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Families, Schools and the Moral Education of Children

Michael S. Pritchard*

The seeds, as it were, of moral discernment are planted in the mind by him that made us. They grow up in their proper season, and are at first tender and delicate and easily warped. Their progress depends very much upon their being duly cultivated and properly exercised.[1]

I. Introduction

This Paper is concerned with the moral education of children.[2] It is often asked whether morality can be *taught*. In higher education this question is commonly converted to the question of whether morality can be *studied*.[3] This shifts the emphasis from teacher to learner. A major theme of this Paper is that the schools, too, should reframe the question of whether morality can be taught. Particularly at the elementary school level, moral education is commonly regarded as a matter of "instilling" or "implanting" moral values. Fearing moral indoctrination, many reject the idea that moral education belongs in the public schools. But, taking the cue from higher education, moral education in the schools need not be a form of indoctrination. It can be much more like studying morality than having moral values "implanted." But this requires acknowledging, with Thomas Reid, that the "seeds of moral discernment" are present even in the early school years. What is needed are opportunities for children's powers of moral discernment to be "duly cultivated and properly exercised."

Moral discernment is highly valued. We value it in ourselves and others as a mark of reasonableness.[4] But, as Reid says metaphorically, it

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1. Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of the Mind*, *in* Philosophical Works 595 (1967).

2. I offer no definition of 'moral education.' Indeed, it is precisely controversies about what constitutes moral education that fuels much of this Paper. I do hope that a reasonably clear and plausible conception of the kind of moral education I favor in the schools will emerge from my discussion. By 'moral' I mean, roughly, that which has to do with right and wrong, good and evil, and virtue and vice. This includes a consideration of principles, standards, rules, attitudes and sentiments that can plausibly be said to be moral. Morality cannot be equated with religion, law, or social etiquette, however intimately they might be related in some areas. By 'education' I mean to include a variety of means of learning, ranging from formal, didactic instruction to learning for oneself. Which end of this spectrum I favor in regard to moral education in the schools will, I hope, become clear as the Paper unfolds.

3. *See* Daniel Callahan, *Goals in the Teaching of Ethics*, *in* Ethics Teaching in Higher Education 61-74 (Daniel Callahan & Sissela Bok eds., 1980) (the emphasis is on students as active learners rather than passive recipients of moral instruction).

4. *See infra* notes 19-26 and accompanying text.

is only the *seeds* of moral discernment that are "planted in the mind by him that made us."[5] We naturally look to children's caretakers, typically their families, to protect these seeds while they are so tender, delicate and easily warped. But this is the language of passivity. To understand fully what Reid means by the seeds of moral discernment "being duly cultivated and properly exercised," we must view children as agents, not merely patients.

In some contexts "cultivated" implies passivity. For example, a field is cultivated by a farmer. It does not cultivate itself. In an educational context teachers might attempt to cultivate appreciation and judgment in their students. However, children can be encouraged to do this for themselves. If moral discernment is a mark of reasonableness, it is clear that at some point children themselves must begin to exercise their powers of judgment—that is, develop a capacity to think for themselves. In this they cannot remain passive.[6]

In this Paper I promote a view that includes moral education within the larger aim of helping children develop their capacity for reasonableness. However, in doing so I must address the concerns families have about the moral development of their children. These include worries about whether it is the business of the schools to enter into the arena of moral education at all. I argue that it is unavoidable that the schools do so to some extent. The real question is how they can do so in a responsible manner. An entering wedge is civic education, which aims at helping children prepare for citizenship in a constitutional democracy. However, this wedge opens up a much wider area in which children should be given opportunities to, as Reid might put it, duly cultivate and properly exercise their "seeds of moral discernment."

II. Whose Responsibility?

Whose responsibility is it to duly cultivate and properly exercise children's "seeds of moral discernment?" A short answer is: Those who bear primary responsibility for the education of children. A moment's reflection reveals that this short answer requires a rather lengthy explanation. Who does bear primary responsibility for the education of children? I will focus on three major candidates. The first is obvious, the second is controversial and the third is typically underestimated, if not overlooked entirely. They are families, schools and children themselves.

5. Reid, *supra* note 1, at 595. Some may balk at the theistic tone of Reid's remark. God does play a part in Reid's account of morality. But nothing I say in this Paper requires his theistic assumptions. The essential point here is simply that moral development begins at a very early age and that its "seeds," as it were, will grow only in a suitable environment. What the elements of such an environment might be is one of the major concerns of this Paper.

6. This does not mean that children are to be regarded as adults. Moral discernment requires experience as well as judgment. And there is much that young children are not experientially or emotionally ready to confront. However, as will be shown later, many have already developed a surprisingly sophisticated understanding of morality by the time they enter school.

