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## A Moral Education

### **Introduction**

When my mother was in elementary school, her teachers began each class day by leading the students in a recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance, followed by the Hail Mary. Whenever an ambulance was heard rushing by, the teacher and students crossed themselves. There is nothing necessarily shocking about these events in themselves; they are likely repeated in Catholic schools every day across the country. What may be surprising to some is that my mother attended public school. However, her school was not unusual. In fact, “the founders of public education were strong-minded reformers who wanted their convictions to prevail in classrooms...[they] typically assumed that other citizens would share their views on reading the Bible without comment, teaching about the evils of alcohol and tobacco, inculcating nonpartisan citizenship, and Americanizing immigrants” (Tyack, James and Benauot). That mindset, which began Victorian era, went relatively unchallenged for decades. It was not until 1963 that school prayer was declared unconstitutional, and as of 2014, 61% of American still supported prayer in the classroom (Riffkin).

However, educational culture has shifted to reflect our increasingly pluralistic society. Instead of promoting unquestioning acceptance of traditional values, educators now emphasize tolerance and respect for different religious beliefs and value systems. Robert Kane explains this shift by stating that many individuals “think to themselves that since it seems impossible to

demonstrate that their view is the right one . . . and since everyone else seems to be in the same condition, the only proper attitude for everyone to take is an attitude of ‘openness’ or tolerance, not passing judgment on other points of view from one’s own” (Kane 14). Many are dismayed by this apparent relativism. Justin McBrayer, writing for the New York Times, lamented that “many college-aged students don’t believe in moral facts” and blames the Common Core standards for teaching “that all claims are either facts or opinions and that all value and moral claims fall into the latter camp. The punchline: there are no moral facts. And if there are no moral facts, then there are no moral truths” (McBrayer). He would undoubtedly agree with Allan Bloom, who thought “such an attitude of openness – an ‘openness of indifference,’ as he calls it – is the scourge of our times, infecting society, education, and young people in perverse ways because it creates an indifference to objective truth and absolute right” (Kane 15), although he might be disappointed to know Bloom was writing 25 years before the Common Core standards were adopted. Basing his claims upon a poster hanging in his son’s second grade classroom, McBrayer goes so far as to claim that public schools are “teaching children that it is not true that it’s wrong to kill people for fun or cheat on tests” (McBrayer). He equates making a distinction between fact and opinion (and relegating value judgments to the opinion category), with claiming that no moral sentiments are true. Although he McBrayer takes his complaints to the extreme, the tension between tolerance and objectivity is inescapable for the educator, who is expected to both transmit knowledge and show respect for diverse worldviews even when those two objectives seem mutually exclusive.

How, then, are teachers to resolve the conflict between the unconstitutional imposition of religious belief on one hand, and a complete lack of ethical guidance on the other? The answer lies within the development of an ethical approach to education that has a clear understanding of

the true objectives and responsibilities of education. I argue that in order to do so educators must first acknowledge their individual roles as moral agents and commit themselves to ethically fulfilling the spirit of their profession, rather than simply meeting the basic ethical and legal requirements. From that point it is possible to construct an ethical framework based upon the educator's obligations to both society and students. This framework, which should encourage ethical development without the unethical imposition of a particular set of morals or values, could then be applied both to mundane matters, such as test preparation, as well as greater philosophical considerations, such as how the nature of truth should be taught in a pluralistic society. When applied to the question of morals in schools, it becomes clear that the incorporation of values into education is desirable, as long as teachers receive the proper training to ensure that ethical discussions spur critical thinking and self-reflection, rather than devolve into moralizing lectures that stifle creative thought and religious choice.

### **Teachers are Moral Agents**

Educators are left in something of a dilemma. It seems patently obvious that allowing teachers to impose their personal belief systems upon students is undesirable, not to mention unconstitutional (at least in the case of public school teachers)<sup>1</sup>. However, it seems equally as obvious that placing individuals in amoral environments in which their performance is continuously judged is a recipe for disaster – for both teachers and students<sup>2</sup>. One may try to argue that it is not the teacher's place to impart values or morals; the job of the educator is to impart academic knowledge, and ethical training is best left to parents. A moment's consideration must show this argument is both wishful and moot. It is irrelevant whether or not a teacher intends to convey a moral message; "values are inherent in teaching. Teachers are by the nature of their profession 'moral agents' who imply values by the way they address pupils and

each other, the way they dress, the language they use and the effort they put into their work” (Carr 214). Educators do not simply impart moral messages through their words, but through their actions and interactions. Kenneth Strike has identified five kinds of moral decisions that teachers make every day:

a) assign grades and make decisions based on these grades; b) allocate resources, especially their own time, to students; c) discipline or punish students; d) broker or negotiate educational programs and other matters with and between parents, students, administrators, board members, and the community; and e) make decisions about sensitive and vulnerable young people. (Chang 71)

