The Ethics Of Character: The Teacher As Moral Agent

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It is a sign of the man who knows, that he can teach, and therefore we think art more truly knowledge than experience is; for artists can teach, and men of mere experience cannot.

Aristotle, Metaphysics

There is perhaps no problem more fundamental to the manner in which we relate to other people, more central to our lives or more important in the determination of value than the problem raised by moral philosophy. The question of what ought a person to do is a slippery one. On the one hand, the answer must make sense to the average person, that is to say it must include common sense. It does no good to have a philosophy that contradicts the obvious conditions of the world. Still an answer must also remain consistent and valid on the highest level of intellectual investigation.

The development of a moral philosophy is even more critical to educators because they are responsible for not only their own lives but for the lives of practically all children and by extension the whole of society. Although this education comes from many sources, in America especially, the schools are an important means by which those people who shape the culture develop their own values.

When a school is established, it may reflect the values of its founders, but those values did not arise out of a vacuum nor do they remain stable without definition and application by a teacher. The responsibility for the inculcation of values may not have always been a function of school, but in our current situation the schools are certainly a major component in most people's lives.

While an auto mechanic may not need a particularly well defined moral philosophy, he needs a well defined mechanic philosophy. An auto mechanic who told a customer that the transmission really should be repaired at home would not be in business very long. Many people, however, need a very precise definition of values because their jobs put them in a position where their moral philosophy matters in the formation of cultural values. Plato knew that nurse maids and poets must be closely watched because those who told stories to the

young and those who sang to the crowd were important factors in the culture. I am sure Plato would have included television script writers and advertising executives or other media people if he had only imagined such creatures. With other elements so powerful and interested only in a profit, how much more important is it for teachers and teachers of teachers to have a clearly articulated philosophy.

. . . parents and argue that child-rearing and moral education are no longer solely the responsibility of the family. The family, according to these thinkers, is no longer an effective institution and cannot even serve its original, primary purposes. At the same time that parents have become powerless and feel frustrated, other agencies and influences have preempted parental roles (Sichel 5).

While social pressure has increased, modern schools have to a great extent attempted to retreat from teaching values out of a misplaced libertarianism, a failure of will (Straughan 49), and a growing skepticism. The more schools retreat from a clear articulation of a moral philosophy, the more some other component of our culture will fill the gap (a peer group or television or rock music). A person simply has an innate quality of the mind that seeks what it apprehends to be good, or that is to say, what ought to be done.

In fact, a school curriculum can no more be devoid of values than it can be devoid of subjects or without teachers. The attempt to teach without value judgments is itself a value. The very presentation of material, its selection and explanation, all actually imply quite strong values about what ought to be, not just what ought to be taught. In the same manner no teacher proceeds from a position of neutrality about life or their subjects or the profession of teaching. They all went to school.

A sobering truth is that the schools may have already lost the battle and might be incapable of the transmission of values that are rational or even radically different from the norms that exist in our individualistic and materialistic society (Sichel 6). While this view may be overly pessimistic, there is obviously cause for concern. The schools can no longer simply attempt to remain value neutral, teach skills and subjects and leave it up to the children and their parents to decide on the proper value structure. In the first place, the family is to an increasing extent dysfunctional, and secondly, people do not choose in a vacuum. They often do not consciously choose at all but are indoctrinated by whatever forces are present that do present specific values. The noble neutrality of the schools becomes an impotent surrender. The egalitarianism of ideals leaves our children helpless (even willing) victims to the duplicity of modern culture.

The situation is not simply whether the schools should teach moral philosophy or ethics. Most educators, although not all, agree that some ethics should be transmitted to the young. Since value neutral education is a contradiction in terms and even the attempt to be value neutral relinquishes one of the increasingly important roles of the school, the real question is what values to teach and how to transmit them.

Often teachers feel that they should not prescribe but only offer an example or a situation where moral choice is necessary. Yet, the students, unless they pick up some clue as to the right answer, can fail to see the moral dilemma and consequently the whole point of the exercise. The instructor will sometimes make the example obvious or use some other inducement like a test question to elicit the approved response, which is actually less honest than making a position clear. The need for an ethical position is clear, but even the fundamentals of the construction of ethical theory is called into question.

Ethical theory is divided into two groups. The theory of value, what is a good or bad, a desirable or undesirable thing, is called axiology. The theory of obligation, what is a right or wrong, a wise or foolish thing to do, is called deontology.