Families are recognized by law to have a right to morally nurture their children. For example, in exercise of this right, families may establish rules of behavior for their children, extend or restrict privileges, monitor television viewing, read their children stories with moral messages and take their children to the church of their choice. Families can also fail to exercise this right responsibly. In cases of child abuse (for example, severe beatings), legal intervention is justified. Although abusive treatment may not be directly related to a parent's efforts at "moral instruction," parental abuse of any sort can surely have an adverse effect on the moral development of the child.

However, there are more subtle ways in which families can fail to responsibly exercise the right to morally nurture their children. They can simply fail to attend carefully to those aspects of their children's lives that need moral nurturing. Young children may be left too much on their own, they may be unloved even if they are not beaten, and so on. Much of this may go unnoticed by others. And even when noticed, it may be unclear to what extent, if any, legal intervention is permissible. Still, we need not conclude that, as long as their behavior is shielded by law, families are fulfilling the *moral* responsibilities they have to their children.[7] Because a legally recognized right to morally nurture children creates a protected zone for families, it seems reasonable to insist that there is an accompanying moral responsibility to exercise that right responsibly.[8] This is especially so given the obvious dependency and vulnerability of children and the substantial legal power families have to govern the lives of their children.

Of course, nothing said so far implies that *only* families have a legal right to morally nurture children. Families may acknowledge that others, too, have such a right by sending their children to accredited private schools. What about the public schools? In the absence of an approved alternative, the state legally requires children to attend the public schools. Thus, the state accords public schools a right and responsibility to provide a major portion of the education of children. To what extent, if any, should this be understood to include the *moral* education of children?

Here opinion sharply divides. Oddly, the voices of children are seldom heard or even represented in these disagreements. Yet, surely at some point in their formal education, children become moral agents with rights and responsibilities of their own. Full acknowledgement of this strengthens the case for according public schools the right and responsibility to provide an environment within which the "seeds of moral

7. This point follows from the broader notion that moral and legal responsibility are distinguishable. For example, if I agree to meet a struggling student in my office at 3:00 p.m., but cavalierly decide to play golf instead, this is a failure in moral, not legal, responsibility.

8. Whether there is a legal responsibility as well is a more difficult matter, one best settled by legal experts. In any case, for reasons given *supra* note 2, whatever legal responsibility may exist now or through future changes in law, it is unlikely to reach as far as moral responsibility does.

discernment" can be, as Reid puts it, "duly cultivated and properly exercised."[9]

Because national surveys consistently reveal that more than eighty percent of the parents in our society favor some sort of moral education in the schools, we might be tempted to conclude that there already is a virtual mandate for the public schools to place moral education explicitly on their agendas.[10] However, because of the vast differences of opinion about just what is to count as moral education, it is not clear what, if any, mandate exists.

For example, many believe morality and religion are inseparable. If they agree with the doctrine of the separation of church and state, they may fear that "secular humanist" teachers will, unwittingly perhaps, undermine the religious foundation of their children's morality. So, if they nevertheless favor moral education in the schools, they will be wary of just how this is to be done (and by whom). Others may simply insist that moral education has no place in state supported, public schools. Private, sectarian schools, however, are another matter, and that is where they will send their children. Still others might wish to overturn the doctrine of the separation of church and state so that moral education, in full religious dress, may be brought into the public schools.[11]

But even those who believe that morality and religion can and should be separated in a public school setting may have very different ideas about moral education in the schools. Some believe it is the job of the schools to "indoctrinate" students with certain values. Their detractors object to this as reinforcing a kind of mindless absolutism. Others favor "values clarification," the aim of which is to help students clarify the values they already hold, while at the same time withholding critical evaluation of those values. Detractors charge that this implicitly reinforces mindless relativism.[12]

Given these controversies, it is no wonder that some families insist

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9. This statement is intentionally vague. What must be taken up below is what such an environment should be like.

10. *See, e.g.*, THOMAS LICKONA, EDUCATING FOR CHARACTER: HOW OUR SCHOOLS CAN TEACH RESPECT AND RESPONSIBILITY 21 (1991) ("For more than a decade, every Gallup poll that has asked parents whether schools should teach morals has come up with an unequivocal yes. Typical is the finding that 84 percent of parents with school-age children say they want the public schools to provide 'instruction that would deal with morals and moral behavior.' ").

11. For a very constructive attempt to show how morality and religion can be distinguished without detracting from either, see Larry P. Nucci, *Doing Justice to Morality in Contemporary Values Education*, *in* MORAL, CHARACTER, AND CIVIC EDUCATION IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL 21, 27-33 (Jacques S. Benninga ed., 1991).