Viewed from this perspective, seemingly mundane classroom choices become infused with ethical considerations; encouraging students to work together in small groups, for instance, is not simply a pedagogical strategy but a subtle message to students about which values and skills the teacher finds important. A teacher who encourages students to work collaboratively on a project is sending a significantly different message than a teacher who has students work independently and competitively. Furthermore, students tend to fulfill the expectations set for them, whether they are low or high. Tellingly a recent study indicated that, even when controlling for prior performance, teacher expectations for secondary school students “were of great consequence in predicting student achievements gains and performance than were student expectations” (Rubie-Davies, Peterson and Irving 39). Teachers who do not recognize the effect that their actions and opinion have upon students should be aware that studies have shown that “when students perceived their teachers as caring, students’ self-expectations, consequent achievement and behavior were enhanced. Further students placed more significance on the relationship they had with their teachers than did teachers” (37).

In order to maintain credibility (and therefore maximize effectiveness), an educator should strive to send consistent messages. To this end, educators need to have ethical guidelines in place to guide their choices and behaviors. This is more complicated than it sounds; teaching requires, to perhaps a greater degree than most other professions, a level of sensitivity to the nuances and context of a given ethical dilemma. Carr points out that ethical problems, particularly in education, cannot be regarded as solved in the manner of a technical problem; “a potential error here is to suppose that there are rationally neutral strategies of ethical analysis, of, perhaps, Kohlbergian dilemma resolution or utilitarian calculation, which would allow us to return unequivocally positive or negative responses to given ethical questions” (Carr 208). He goes on to explain that even if two people adopt the same consequentialist approach, for instance, they still may weigh outcomes differently. However, the understanding that there likely is no one-size-fits-all solution to ethical dilemmas does not preclude the utility of developing an overarching ethical framework to aid in moral decision making.

Before an ethical framework can be developed, however, the educator must first acknowledge his or her own moral agency. There can be no good moral action without first the decision to act morally; morality is intentional. Immanuel Kant would consider this decision to be the manifestation of “good will”, and believed that any action done without this intentional good will was not meritorious, regardless of its consequences<sup>3</sup>. Teachers generally are required to agree to a code of ethics, and “by becoming a member of the profession [one] forgoes the right to hold certain values by virtue of his or her place in a larger system” (Kitchener 8). However, agreeing to adhere to a code of ethics does not excuse someone for responsibility of his or her actions; it may be tempting for an individual to replace actual ethical decision making with a code of ethics, or defer responsibility for one’s actions to the code, but accepting to follow a set

of rules is a freely chosen action, and one that should only be taken if the code is actually compatible with one's own values. Educators are still responsible for their actions and the consequences of those actions. As Simone de Beauvoir wrote "freedom must project itself toward its own reality through a content whose value it establishes. An end is valid only by a return to the freedom which established it and which willed itself through this end. But this will implies that freedom is not to be engulfed in any goal; neither is it to dissipate itself vainly without aiming at a goal" (de Beauvoir 605). Teachers are role models for students, and students will certainly learn something about ethics if they hear their teachers say things like "I don't want to teach X, but the code says I have to" or "I wanted to do X, but apparently I'm not allowed". It gives the impression to students that a code of ethics is simply an irrelevant group of rules and excuses, rather than a meaningful set of principles.

### **Ethical Framework**

The issue then becomes one of devising a coherent ethical framework that allows educators to encourage moral development without imposing a particular system of morals or values. The codes of ethics of various teaching associations are strangely unhelpful in this task. The code of ethics of the NEA is basically a list of proscriptions, rather than a source of ethical guidance; it does not say what teachers ought to do, instead declaring educators "shall not unreasonably restrain the student from independent action in the pursuit of learning" or "deliberately suppress or distort subject matter relevant to the student's progress" (National Education Association). It seems that, to paraphrase Aristotle, being a good teacher is not incompatible with being asleep. To be fair, the code also mentions that the goal of educators should be to help each student become "a worthy and effective member of society. The educator therefore works to stimulate the spirit of inquiry, the acquisition of knowledge and

understanding, and the thoughtful formulation of worthy goals”. However, lofty as those goals may be, they are not actually listed among the obligations to the student. More to the point, the goals are disobligingly vague. That teachers should want to encourage understanding is a given – the crucial questions of “encourage how?” and “understand what?” are left unanswered.