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These divisions are sometimes considered complimentary since a good thing is one that performs right actions. A good man acts wisely. A good apple tastes right. A good airplane is one that flies without crashing. In each case the judgment is a reflection on the act performed. Other thinkers separate the two by considering "good" a meaningless concept, and "right" as relating only to the specific situation.

The question of what things are good or what is the highest good can then be divided into three areas. Some hold that the highest good is pleasure or satisfaction or a state of feeling. Others maintain that it is virtue, a state of the will, and/or knowledge, a state of the intellect.

The question of what is a right act depends upon how a person uses various terms. Axiological theories see the rightness of an act dependent upon the goodness or value of something. The goodness can be the thing itself or motive or comparative goodness. Deontological theories separate the two and make a right act something independent of the goodness of the thing or how much (if any) good will result.

Even to the well informed, the field of ethics seems crowded to say the least and can be confusing. It is not hard to understand how the confusion of ideas in modern culture has encouraged a retreat to neutrality. Many people adopt a position of cultural relativism as a defensive mechanism. (We cannot tell which are wrong; so they all must be right.)

This cultural relativism or moral pluralism is one of the problems that is a cause for the moral disorder in the schools and society.

> The acceptance of moral pluralism and diversity by society created many problems for educators trying to transmit moral standards and engender in their students the good, humane, and moral life. Which moral ideals and standards should a teacher transmit when confronted with pluralistic moral views? The moral pluralism of society and the linguistic analysis of theoretician could not provide substantive moral standards for teachers to transmit to students (Sichel 49).

Sichel identifies several other factors that all contribute to what is actually an unstable climate of moral uncertainty and a paralysis of the will. After Marx, Freud and Darwin the universe grew smaller and theories with a teleological quality were replaced by ones that denied either objective truth or a rationality of moral judgments.

Emotivism especially was a powerful force by providing a psychological basis for moral statements. At the same time the science of behaviorism developed so that not only were values relative, but the responsibility for moral acts was assigned to the inner self. The inner person became more real than the outer person that was only a reflection of those inner forces we cannot control. If all moral content is an emotional expression (Bull 6), then society must accept all values as being equivalent and entirely subjective.

Early on this subjectivism seemed the ideal solution. Moral pluralism was the essence of the egalitarian ideal that our democracy was founded on, all men equal. Everyone was right. We were spared the nasty task of deciding which values were wrong. Most people, while accepting this as a political idea particularly suited to an American brand of individualism, still believed in traditional moral values. They lived their lives, taught their children and in general did not pay much attention to strange ideas.

The problem with subjectivism is that while it denies no position, it also gives no reasons to follow one over another.

> In short, the principle is clear: take away the real or ontological ground for the rightness or wrongness of an action, and there will no longer seem to be any proper reason for anyone's holding it to be right or wrong. And without reasons for our moral judgments, we must

acknowledge that such judgments are quite arbitrary (Veatch 17).

While on one hand an attitude of "minimize pain, maximize pleasure" was the response to a world without reason, a need to have a means by which to make moral decisions grew. Numerous forces from television to the call for cultural diversity have shaken the moral ground of America. Linguistic analysis began to dominate modern philosophy and attempted to provide a methodology for solving moral dilemmas. Linguistic analysis did not recommend any single moral judgment but only a method for making them, the correct form and abstract principles to use.

Linguistic analysis, emotivism and any other of the ethical positions that are not grounded upon some objective truth tend toward relativism and its clearer definition nihilism. Stanley Rosen comments

> Nietzsche defines nihilism as the situation which obtains when "everything is permitted." If everything is permitted, then it makes no difference what we do, and so nothing is worth anything. We can, of course, attribute value by an act of arbitrary resolution, but such an act proceeds ex nihilo or defines its significance by a spontaneous assertion which can be negated with equal justification. More specifically, there is in such a case no justification for choosing either the value originally posited or its negation, and the speech of "justification" is indistinguishable from silence (qtd in Veatch 17).

Relativism is a retreat from the difficulties of determining which of the competing ethical theories is correct. The basic position is that truth is different for each individual or group, and there is no absolute, objective and knowable truth that is the same for all people at all times. The relativist is positive that there is absolutely no absolute truth. The eventual result of this contradiction is skepticism. If there are several truths, then there must be some underlying quality that is common to all. If this is not true, then there is no truth at all and to speak of relative truths is to equivocate the term.