12. "Mindless absolutism" and "mindless relativism" should not be construed as representing anything clear or precise. Those who use these expressions are speaking pejoratively of positions they (fairly or unfairly) attribute to their opponents. "Mindless," as applied to both "absolutism" and "relativism," implies uncritical acceptance and application. So, it may be alleged, "mindless absolutism" favors "implanting" universal, and possibly exceptionless, moral principles in children. Children are not invited critically to evaluate these principles. Children are to be indoctrinated to accept and apply them, thus circumventing their critical intelligence. Similarly, "mindless relativism" allegedly encourages uncritical acceptance of the view that "any moral opinion is as good as any other."

that the moral education of their children is their responsibility, and that the public schools should not interfere. However, I will argue that they are mistaken in this. In making my case, I will suggest a path between the contending parties that at the same time addresses their fears. Three basic points can be made. First, moral education in the public schools should, among other things, strive to help students become reasonable persons. Reasonable people can deeply disagree about many things, including religion. So, aside from any constitutional guarantees, there is good reason for public schools to respect religious differences. Second, helping students become reasonable persons is the most effective way of fighting the twin specters of mindless absolutism and mindless relativism. It would be odd to think of a reasonable person as a *mindless* absolutist or relativist.[13] Whatever attraction such a person might have toward any form of absolutism or relativism would involve some degree of reflection or thoughtfulness. The best defense against either form of mindlessness would therefore seem to be to help students develop their capacity to be reasonable. Third, in a pluralist society such as ours, families that attempt to "go it alone" with the moral education of their children are unlikely to succeed—at least not in a way that will serve their children well.

III. Civic Education: A Link Between School and Family

It should be noted that there is a place where the legitimate concerns of public education and families clearly join. Public education in our society is sustained by a political system committed to certain individual liberties and democratic decision making.[14] In turn, public education is legitimately expected to help sustain that system by preparing children for citizenship. This is the function of civic education, which aims at helping students acquire the necessary understanding and skills for effective, responsible participation in a constitutional democracy.[15] What, then, are the values civic education should emphasize? Robert Fullinwider suggests the following: the capacity to make independent, rational judgments about civic matters, respect for the rights of others and the capacity to discuss and defend political views that may differ

13. Any reflective form of absolutism can be expected to show some sensitivity to the particular contexts within which moral judgement and choice are made. Any reflective form of relativism is likely to embrace common values such as self-respect, respect for others, fairness, truthfulness, keeping one's word and not harming others. Thus, neither view could fairly be called "mindless."

14. *See* Robert K. Fullinwider, *Science and Technology Education as Civic Education*, *in* Europe, America, and Technology: Philosophical Perspectives 197, 197-215 (Paul T. Durbin ed., 1991).

15. For a detailed discussion of where civic education might best fit in the curriculum, see Alita Z. Letwin, *Promoting Civic Understanding and Civic Skills Through Conceptually Based Curricula*, *in* Moral, Character, and Civic Education in the Elementary School, *supra* note 11, at 203, 203-11 (discussing educational materials developed by the Center for Civic Education, a California nonprofit corporation that develops programs for both private and public schools). *See also* Carolyn Pereira, *Educating for Citizenship in the Early Grades*, *in* Moral, Character, and Civic Education in the Elementary School, *supra* note 11, at 212, 212-26.

from theirs.[16]

These civic values form an important part of the social virtue of reasonableness. Civic education's concern for the reasonableness of students joins with the family's concern for the moral development of its children. This is so for several reasons. First, civic values such as respect for the rights of persons are themselves moral values. Thus, no clear separation of civic and moral education is possible. Second, as Fullinwider amply shows, the dispositions that civic education encourages do not, in fact, confine themselves to the civic arena. For example, the ability to discuss and defend political views is not an ability to discuss and defend *only* that. Once encouraged, the critical thinking skills exhibited in the civic arena are likely to show up anywhere. And, just as these skills are assets in the political arena, they are assets in other areas of life as well.[17] Third, families should desire their children to grow up to be well-developed, moral persons. As will be shown, reasonableness is a central feature of such persons.

Finally, we need to consider the perspective of children themselves. They have a *right* to be given opportunities to become well-developed, moral persons.[18] This right is as basic as the right to be given opportunities to develop the ability to read, write or compute. Families that do not want or do not care whether their children become well-developed, moral persons pose a special problem. The failure of such families to provide adequate opportunities, or their active interference with this endeavor, can only strengthen the case for the schools providing such opportunities. The case for schools doing this is even stronger if, as seems likely, even the most conscientious families cannot by themselves provide adequate opportunities.

IV. A Case for Reasonableness

I have referred to reasonableness as a social virtue. What does this involve? Minimally, it can be understood to include those skills and dispositions encompassed by what educators refer to as *critical thinking*. Robert Ennis succinctly defines "critical thinking" as "reasonable reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do."[19]

16. Fullinwider, *supra* note 14, at 198. As authority for these ideas, Fullinwider cites BRIAN S. CRITTENDEN, PARENTS, THE STATE, AND THE RIGHT TO EDUCATE 13, 122 (1988); AMY GUTMANN, DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION 38-39 (1987); William Galston, *Civic Education in the Liberal State*, *in* LIBERALISM AND THE MORAL LIFE 89, 97 (Nancy L. Rosenblum ed., 1989).