Tutors do not have a widely accepted professional association at the level of the APA or the NEA, but they do have a few smaller organizations with ethical codes. Two codes in particular seem to have been adopted by a number of private and university-affiliated tutoring services. They each contain a greater mix of proscriptive and prescriptive directives, but their missions also seem to be unnecessarily vague: “my ultimate goal is to assist my student in discovering how he or she best learns and to help my student develop the skills to achieve his or her best educational outcome” (National Tutoring Association) and “my ultimate goal is my student’s independence” (National Association of Tutorial Services). These associations seem to think that tutors serve a limited, technical role; unlike teachers, tutors are not expected to socialize and mold the next generation, they are only expected to make sure the next generation passes its math quiz. It seems odd that tutors should be relegated to such a minor role that is without any sense of responsibility for the student’s general welfare considering the amount of individual time spent with the student. Tutors are no less “moral agents” than teachers; if anything, the greater personalized attention combined with a less formal interaction increases the potential ability of the tutor to influence the student. The somewhat bizarre abdication of responsibility may stem from the fact that both of these codes of ethics were designed by tutors working within a school environment. Schools in general, and teachers in particular, are often made uncomfortable by the idea of private tutoring; teachers seem to either take it as a personal insult and vote of no confidence, or else they think that it grants some students unfair advantages.

Administrators are wary of teachers who tutor, recognizing that the situation may cause a conflict of interest that tempts teachers to teach poorly. On the other hand, it could be argued that while both tutors and teachers have the same overall goals for students, tutors actually have a greater obligation to individual students than do teachers, who may be constrained by their obligations to the class as a whole. That does not give tutors any more right than teachers to impose their beliefs on students; the code of ethics developed by the National Association of Tutorial Services is emphatic on this point, stating “I will not impose my personal value system or life style on my student” and following that with “I will not use a tutoring situation to proselytize my personal belief systems” (National Association of Tutorial Services). Instead, it is important for educators to remember that “built on a personal connection, the tutoring experience can leave a lifelong impression on tutor and student...tutoring is much more than sharing academic knowledge. Tutoring includes motivating students to enjoy learning and to feel good about themselves while they do it” (Chin, Rabow and Estrada 39).

Although these codes contain valid points, they are insufficient for the creation of an ethical framework. Karen Kitchener is a respected psychologist and ethicist who, in addition to writing the lead article for the *APA Handbook of Ethics in Psychology*, received the APA Ethics Committee’s 2010 Outstanding Ethics Educator award. She writes that ethical issues are not simply about determining whether an action is right or wrong; it also involves identifying and prioritizing competing obligations to an individual and to society (Kitchener 2). She proposes a multistage approach to moral decision making. The first level, called the immediate level, is the integration all available information with one’s ordinary moral sense. The second level, called the critical-evaluative level, is comprised of three tiers: ethical rules (professional codes, laws, etc.), foundational ethical principles, and ethical theory. If the first tier does not provide a



resolution to the issue, one proceeds to the next tier. The lowest tier of the critical-evaluative level, ethical rules, are likely to be specific, while ethical theory will be more generalized. Unlike the foundational principles, which will be discussed more thoroughly in a moment, ethical theories tend to be personal and will vary from person to person; “at this point...a decision might be justified on the basis of something like the gold rule – act in such a way toward others as you would wish them to act toward you or others you love. The decision...might also be made from a utilitarian perspective of doing the least amount of unavoidable harm” (Kitchener 12).

### **Principles and their consequences**

However, returning to an ethical framework: as previously discussed, the laws and codes of ethics provide a list of proscriptions, but do not provide much in the way of positive guidance. For that one must turn to the next level, foundational principles. Ideally, the code of ethics would be derived from these foundational principles, but since in this case the codes are preexisting, foundational principles will have to be inferred from the codes (as well as arrived at through independent thought). The principles should be derived from the overall goals of the educator, which in turn are informed by the educator’s obligations to both society and the individual. It is possible that these two obligations can conflict, so one must define each obligation in such a way that they are compatible. It may be that in actual practice a conflict may arise between an educator’s obligation to the student and his or her competing obligation to society, but the underlying principles themselves must be understood in such a way that they cannot be in conflict. That is to say, the underlying principles are not absolutes: they only hold true to the extent they do not conflict with each other. For instance: the NEA’s code of ethics states that the educator’s goal should be to produce worthy and effective members of society.

There are probably many ways one could create a good citizen, but some of those methods could conflict with the educator's obligation to students and so are not justified. In the *Republic*, Plato supports lying to his fictitious city's populace in order to make them better citizens, saying "can we devise one of those lies – the kind which crop up as the occasion demands, which we were talking about not long ago – so that with a single noble lie we can indoctrinate the rulers themselves, preferably, but at least the rest of the community?" (Plato 118). No matter how efficacious this method may be, it would not be permissible under this ethical framework because it would conflict with the teachers' obligation to deal honestly with students. Rather than thinking in terms of obligations to society versus obligations to individuals, I propose that it is more accurate and efficient to think in terms of obligations to "social individuals"; a democracy is at its strongest when its people are at their strongest, and so it is to the benefit of both society and individuals for educators to nurture "social individuals" who are able to positively interact with society's civic and economic life. This precludes assigning any priority to goals that would only benefit society/government at the expense of the individual or to goals that would encourage individuals to behave in an antisocial manner; rather than perpetuating the perception of society/government's interests in competition with those of individuals', it recognizes that individuals and society are one. As Thomas Jefferson said "I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them but to inform their discretion" (National Commission on Excellence in Education).