This type of relativism has helped produce two more cultural developments that plague the schools and make meaningful moral education difficult. First is the development of a categorical morality such as a greatly enlarged concept of "rights". The centrality of rights theories has created a school climate the rejects moral education. Instead the schools become a place where specialists conduct discussions about rights, and a "reductionist version of intellectual virtue" is the standardized test score (Sichel 9). (one commentator noted that standardized tests unfairly discriminate against the stupid.)

A second cultural element that interferes with our ability to teach ethical ideas is the loss of historical perspective. This coupled with the idea of living only for the future causes a disconnection with what we are. As humans in human society, we 're'-encounter problems but ignore solutions or pitfalls because we are blind to our moral experience.

The solution to the problem of moral education is to find a new way of applying old ideas. A new ways of thinking, new categories that contextualize old concepts are needed. We cannot start over or go back in time, and a "clean slate" is not only impossible but wasteful. Instead of rejecting the past, we need to redefine aspects of previous moral theory so that it can be incorporated into a new set.

CHARACTER

This new category is called character. Character, a concept that behavioral research buried, should again become a "vital dimension of moral education". Since moral education is not a separate discipline but is at a point where various disciplines and the realities of the world interweave, it can not be a "set of tools" with which to fashion a moral position, but it must

be a condition out of which a moral agent acts. A philosophy of ethics must recognize its interrelated status and the need to produce a moral condition, not just a methodology. A moral agent must be in a condition to make proper use of moral "tools".

Character is not then a specialized term for a complex reasoning process:

> [It] represents the unified, enduring ways by which moral agents handle simple and perhaps trivial moral interactions. Character includes a set of moral excellences or virtues that represent for a moral agent principles and means of justifying moral actions. In addition, character provides agreed upon ways of describing the ongoing, persistent moral being of a agent (Sichel 35).

The excellences are the core of the concept. The inculcation of these creates a basis for moral action. Example of virtues are benevolence and compassion. A person might justify an action or rather simply act out of a benevolent or compassionate character. Societies have always valued and sought to develop character, from the early Greeks to the modern idea that "it builds character" being a good thing. Once a person possesses this foundational character, the intellectual tools such as those provided by utilitarian consequentialism or neo-Kantian would be much more useful and the results justifiable of course only good character is a good thing, and the problem is that schools have generally tried to avoid making that kind of judgment. The result is a kind of character dependence that cripples the moral agent's ability for independent action. People (especially the young) have no desires and impulses that are their own but have only those that they are told they should have by a peer group or the media or another agent. Those "whose desires and impulses are not his own has no character, no more than a steam engine has character" (Mills 73).

Character can be fostered developing qualities (virtues) within the individual and then provide the means and standards-to evaluate and assess "personality accepted character" through expectation of social norms. This is only to recognizes that character is modified by culture. The assumption is that we all should be able to agree on some basic social values.

Even though this seems to be an impossibility in our current condition, many appropriate moral values already exist and derive from traditional sources. They have been forgotten or rejected because they are old and should be revived via character. Further more society must develop this kind of moral character because moral philosophy affects all aspects of life. It is not separate but interwoven. A good doctor or a good business man or a good repairman or any productive member of society does not become good by acquiring certain skills and knowledge. They must also acquire the moral dimensions of that profession or trade.

The most important agent in the process of character formation is the teacher. Consequently the moral character of the teacher becomes an important consideration since the role of teacher does not negate the moral character of the individual. Neutrality of the teacher is not desirable, nor is it possible. Teachers often claim moral neutrality and deny transmitting specific values. In practice, however, many student behaviors are not accepted while others are rewarded, and these actions reveal (perhaps unconscious) moral positions that comprise the moral character of the teacher. This is in the nature of good teaching, which even in practical matters is a moral judgment.

TEACHER

A group of researchers, once upon a time, wanted to find out what good teaching was. They decided to do a research study and find out. Their conclusion was that good teaching is what good teachers do. This, of course, presents a problem. Good teaching turns out to be not so much doing something

but rather being something. Being is something of a rather elusive nature, better suited to the poet and the philosopher. The scientist and the researcher are more interested in "just the facts ma'am". After all, how does one teach a person to be something? If they learn to do something and practice it, then perhaps they will become what they do. So, with some understatement, one might say modern educational methodology was born.

If once the education of teachers was based on what other teachers did, it is no longer. Now it is classroom models, measurement and evaluative instruments, desired outcomes, and research applications. All of the scientific attention focused on learning has certainly produced many successes and many valuable insights into the learning process. Many realize that more than anything, what teachers do is an imitation and composite of what they have seen good teachers do. A teacher somewhere is probably responsible for the career decision of most teachers. It may be, in part because it does not fit the current paradigm, that we are missing a very important element in the making of teachers. A consideration of the great teacher should yield some valuable insights into what teaching is.