17. How else are we to understand the nationwide call for greater emphasis on developing critical thinking skills? This is not simply a call for critical thinking in civic education.

18. This is at least a moral right. Whether it can plausibly be construed as a legal right as well is a question best left for legal experts. I would think that there *should* be such a legal right, even if presently there is none. What respect for such a right would entail for families, schools and others would still be subject to much debate. However, the importance of acknowledging such a right is that this recognizes children themselves as having a *claim* in the matter.

19. Robert H. Ennis, *A Conception of Critical Thinking—With Some Curriculum Suggestions*, NEWSLETTER ON TEACHING PHILOSOPHY (American Philosophical Association, Newark,

Although admirably brief, Ennis's definition may be too narrow. Critical thinking can also be used to make sense of what we read, see or hear and to make inferences from premises with which we may disagree or about which we have no particular view. Such critical thinking may lead one to decide what to believe or do, but it need not.[20]

In addition to his definition of critical thinking, Ennis provides an elaborate taxonomy of critical thinking skills. This taxonomy is actually broader than his definition would suggest. It includes dispositions to seek clear statements of questions, to be open-minded, to seek as much precision as the subject permits, to think in an orderly manner and to be sensitive to the feelings and level of understanding of others. It also includes abilities such as focusing on the context of an argument, detecting unstated assumptions, clarifying arguments, making inferences from premises and interacting with others in a reasonable manner.

It is clear from this list that critical thinking involves more than the employment of "higher level" thinking skills, and more than clever or skillful argumentation. Critical thinking involves thinking for oneself. But it also involves thinking well—that is, exercising good judgment. This means having reasons for one's judgments, or, as Matthew Lipman puts it, having reliable *criteria* for one's judgments.[21]

If the point of encouraging the critical thinking of children is to help them become more reasonable, then moral education should be seen as an explicit part of the broader educational agenda of the schools. This is because reasonableness applies to morality as much as to any other area of judgment and conduct. How reasonableness should be understood in the context of morality requires special comment.

It should be especially noted that reasonableness in the context of morality is not to be equated with rationality. Someone can be unreasonable without thereby being irrational. A selfish person may (unreasonably) take more than his or her fair share, likely at the expense of others. Yet, from the standpoint of self-interest, this is not necessarily irrational. A person may make excessive (unreasonable) demands and yet not be irrational. A person might be unwilling to reason with others about an issue or refuse to listen to others's points of view without being irrational. But we may regard this as unreasonable. It is only when rationality is combined with fairminded regard for the views and interests of others that reasonableness is present. Thus, reasonableness is actually a *social* virtue. As W.M. Sibley states:

> If I desire that my conduct shall be deemed *reasonable* by someone taking the standpoint of moral judgment, I must exhibit something more than mere rationality or intelligence. To be reasonable here is to see the matter—as we commonly put it—

Del.), Summer 1987, at 1 (emphasis omitted). *See also* ROBERT H. ENNIS & STEPHEN P. NORRIS, EVALUATING CRITICAL THINKING 3 (1989).

20. *See* Michael S. Pritchard, *STS, Critical Thinking, and Philosophy for Children*, *in* EUROPE, AMERICA, AND TECHNOLOGY: PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES, *supra* note 14, at 217, 217-46.

21. MATTHEW LIPMAN, THINKING IN EDUCATION 114-42 (1991).

> from the other person's point of view, to discover how each will be affected by the possible alternative actions; and, moreover, not merely to "see" this (for any merely prudent person would do as much) but also to be prepared to be disinterestedly *influenced*, in reaching a decision, by the estimate of these possible results. I must justify my conduct in terms of some principle capable of being appealed to by all parties concerned, some principle from which we can reason in common.[22]

Ronald Dworkin provides a good illustration of the importance of encouraging this sort of reasonableness in children:

> Suppose I tell my children simply that I expect them not to treat others unfairly. I no doubt have in mind examples of the conduct I mean to discourage, but I would not accept that my 'meaning' was limited to these examples, for two reasons. First, I would expect my children to apply my instructions to situations I had not and could not have thought about. Second, I stand ready to admit that some particular act I had thought was fair when I spoke was in fact unfair, or vice-versa, if one of my children is able to convince me of that later; in that case I should want to say that my instructions covered the case he cited, not that I had changed my instructions. I might say that I meant the family to be guided by the *concept* of fairness, not by any specific *conception* of fairness I might have had in mind.[23]

It should be noted that Dworkin is not inviting just any kind of challenge to his conception of fairness. Presumably it will have to be one capable of *convincing* him that he was mistaken; and this implies that the challenge is accompanied with good reasons. Thus, both parent and child are subject to the constraints of reasonableness. Like any parent, Dworkin would like to believe that the examples of unfairness he has in mind at any given time are reasonable. But he is not willing to hold that belief in the face of convincing reasons to the contrary. As a reasonable parent, he is open to the possibility that he might be wrong about some of his examples. To deny this possibility (and reject evidence to the contrary) is to be willing to be wrong *twice*—and to wish that for his child as well.