Florida's rather Spartan code of ethics for educators states that educators value "the worth and dignity of every person, the pursuit of truth, devotion to excellence, acquisition of

knowledge, and the nurture of democratic citizenship” (Florida Department of Education). This last point is worth investing further. The idea that education should serve to create better citizens; as previously noted, Plato discussed it over 2300 years ago. Whereas Plato merely wished to ensure a more compliant underclass, today’s educators should try to create citizens who can actively and meaningfully participate in the democratic process. Ideally, the students should not be only given the means to participate, but also the motivation. According to John Stuart Mill, education is meant to train citizens by “taking them out of the narrow circle of personal and family selfishness, and accustoming them to the comprehension of joint interests, the management of joint concerns – habituating them to act from public or semi-public motives, and guide their conduct by aims which unite instead of isolating them from one another” (Mill 237). A citizen needs to be able to vote in elections, serve on juries, and participate in public discourse concerning issues of importance to the community. It is neither required nor possible to become an expert in all subjects to be able to meaningfully participate in these activities; instead, the most important thing that can be done to prepare students for citizenship is to teach critical thinking.

Critical thinking is a buzzword that has practically lost all meaning through overuse, but what is meant in this case is the ability to evaluate both arguments, and the data upon which they are formed, and to use those evaluations to form new opinions, even if the new opinion is that more data are necessary before a conclusion can be formed. It means questioning not simply what someone says, but why they are saying it, and what they are not saying. As Nietzsche wrote, “I have gradually come to realize what every great philosophy so far has been: a confession of faith on the part of its author, a type of involuntary and unself-conscious memoir...Actually, to explain how the strangest metaphysical claims of a philosopher really

come about, it is always good (and wise) to begin by asking: what morality is it (is *he-*) getting at?" (Nietzsche 8). This mindset should be applied to all disciplines, not only philosophy. One does not need to be an expert on the subject of immigration, for instance, to choose between two politicians' immigration policies; instead, a citizen simply needs to be able to critically analyze the strengths and weaknesses of each argument. Similarly, a person does not need to be a lawyer in order to serve well on a jury, but instead needs to be able to separate facts from emotional appeals while determining whether the prosecution has provided sufficient evidence of guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. A 1983 report on the state of the national education system stressed the importance of education to both political freedom and economic competitiveness, saying

The people of the United States need to know that individuals in our society who do not possess the levels of skill, literacy, and training essential to this new era will be effectively disenfranchised, not simply from the material rewards that accompany competent performance, but also from the chance to participate fully in our national life. A high level of shared education is essential to a free, democratic society and to the fostering of a common culture, especially in a country that prides itself on pluralism and individual freedom. (National Commission on Excellence in Education 7)

A critical approach should even be applied to the teaching materials themselves.

Textbooks are written by people, who are fallible, based upon information which is rarely complete. Furthermore, they are often written with political considerations in mind. One famous example is the biology textbook *Of Pandas and People*, which became the focus of the *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District* trial. The plaintiffs in the trial argued, successfully, that the textbook's presentation of Intelligent Design and evolution was a thinly veiled attempt to promote creationism, which had already been declared a religious belief that could not be taught

as part of a public school biology class (*Tammy Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District*). Just this past July, the College Board announced changes to its AP US History teaching guidelines in response to criticism; the Republican National Committee, for instance “issued a resolution describing the framework as a ‘biased and inaccurate view of many important events in American history’ and calling on Congress to withhold federal funding from the College Board” (Massey). Unfortunately for the College Board, others are now criticizing the College Board for caving to conservative pressures and creating a curriculum that is “whitewashed, downplaying some darker points in American history” (Stoetzer). However, the College Board is not alone – this type of editing is common. “Textbook adoption by the Texas State Board of Education has long been an era of ideological combat, identity politics, and pandering to interest groups... In the 2002 selection round, a publisher changed [millions of years] to [over time] in a passage...to steer clear of conflicts with the biblical creation story...Since Texas is the second largest purchaser of books in the nation, its choices affect the textbooks available to schools in other states” (Franciosi 40). This type of controversy should be discussed directly and honestly before students become disillusioned with academia in general. Understanding the political and historical context for learning materials give students a greater sense of ownership over their education, and minimizes the feeling that they are being manipulated.