There are a few givens in the world of educational research. One of them is that there are problems, and another is that generally things are getting worse not better. An analysis of popular culture revealed that there has been an important change in the portrayal of the teacher in society. Since the 1950's the image of the teacher has gone from authority figure or hero, to teacher as helper with an emphasis on the role of student as learner and hero, to the portrayal of the student and teacher on nearly equal terms (Arenz 119). In *The Closing of the American Mind*, Bloom says that "the absence of docility by an intellectual egalitarianism renders the educational process impotent, and education as a human institution pointless.". In other words, if the teacher lacks authority, education is impossible. Even the best scientific methods and instruments in the hands a teacher who lacks authority are useless.

A recent study concluded that an improvement in education must include an increase in the authority of the teacher (Warnock 73-81). This study also found four factors contributing to teacher authority: character, moral integrity, membership in a true profession, and salary. Interestingly enough, they do not mention greater expertise, although this would seem to be especially important at the higher levels. Another study that looked at "communication-related characteristics" [classroom performance] of college teachers found four important factors in their construct: Extroversion, character, competence, and composure (Powers 227–33). While some of these factors are easily understood and others need some definition, the one that stands out because it occurs in both is character.

Character appears to be an important link between authority and performance, and since it is certainly the portion of the personality that is publicly presented to the student, it is a link to the essence of the great teacher. It is clear that character is an important factor and should be regarded as a condition of the individual rather than a methodology. It only makes sense to look the at great men and women among us for examples of this condition. Arthur Schlesinger notes that "great men enable us to rise to our own highest potentialities" (104) They help us to see possibilities in ourselves, and they give us direct experience in the art of inspiration. However, since it is teaching that is the focus here, the great teacher is our immediate object.

There is an objection to the whole concept of the great teacher that should be considered. Robert Heilman, in an article titled "The Great-Teacher Myth", somewhat condescendingly but rather clearly catalogues the general complaints. The most frequent is that the teacher rather than the work becomes the object of the student. Another is that these teachers never seem to actually teach anything. They are accused of a self-worship and a power-love that gathers a group of devotes

away from the mainstream of education. They are seen as performers more than teachers, as generalists more than scholars and as interlopers more than professionals. Most importantly, they do not fit either the current image of the "correct" professor or the system that perpetuates the institution.

An underlying assumption in all these objections of Heilman is that his perspective on what should be taught is correct. If character is what we are interested in, then it becomes the subject. However, it always seems that the mediocre teacher hides behind the subject and teaches only the letters on the page, and if successful, the students leave burdened by the facts. The great teacher always seems to teach to the spirit of the work, and if successful, the students leave the text behind and are enlightened by the ideas.

In *Liberal Education*, Van Doren quotes Pindar as saying that "our chief duty consists in becoming who we are" (17). Van Doren goes on to explain this with the example of educated people. Are they changed by their education? In an important way, no. People who are educated do not become something else. Those people, in a sense, become more of what they are, or could be, that is human. They fulfill their potential. The same is true of the teacher. All teachers have the potential to become good (better) teachers. Each to a different personal potential, but all to a common human potential.

The objections to the great teacher noted earlier either apply to teachers who are becoming something else (i.e. a clown or anything else that a teacher might become that is not a teacher) or they do not really make sense, unless a completely relativistic position is taken, in which case there is no logical ground for criticizing any position. Good teachers must teach themselves in so far as they become a recognizable actuality of the human potential to know math or literature or any subject. Teaching is therefore a science in the older sense of the knowledge of causes, and an art in the sense of knowledge of things.

If teaching is an art, how does one teach people to be teachers? First, they must know, truly know, something—their subject (Demming calls this the "profound knowledge of what they do"), and there are also some tools, techniques, instruments and tricks that also can be taught profitably. Then they must have models to emulate, to admire, and to desire. Finally, they must have opportunity; opportunity to teach, to fail, to become and to love.

This element of love is the crux of the real opposition to great teaching. The failure of many teachers is in the failure to give of themselves. These teachers just do not want the responsibility, not of the work of teaching but of the loving of those taught. It is too personal-, too intrusive. It is much easier to think of people as clients and truths as outcomes. May Sarton, in her novel *The Small Room*, portrays a young teacher, Lucy, who struggles with just such a problem. She thought that she could keep teaching and students in the classroom and out of her life, but she found out that this was not teaching.