Of course, being a well-developed, moral person involves more than reasonableness. But in our pluralistic society it may be difficult to specify what else is essential. Not all values are specifically moral values, and there is no reason to insist on uniformity across persons. But even within morality there may be many different ways of satisfying plausible criteria for being a well-developed, moral person, and reasonable people might even disagree about some of the criteria. However, broad consensus about some basic features in addition to reasonableness may be attainable. Here are three candidates:

1. Self-respect;

22. W.M. Sibley, *The Rational Versus the Reasonable*, 62 PHIL. REV. 554, 557 (1953).
23. RONALD DWORKIN, TAKING RIGHTS SERIOUSLY 134 (1977).

2. A capacity to resist, if not overcome, egocentricity in circumstances calling for moral sensitivity and judgment; and

3. Commitment to other-regarding values (e.g., respect for others, justice, beneficence), with appropriate supportive virtues (e.g., considerateness, compassion, fair-mindedness, benevolence).

Although distinguishable, these features are not independent of one another. In addition, each has a special relationship to reasonableness. For example, someone who is seriously deficient in other-regarding values will not be regarded as a reasonable person. And someone who is excessively egocentric will have distorted other-regarding values and, thereby, lack reasonableness. Finally, the acknowledgement and appreciation by others that one has the virtue of reasonableness can contribute to one's self-respect.

If the sort of reasonable person Sibley describes is the sort of person families should want their children to become, it is a tall order, indeed, for families to "go it alone." Without the assistance of the kind of civic education Fullinwider describes, how are children to develop the capacity to understand and discuss views different from those they encounter in the smaller circles within which their families may try to enclose them?

Nevertheless, families obviously play a crucial role in determining the extent to which children grow up to be well-developed moral persons. On the negative side, various forms of child abuse (physical and psychological) can impede this development, as can parental neglect or absence. Parental modelling of behavior and attitudes can have either a positive or negative effect, as can that of other older family members.[24] If reasonableness is a desired outcome, then *inductive* modelling is likely to prove most effective. This requires both exhibiting the desired types of attitude or behavior and providing the child with *reasons* for embracing them.[25] Finally, on the positive side, the unconditional love that parents have for their children is a fundamental source of self-respect and self-esteem.[26]

So, enroute to becoming well-developed, moral persons, children need from their families good modelling, love, support and the absence

24. For convenience, I will refer to parents as the significant adults in family life. But, I make no special assumptions about what constitutes a standard family. There may be one or two natural parents present—or none. There will be at least one adult, however related to the children. Beyond this, nothing I say is intended to support one particular family arrangement rather than another. How families might best be structured is an interesting and important topic, but is beyond the scope of this Paper.

25. For more on inductive modelling, see Martin L. Hoffman, *Empathy, Role-Taking, Guilt, and the Development of Altruistic Motives*, *in* MORAL DEVELOPMENT AND BEHAVIOR: THEORY, RESEARCH AND SOCIAL ISSUES 124, 124-43 (Thomas I. Lickona ed., 1976).

26. 'Unconditional' may seem too strong, since parental love can be withdrawn under some circumstances. However, what is meant by 'unconditional' is that the child does not have to do anything or have any special qualities in order to be loved by his or her parents. Such love is not conditioned by one's accomplishments or special characteristics. For a good discussion of unconditional love and its importance for developing self-respect and self-esteem, see LAURENCE THOMAS, LIVING MORALLY: A PSYCHOLOGY OF MORAL CHARACTER (1989).

of abuse and neglect. However necessary these might be, they are not sufficient. Taking only these elements into account, the child is largely being portrayed as a *patient*—someone to whom something is happening or for whom something is being done. But at some point the child as *agent* must enter the scene. So, we might ask, when does the child "get in on the act?" We need to ask not just what is to be done *to* and *for* children, but also what might enable them to *do things for themselves*.

V. Children as Moral Agents

The four features of a well-developed, moral person outlined above clearly portray the person as an agent, not merely a patient. To encourage the development of these features, it is important to recognize the earliest appearance of those affective and cognitive capacities that are essential to that development.[27] This has been precisely the agenda of developmental psychologists such as Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg.[28] Their theories of moral development are so influential among parents and educators that they warrant some attention here, for these theories are as misleading as they are promising in suggesting how moral development can be encouraged.