Citizens are expected to participate not only in the political life but also the economic life of a country. Many believe that our schools are failing students in this respect, and have been for some time. The 1983 report on education believed that in order to stay relevant in the age of information (then just newly dawning) that we needed to build a culture of lifelong learning; “such a society has as a basic foundation the idea that education is important not only because of what it contributes to one’s career goals but also because of the value it adds to the general

quality of one's life" (National Commission on Excellence in Education). Confucius would have agreed; he presented the love of learning as the balancing force that prevents the six virtues from degenerating into vices. His words seem particularly apt when considering moral education: "Loving goodness without balancing it with a love for learning will result in the vice of foolishness...loving uprightness without balancing it with a love for learning will result in the vice of intolerance" (Confucius 203).

Unfortunately, our current system of education is unlikely to prepare students either for jobs or a lifetime of learning. According to Cathy Davidson, "65 percent of children entering grade school this year [2011] will end up working in careers that haven't even been invented yet" but that they have inherited an "education system mostly designed to prepare students for a focused, task-specific form of attention demanded by the late-19<sup>th</sup>-century assembly line and then, later, by the similarly hierarchical and regulated corporation" (Rosen). These jobs valued punctuality and obedience over creative and critical thinking, and employed forms of assessment that were "a new way of calculating human productivity. Teachers ought to think about how much of their system has been designed to prepare students for the punch-clock world, and reevaluate their goals and routines in light of the world kids will enter: an interactive, globalized, contributory world" (Rosen). The creation of new types of jobs highlights the need to develop skills than enable lifelong learning, and so "one of the main goals of formal education is to equip students with intellectual tools, self-beliefs, and self-regulatory capabilities...to emphasize students' self-efficacy and self-directed learning" (Hong and Park 113). Intrinsic motivation for self-directed lifelong learning is associated with student ownership of learning, which, unsurprisingly, is not fostered by passively memorizing presented information, but is instead developed when students are interacting with material and "develop metacognitive skills that

allow them to question their learning processes, develop learning plans, and ultimately reflect upon the changes in their own learning” (Fleming and Panizzon 27). To a large extent, these processes are contingent upon the students’ belief in their own ability to learn. Two recent studies focused on the effects of “mindset interventions”: one intervention focused on instilling a “growth mindset” and the other on a “sense of purpose”. Those with a growth mindset believe that intelligence can be developed through effort (in contrast to those with a ‘fixed mindset’ who believe that everyone is born with a fixed amount of intelligence). Meanwhile, “the sense-of-purpose intervention was designed to help students articulate how schoolwork could help them accomplish meaningful life goals”; despite the fact that neither intervention included any subject-matter material, both interventions increased students’ GPAs and increased the rate at which students performed satisfactorily in each course (Association for Psychological Science).

It may seem that these concepts (critical thinking, lifelong learning, self-efficacy, etc.) may be far removed from the concerns of ethics, but this is not so. Firstly, being an ethical educator means more than simply cramming information into students’ heads while refraining from harming them. The desire to be ethical, Kant’s “good will”, is “not, to be sure, a mere wish, but the summoning of all means in our power”, and so an investigation into the obligations implied by the goals of education is warranted. However, there is a more direct concrete connection as well – the teaching of ethics and values are intimately related to such seemingly dissimilar concepts such as critical thinking, creativity, and self-confidence. Neurological studies focusing on the development of the prefrontal cortex has shown that “neural activity associated with imagination is the key to establishing the emotional regulation necessary to the forming of effective decision-making and problem-solving. In turn, the self-confidence that results from such decision-making and problem-solving becomes the basis of ongoing critical

reasoning, and indeed of learning” (Lovat and Fleming, *Creativity as Central to Critical Reasoning and the Facilitative Role of Moral Education: Utilizing Insights from Neuroscience* 1099). Imagination and a sense of wonder both develop best when the individual feels a sense of safety and security, and that “it is the caring and trusting ambience, including the key people in any student’s life that activates the kind of imagination and wonder that impels the emotional regulation that is essential to problem-solving, knowledge-seeking curiosity and critical reasoning” (1102). This type of environment is aided by active social and emotional learning, which “is the process through which we learn to recognize and manage emotions, care about others, make good decisions, behave ethically and responsibly, develop positive relationship and avoid negative behaviors”, and it has been linked to a variety of positive academic and social outcomes (Zins 4). There is a growing body of evidence that the “establishment of such ambiances of learning, together with explicit discourse about moral and values-oriented content in ways that draw on students’ deeper learning and reflectivity, has power to transform their patterns of feelings, behavior, resilience, and academic diligence” (Lovat and Fleming, *Creativity as Central to Critical Reasoning and the Facilitative Role of Moral Education: Utilizing Insights from Neuroscience* 1104). These results should not be surprising. Ethical thinking requires students to think outside of their limited self-interest, and imagine unfamiliar situations and perspectives. It requires thinking critically about the motivations for behaviors, and the consequences of actions. It is little wonder that it has been linked to improved critical thinking and problem solving.