One of the greatest teacher I ever knew was the first teacher that I met in college. He had on his desk a plaque that said "To Learn and never be filled is Wisdom, and To Teach and never grow tired is Love." Teachers who do not have these qualities can never become great, they can only become what they are not.

Love, of course, is not the only thing. There are three characteristics of good teachers. They must know something. They must really know their area, and they must know life. They must stand for something, that is, they must have a vision. Without this vision their knowledge essentially means nothing since it has no reference point. The vision may be faulty. A student may be impressed with a marvelous teacher but may later realize that this teacher's vision was limited. Recently a professor confided to me that he had concluded

upon reflection (It apparently bothered him.) that most of the teachers whom the students really liked and seemed inspired by were ones that had a very strong position that they advanced.

Finally, a teacher must have character. One does not actually teach subjects, for then the success is always limited to the text. A teacher must be something, and that something is the medium through which the students encounter the subject. If a teacher truly sees what is taught, then the self fades in an assent to a greater truth or understanding of the thing considered. Method people never see this.

A teacher is not a teacher without a student, and the greatness of a teacher is never apparent without seeing the responses of the students. Perhaps this is true because the nature of education is not a product but a process, a process of becoming. Here is what Mark Van Doren said about education in his autobiography:

> Nothing is more human than education. Man does all he does by art. Animals have instincts, but men have arts; and the intellectual arts are those that free them to be themselves. College, where the intellectual arts are encountered, makes more difference in a person than anything else ever does: it turns the child into a man. What could be more exciting? (265–6).

Although a growing number of thinkers rightly see relativistic skepticism as the malaise of the modern world, they do not really provide an objective warrant for any virtues or moral goods or ethical positions but ground them in a socio- cultural justification. That is to say, they give them an institutional basis, and this does not solve the dilemma of relativism. "[For] to base ethics on no more than institutional facts is thereby to condemn it to a seemingly ineradicable relativism" (Veatch 48). Perhaps this is all we can do in our weakened condition as a culture. As a swimmer in a flood grasps some flotsam to gain a respite, even though still swept along, he can gather strength to strike out for solid ground; so we may gain some strength from these institutional justifications. Eventually, however, we must reach a firmer footing or be swept out to sea.

There is a sense of frustration even among intellectuals (the common person has long had it) over the problem of objective assurance for moral positions. At a recent AESA conference a Dr. Sean Healy was interrupted during his presentation on the problem of meaning in post-modern America by a member of the audience who suggested that certainly we could all agree on the value of such basic concepts as democracy, human rights, basic equality and social justice. Although we all wanted to rally behind these ideas, no one was able to answer the speaker's question—How?

As much as some may wish to put these ideas into a pre-rational condition, they are still culture driven and therefore subjective. Even an intuitional basis leads finally to a relativistic position. The belief that modern empirical science can be the warrant is itself an ethical position and has in any case failed to become an acceptable justification for, or a guide to right action. In fact most ethical theories do not give adequate reasons for their inferences.

This is because the Good is necessary to the nature of moral education, and admitting to an objective reality raises the specter of all of the philosophical problems of the last five hundred years we imagined we had outgrown—like childish playthings cast aside. We are loath to confess how necessary they are and how much we want to keep them without anyone knowing. These ideals must be of themselves permanent and not just temporary ends that the person or the society desires. What is required of the moral agent is a continual striving to reach the standards set by the moral ideal of the Good. This is, of course, a restatement of the concept of natural law in less technical terms. Here is Aquinas. "Natural laws are but rules or

measures of actions that specify and determine the order of potentialities to their actualities" (Veatch 124).

What is needed is an overhaul of the educational system with a new model that is both reflective and integrated. It cannot be value neutral but must be specific and affirmational of correct moral positions. Its primary focus must be not only to teach subjects but also to frame them in a moral context of socially approved models. These models are transmitted through the development of character in the individual. Specific ideals become the basis for making moral decisions.

Many in education and research appear to be reluctant to go this far, and they may be wise. To be associated with traditional realism today is to invite the automatic dismissal of your ideas, and it is to be held accountable for a host of elitist assumptions. It may be necessary to package any program advantageously. If a person truly wants to effect change, then the realities of the situation must be faced. We may be able to find answers for current problems in the treasury of our cultural past, but they must be given a new suit of clothes.

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