Piaget and Kohlberg offer encouragement to parents who worry that their children's basic moral development is completed before they even enter school. They reject this Freudian view in favor of the idea that moral development is dependent on cognitive development. So, basic moral changes can be expected to occur well into school years, and even into adulthood. Of course, this may be unwelcome news to parents who would like to minimize the influence of the schools and peer groups on their children's moral development. But for many it is a relief to know that their first, often fumbling efforts at parenting may not have sealed their children's moral fate.

However, Piaget and Kohlberg accept Freud's view that, even well into the early school years, children are basically self-centered. Morality for young children is first grounded in the fear of punishment or loss of love and then in an "instrumental egoism" of reciprocal exchange.[29] Even Carol Gilligan's critique of Kohlberg's neglect of the affective side of moral development accepts the view that early childhood is basically

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27. Roughly speaking, affective capacities are capacities for emotion and feeling, whereas cognitive capacities are capacities for rational and logical thought. Just what relationships these capacities have to one another in the moral domain is subject to much debate. *See* Michael S. Pritchard, On Becoming Responsible 58-159 (1991).

28. For a discussion of Piaget's views on moral development, see Jean Piaget, The Moral Judgment of the Child (Majorie Gabain trans., 1965). Kohlberg's basic theories are presented in Lawrence Kohlberg, The Philosophy of Moral Development: Essays On Moral Development (1981) and Lawrence Kohlberg, The Psychology of Moral Development (1984).

29. "Instrumental egoism," for Kohlberg, is understood as "backscratching"—"You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours." This is self-serving in the following sense: I will do things that will benefit others, but only in the actual or expected return of benefits from them. Thus, there is an expectation of fully reciprocal exchange of benefits and, therefore, no unilateral sacrifice.

self-centered in these ways.[30]

Unfortunately, this view of the self-centeredness of young children conflates egocentric and egoistic behavior. What is overlooked is the possibility that much apparently egoistic behavior is only egocentric. Egoistic behavior is self-centered in the sense that one is seeking something for oneself. Egocentric behavior is self-centered in the sense that one does not fully understand or take into account the different perspectives of others. Although someone's behavior on a particular occasion can be both egoistic and egocentric, it need not be. For example, a younger brother may buy a present for his older brother that is no longer of any interest to the older brother. The older brother may then permit the younger brother to use it. If we surmise that the younger brother bought the present with precisely this in mind, his behavior will be construed as egoistic. But it should be noted that this interpretation assumes that the younger brother *does* understand the perspective of his older brother. So, if he behaved egoistically, he was not entirely egocentric. However, if the younger brother's thinking was basically egocentric, he might not have behaved egoistically at all. Suppose the younger brother failed to realize that his older brother no longer shared the same interests. He might then have bought a present he mistakenly thought would please his older brother. This would be egocentric but not egoistic behavior.

The extent to which young children are self-centered—and how this is to be understood—is a central concern for child rearing. If parents believe that their children will respond only to threats of punishment or the withdrawal of love, what is reinforced is a *morality of threats*. The longer this is reinforced, the more firmly entrenched it is likely to become (and the greater the danger of its becoming abusive). If, as Kohlberg suggests, children are responsive only to such threats well into their early school years, how is it, we might wonder, that they *ever* acquire genuinely other-regarding concerns? Kohlberg's apparent answer is that at roughly age seven or eight children's social understanding is transformed through further cognitive development. At this point they are able to understand perspectives other than their own, thus enabling them to empathize with others. However, seven or eight years of parental reinforcement of a morality of threats, plus another two or three years in an authoritarian school environment are likely to make such a transformation quite difficult.

Psychologist Martin Hoffman points out a fundamental problem with Kohlberg's account:

> It is . . . conceivable that a person could understand the social order and see its functional rationality quite well, discuss moral

30. CAROL GILLIGAN, IN A DIFFERENT VOICE: PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY AND WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT (1982). Gilligan criticizes Kohlberg for overemphasizing justice, rights, duties and abstract, universal principles. Equally important for morality, she argues, are compassion, caring and responding to the needs of others, regardless of whether there is a strict duty or obligation to do so. So, Gilligan contrasts what she calls a "morality of care" with Kohlberg's "morality of justice."