### **Incorporating Values**

The ultimate goal of educators is not simply to give students the tools with which to succeed, but to help students discover how it is they wish to succeed. Since the very definition



of ethics (or moral philosophy) is “the study of what we should aspire to in our lives, and of how we should live” it seems that its inclusion within a curriculum would be a given (Shafter-Landau 1). That being said, there are many reasons to be cautious about the incorporation of moral/values education into a curriculum. Legally, the government (and so, by extension, public schools) are forbidden from endorsing any particular religion, or religion in general. However, values are not the exclusive domain of the devout, and, besides, it is inevitable that values will be communicated to students, as previously discussed. What remains, then, is to determine which values are consistent with the goals of education and the best means for nurturing those qualities in students. The development of such a list should be a community/social effort, although it seems reasonable that the values that inform the code of ethics of educators should be at the core of such a list, since ideally teachers would be modeling those values in any case. For instance, it is generally agreed that teachers should treat students equally (i.e. deny benefits or grant advantages to students on the basis of race/ethnicity, religion, orientation, etc.). Other such values include responsibility, honesty, respect, empathy, and tolerance.

Of these values, tolerance is the only one likely to cause contention. On the one hand, there are those who will claim that an insistence on tolerance is an infringement on their right to religious freedom; for instance, some Christians do not want to be forced to be tolerant of homosexuals because they believe that homosexuality is a sin. More specifically, they do not want their children to be taught that homosexuality is an acceptable lifestyle (many, if not most, of these individuals believe that homosexuality is a choice). Others, on the other hand, are less concerned that their religious beliefs are being ignored as much as they are concerned that tolerance leads to relativism, and that relativism leads to a loss of objective truth.

There are several ways to address these concerns. It is acknowledged, both through law and general consensus, that people, including children, have rights. Americans believe that everyone has the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and that the government does not have the right to define happiness. Inherent in those rights is the freedom to choose for oneself the best way to live. Based upon this understanding, there are both consequentialist and nonconsequentialist arguments to be made in favor of tolerance. The nonconsequentialist argument for tolerance is based on rights, and the educator's obligation to the rights of the students, not to those of the parents. Teachers are ethically bound to treat all students with respect, which means they must not make students feel as though they are being personally judged, unwelcome, or otherwise made to feel uncomfortable. If they are to treat all students with respect, that means they also must respect their students' right to make choices. Furthermore, rights can and should be defended, and so a teacher has the right to interfere if students are violating another student's rights. The justification for schools legitimately advancing some values while prohibiting others (such as racism, religious intolerance) may be seen as contradictory or hypocritical, but is not: it is justifiable to advance values which are necessary for the maintenance of our civil liberties, aside from the beneficial effects upon the ethical decision making capabilities of students. As Strike and Solis write,

May we use the schools to make people Americans? Yes, if we mean that we may try to use schools to teach the essentials of a just constitution and to promote a common political culture based on it. No, if that means that we can use schools to promote a shared religion, a common culture, or a shared identity beyond the political culture warranted by a just constitution. The view does not root tolerance in pluralism or cultural relativism. We must tolerate other people's religions even if we are sure they are false

and ours true. We must respect other people's cultures even if we are convinced that ours is superior. What we are respecting is the right to choose, not the adequacy of the choice. (Strike and Soltis 82)

On the other hand, a consequentialist defense of tolerance can be made on the basis that one of the reasons that education is so important is that it safeguards the freedom to choose one's way of life. In order to be able to make educated decisions regarding the best way to live one's life, students must be exposed to a variety of ways of life. Mill believed that diversity was important because it provided a multiplicity of experiments into the best way to live life, and so any infringement upon the diversity of experience is a loss to all. Amy Gutmann writes "to reap the benefits of social diversity, children must be exposed to ways of life different from their parents and – in the course of their exposure – must embrace certain values, such as mutual respect among persons, that make social diversity both possible and desirable" (Gutmann 33). To decide that parents have exclusive control of the material to which their children are exposed in school would be to allow parents not only to limit their children's current freedom, but their children's future ability to function as free and social adults<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, this affects not only their own children but society as a whole, because a functioning democracy depends upon its populace's ability to critically evaluate and choose between multiple viewpoints. The concept parents must share control of their children's education with the state makes many uncomfortable, although in practice many recognize the necessity. Few, for instance, would argue that it should be permissible for schools to allow racism, despite the claims of some parents that insisting on racial equality violated their religious beliefs. This is not a spurious comparison; it was only in 1983 that the Supreme Court decided that Bob Jones University could not receive federal funding while maintaining racially discriminatory admissions policies,

despite the school's claims that these policies were based on sincerely held religious beliefs (Bob Jones University v. United States). Just last year a survey conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute "found that 10 percent of Americans believe business owners should be able to refuse to serve black people if they see that as a violation of their religious beliefs" (Green). Discrimination and the silencing of viewpoints is harmful not only to those who are discriminated against, but to those who could have otherwise benefited from new perspectives.