> dilemmas of others intelligently and take the role of most anyone—and still act immorally himself and experience little or no guilt over doing so. Indeed, these social insights might just as readily serve Machiavellian as moral purposes.[31]

Not only is this conceivable, it is precisely how sociopaths are typically characterized by psychiatrists.[32] Because Kohlberg supposes that young children do experience guilt, it is clear that he is not thinking of young children as sociopaths. However, apparently he is not thinking of their experience of guilt as reflecting genuine concern about the well-being of others. Instead, guilt is strictly tied to real or imagined threats of power or punishment. So, Hoffman still has a point. If children are egoistic from the outset and remain so until seven or eight, perhaps as they acquire greater social understanding they will simply incorporate this within their egoistic perspective. Thus, moral development could be seen as a gradual development of enlightened self-interest—that is, a more sophisticated form of egoism.[33]

Finding this implausible, Hoffman offers us a different view of young children. He provides convincing evidence that very young children are capable of genuinely empathic responses to the distress of others.[34] These responses manifest some awareness of the very different perspectives of others. They also seem to manifest a genuine concern for the distress of others. William Damon's *The Moral Child* presents further evidence of this from recent research on the moral development of children.[35] So, there is good reason to suppose that non-egocentric and non-egoistic behavior is possible much earlier than Kohlberg allows. Because both are essential to later moral development, it is important for parents to be attentive and responsive to early manifestations.

Recall Thomas Reid's observation that the progress of the "seeds of moral discernment . . . depends very much upon their being duly cultivated and properly exercised."[36] If parents believe their children are not ready to accept non-egoistic reasons for behaving or not behaving in

31. Martin Hoffman, *Moral Development*, *in* 2 CARMICHAEL'S MANUAL OF CHILD PSYCHOLOGY 281 (Paul H. Mussen ed., 3d ed. 1970).

32. *See* WILLIAM MCCORD & JOAN MCCORD, PSYCHOPATHY AND DELINQUENCY (1956); PRITCHARD, *supra* note 27, at 39-57.

33. PRITCHARD, *supra* note 27, at 119-23.

34. According to Hoffman, even infants give evidence of empathic responses to the crying of other infants. However, at this stage infants apparently have no clear sense of the distinction between themselves and others. So, he refers to this as "global empathy." Still, as young children develop their understanding of the perspectives of others, empathy becomes differentiated. This is not an escape from egoism, for it is only at this point that ego itself clearly emerges. Now there can be concern both for others and self. Equally important, non-egocentric understanding begins to develop much earlier than Kohlberg suggests. Hoffman's earliest example is an 18 month-old child comforting another toddler. There is little reason to suppose that very young children cannot respond to overt expressions of adult distress as well. However, the understanding of more subtle and complex forms of suffering no doubt must await appropriate cognitive development.

35. WILLIAM DAMON, THE MORAL CHILD: NUTURING CHILDREN'S NATURAL MORAL GROWTH (1988).

36. REID, *supra* note 1, at 595.

certain ways, they will not cultivate the "seeds of moral discernment" in that direction. In fact, by substituting egoistic reasons in their stead, parents may actually contribute to the warping of those "seeds." If children are capable of non-egocentric thinking at a very early age, then parents would do well to reinforce this and provide opportunities for their children to develop this capacity. By assuming that their children are not capable of non-egocentric thinking until well into their school years, parents may actually reinforce and prolong the "tunnel vision" that so often impedes the development of moral sensitivity.

Of course, it is implausible to suppose that an eighteen month-old child's empathic response to the distress of another child incorporates moral conceptions. However, the responsiveness and caring that are present can be expected eventually to contribute to that child's moral outlook—*unless this is otherwise discouraged.* Furthermore, the wait will not be long. Richard Shweder, Elliot Turiel and Nancy Much provide evidence that children as young as four have an intuitive understanding of differences among prudential, conventional and moral rules:

> In fact, at this relatively early age, four to six, children not only seem to distinguish and identify moral versus conventional versus prudential rules using the same formal principles (e.g., obligatoriness, importance, generalizability) employed by adults; they also seem to agree with the adults of their society about the moral versus conventional versus prudential status of particular substantive events (e.g., throwing paint in another child's face versus wearing the same clothes to school every day).[37]

Lest it be concluded that the basic story of moral development is completed in the pre-school years after all, it should be emphasized that this *is* just the beginning. Gareth Matthews nicely outlines what we should expect to follow:

> A young child is able to latch onto the moral kind, bravery, or lying, by grasping central paradigms of that kind, paradigms that even the most mature and sophisticated moral agents still count as paradigmatic. Moral development is then something much more complicated than simple concept displacement. It is: enlarging the stock of paradigms for each moral kind; developing better and better definitions of whatever it is these paradigms exemplify; appreciating better the relation between straightforward instances of the kind and close relatives; and learning to adjudicate competing claims from different moral kinds (classically the sometimes competing claims of justice and compassion, but many other conflicts are possible).[38]

This may seem to place too much emphasis on the cerebral. What about

37. Richard A. Shweder, Elliot Turiel & Nancy C. Much, *The Moral Intuitions of the Child*, *in* SOCIAL COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT: FRONTIERS AND POSSIBLE FUTURES 288 (John H. Flavell & Lee Ross eds., 1981). *See also* Nucci, *supra* note 11, at 22-26 (children as young as two and one-half can differentiate between moral and conventional issues).