### **Australian Example**

Values education must be undertaken carefully so that it does not result in the real or perceived mass indoctrination of children. Undoubtedly experimental programs would have to be designed, tested, and evaluated before a satisfactory curriculum could be implemented on a large scale, and it is possible that due to the fact that schools are controlled by the state rather than the federal government that there is never a curriculum that is acceptable on a national level. However, in the meanwhile educators can study the methods and effects of the Australian Values Education Program, a program that was implemented on a national level in 2003 in response to the growing awareness that academic performance and diligence was linked to social behavior, which in turn was linked to ethical development. Although schools were free to design their own programs, they were derived from the recommendations of the Values Education Study conducted by the Department of Education, Science and Training. That study identified 10 common values that it felt were consistent with "Australia's democratic traditions including beliefs in equality, freedom and the rule of law, and our overall commitment to a multicultural society where all are entitled to justice and a fair go", to use the report's delightfully Australian phrasing (Curriculum Corporation 16). These values were: tolerance and understanding; respect; responsibility; social justice; excellence; care; inclusion and trust; honesty; freedom; and being

ethical. It is important to note that values education did not necessarily mean teaching values explicitly – it meant “teach **about** values....to promote student understanding and knowledge of values, and to inculcate the skills and dispositions of students so they can exact particular values as individuals and as members of the wider society” (2). The curriculum does not attempt to impose a single interpretation of values, but says “it is misleading to confuse disagreements in ethics with there being no right or wrong answer. There may be different positions, each with their strengths and weaknesses, and often there is the need to make a judgment in the face of competing claims. At the same time there is a need for open-minded, ongoing endeavor to create an ethical life” (Australian Curriculum, Assessment, and Reporting Authority 102). A follow up study investigating the effects of the program found encouraging results. Both qualitative and quantitative data reported “measurable improvements in students’ academic diligence, including increased attentiveness, a greater capacity to work independently as well as more cooperatively, greater care and effort being invested in schoolwork and students assuming more responsibility for their own learning as well as classroom ‘chores’” (Lovat, Toomey and Dally 6). One of the more interesting findings was that there was a statistically significant decrease in the students’ ratings of their own behavior, but not in their ratings of their peers’ behavior. The discrepancy between these two ratings implies that students’ behavior did not decline in fact, but instead that “students were being more self-critical in the post-implementation survey. One of the effects of values education appeared to be an increase in ‘self-reflection’ and students were more likely to evaluate their own behaviour in a critical light” (7). In summary, the researchers concluded that evidence from this study has demonstrated that a well-crafted and well-managed values education intervention has the potential to impact positively on student academic

diligence, school ambience, student-teacher relationships, student and teacher wellbeing, and, less significantly, parental and family participation. (Lovat, Toomey and Dally 88).

### **Potential Complications**

Aside from the difficulty of designing such a program, there may also be an unexpected difficulty in its application. Its effectiveness will depend almost entirely on teachers, and there is evidence to suggest that school teachers are ill-prepared for such a project. In particular, “Bloom found that the moral judgments of education students compared unfavorably with those of college students in other fields. Diessner...concluded that most teachers reasoned only at the conventional level...and that 30-50% of the time, teachers were at the principled level. This result implies that most teachers could recognize, but could not produce, post conventional thinking” (Chang 72). This is unfortunate, because it has been shown that “teachers with advanced moral reasoning can be more empathic to students’ needs and more willing to facilitate students’ growth, respect students’ rights, avoid taking students’ challenges personally, and be more objective when dealing with problems caused by students. Consequently, teachers with high levels of moral reasoning can be more student-centered” (Chang 76). This is not an argument against incorporating values into the class, but teachers may have a difficult time applying it without additional ethical training. It may be putting the cart before the horse to be concerned with the ethical development of our students when our own teachers are in need of help.

Unfortunately, training itself may have its own difficulties. In a study investigating the effects of values training on teachers, there were several recurring issues that the researchers noted. One was that some teachers were resistant to the idea of “adopting a moral perspective, experiencing it “as an alternative authority to the conventions dogmas and rules of the school

system...some teachers thus saw the program as a major challenge to the ‘rightful’ authority of their conventional workplaces and employment norms, issuing the need to question the authority and credibility of the faculty and the program, and in rejecting some of the intellectual content” (Sockett 162). Secondly, the report notes that schools often nurture a culture in which students learn to tell teachers what they want to hear in order to receive good grades, and that teachers put in a learning situation seem to revert to this pattern themselves:

Rather than engaging in the intellectual complexity of the program, however, many teachers sought ‘clear directions’ from faculty so that, as it were, the ‘right’ answers could be given...however, as they faced the alternative authority conflict, some not only professed bewilderment, but as a way to relieve anxiety, they sought to place blame on others for their frustrations. (Sockett 163)

The researchers did not interpret these findings as indicative of the moral failings of teachers, but rather as a result of training that emphasized behaviorist strategies for dealing with children and of a teaching culture where “moral judgment and decision making are de-emphasized, control is maintained as part of a hierarchical structure, monitoring devices (like standardized tests) are used as scare tactics to motivate teachers to do their jobs and rewards and punishments are meted out when teachers toe (or fail to toe) the line” (Sockett 170). Again, these points are not brought up to suggest that values education is impractical; if anything, these studies highlight the necessity of such a program. Instead, the point being made is that children do not study and learn values (or anything else) in a vacuum, but instead from living, breathing people with their own values and struggles, who are working within a system that is not designed to allow for creative and critical thinking that incorporates multiple viewpoints. Any educational

reform to include ethical thinking will be need to be accompanied by changes to both teaching and assessment methods in order to realize the potential gains.

### **Conclusion**

So, what about Mr. McBrayer and his call for educational reform? He certainly makes a compelling case, but probably not in the way he intended. We need a system in which people can understand that the difference between fact and opinion is not a matter of truth, but of verifiability. A fact may be false, and an opinion may be true, but only one of those things can be directly proven with evidence. They represent different types of knowledge, similar to how quantitative data and qualitative data represent different types of information. The inability to distinguish the characteristics of fact from opinion, and to confuse both with the concept of truth, is a contributing factor to the increase in skepticism concerning science, the meaning of which people have twisted to the point of referring to creationism, a religious belief, as “creation science”. Aristotle himself recognized the limits of ethical speculation, stating “it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits; it is evidently equally foolish to accept probably reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician scientific proofs” (Aristotle). No one would argue that Aristotle thought that he was wasting his time discussing concepts that were not true, he simply was stating the obvious – moral and ethical opinions, no matter how true, cannot be proven true in the same manner as facts. It is to be hoped that students learn enough critical thinking in the classroom to be able to identify McBrayer’s claims as opinions, and particularly ill-founded ones at that.

Presenting morals as facts does a disservice both to the students and to ethics. A worthwhile curriculum that incorporates values should encourage discussion and debate



concerning which, if any, morals are absolute, and encourage students to think about the sources of their beliefs. Pluralism does not necessarily lead to relativism (although of course it might, that being an option available to thinking students). Kane believes that openness can lead to the discovery of absolute facts by allowing others to present arguments and choosing between them. That is a good start, but education should be more than passively receiving information. Students should challenge and critically analyze what they are told, decide between competing claims, and be capable of defending their decisions. Being told that “X is a moral fact” is an infringement upon the students’ rights to choose their beliefs for themselves, and actively inhibits critical thinking. Students may come to the conclusion that “X is true”, but the real value, both in terms of intellectual activity and moral commitment, is the process by which they come to that conclusion. We should be careful not to stifle ethical thinking in our attempt to encourage ethical behavior.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Illegality and immorality are obviously separate concepts – not everything that is immoral is illegal, and vice versa. However, when discussing appropriate behaviors for teachers, it can be assumed that the vast majority of illegal behaviors would be unethical to do as part of a lesson, if for no other reason than it sets an example that could cause children (legal) harm if they were to follow.

<sup>2</sup> This has been highlighted by the number of scandals involving teachers cheating on their students' behalf. See Bidwell, Allen. "Atlanta Scandal Could be the Tip of a 'Test Cheating Iceberg'". *USnews.com*. 2 April 2015. and Emdin, Christopher. "The 5 Causes of Test Cheating Scandals: From Atlanta to Washington D.C.". *Huffingtonpost.com*. 25 April 2013.

<sup>3</sup> In fact, he thought that consequences were entirely irrelevant to the goodness of an action. He probably would have also disapproved of a code of ethics, believing that adherence to an ethical code that did not originate from within the individual represented heteronomous action that could not carry the weight of a true moral imperative. But if we all agreed wholeheartedly with everything Kant had to say there would be no more need to write ethics papers ever again.

<sup>4</sup> Mills was particularly eloquent on the topic, writing "It is in the case of children that misapplied notions of liberty are a real obstacle to the fulfillment by the State of its duties. One would almost think that a man's children were supposed to be literally, and not metaphorically, a part of himself, so jealous is opinion of the smallest interference of law with his absolute and exclusive control over them, more jealous than of almost any interference with this own freedom of action...Is it not almost a self-evidence axiom that the State should require and compel the education, up to a certain standard, of every human being who is born its citizen? Yet who is there that is not afraid to recognize and assert this truth? Hardly anyone, indeed, will deny that it is one of the most sacred duties of the parents...after summoning a human being into the world, to give to that being an education fitting him to perform his part well in life toward others and himself. But while this is unanimously declared to be the father's duty, scarcely anybody, in this country, will bear to hear of obliging him to perform it" (Mill 233).