38. Gareth B. Matthews, *Concept Formation and Moral Development*, *in* PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES ON DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY 185 (James Russell ed., 1987).

the will, one might ask? What about matters of the heart? What about behavior? However, what must be borne in mind is that typically the kinds of reflection Matthews describes take place in contexts in which it very much *matters* to the participants how issues are understood. There may be concerns about sharing toys, distributing dessert fairly, doing household chores or helping an elderly neighbor who is too ill to care properly for her pet. There might also be concerns about all sorts of issues at school—sharing materials, taking turns, school government, privileges and rights, punishments and rewards, social relationships, and so on. That is, sorting through and refining paradigms is not typically just an intellectual exercise.

"That's just it," an objector might say, "the problem is that these things do matter to children—too much, in fact. Children aren't ready for reasonable discussion of such issues. Aristotle is right, first they need to be *habituated*—their passions have to be brought under control by good habits. Give them firm rules and reinforce them. Then, much later, such matters can be discussed." This underestimates children in two respects. First, it assumes that they do not already have some rather stable moral dispositions by the time they enter school. Second, it assumes that reflection and discussion can contribute little to the refinement the dispositions that are already somewhat in place. It is again, to view children as patients rather than agents.

Fortunately, there is now a great deal of empirical evidence that these assumptions are not warranted. Ask any group of five to ten year-old children what they think about lying or fairness, for example, and marvel at the range of thoughtful responses.[39] It is often difficult to see what basic moral distinctions they leave out that adults would put in. For example, favoritism, taking more than one's fair share, not taking turns, listening to only one side of the story, jumping to conclusions, not treating equals equally (and unequals unequally), and the like are readily volunteered as kinds of unfairness. These are staple fare in the lives of children from a very early age—within their family structures, on the playground and in school. That young children, like the rest of us, may more readily recognize unfairness in others than in themselves does not mean that they do not understand what fairness and unfairness are. That they will later extend their conceptions of fairness and unfairness to situations they cannot now understand very well (e.g., taxation)—and that they will discover conflicts with other fundamental values—does not imply that they do not now have access to moral concepts at their most basic level.

Still, there is no necessary connection between moral thought and action. A crucial part of the mix is the social environment. Because

39. *See, e.g.*, GARETH B. MATTHEWS, DIALOGUES WITH CHILDREN (1984); MICHAEL S. PRITCHARD, PHILOSOPHICAL ADVENTURES WITH CHILDREN (1985); *see generally* GROWING UP WITH PHILOSOPHY 311-91 (Matthew Lipman & Ann M. Sharp eds., 1978) (collection of essays regarding ethical inquiry in the schools); *see also* any publication of the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children at Montclair State College, New Jersey.

families constitute only a part of that environment (especially once the child is school-age), it is clear that any adequate account of how children might grow into well-developed, moral persons must focus on much more than the family. But the family itself plays a fundamental role. It is to be hoped that families and schools can work together in encouraging the moral development of children. However, two worries about families should be mentioned—worries about families contributing either *too little* or *too much* to the process.

First, the worry about too little: Families may provide little or no love for and acceptance of their children. They may sustain an environment ranging from indifference to abuse. And they may provide little or no good modelling. The causes may be various (e.g., poverty, lack of education, family breakdown), but in such circumstances children are bound to be shortchanged. Through a strong natural constitution, strong support outside the family or good luck, many children in these families will nevertheless grow up to be well-developed moral persons. Many others, however, may not. External support from the schools, social services or the law may be helpful. In any case, it is unrealistic to expect each family on its own to be able or willing to work things out in the best interest of the child. Government, social services, schools and family law must work together in trying to provide needed assistance.

Second, the worry about too much: Families can attempt to be too supportive and protective of their children. A family may try to protect its children from an external world perceived to be hostile to what the family's adults most value and want for their children. Or, as already mentioned, the family's adults may be convinced that moral education belongs exclusively in the home. Thus, deliberate attempts by the schools to undertake some of the tasks of moral education are viewed with suspicion and may be vigorously opposed.

VI. Empowering Children

The cost of keeping moral education out of the schools is likely to be high. Deliberately or not, moral values are reinforced (or undermined) in the schools. Cheating is discouraged, respect for students and teachers is encouraged, and so on. In short, educational institutions depend for their viability on the acceptance of basic moral values, values that may or may not match up well with values found in the corridors, the playgrounds and the streets between home and school—or even in the homes of some children. To expect all of this to work out well without moral education being in any explicit way placed on the educational agenda is quite optimistic.

It might be replied that these moral values are reinforced only to enable schools to get on with their main business—educating students. These are ground rules for the schools to function effectively. Distinct from this, however, is the question of whether moral values should be discussed *within* the curriculum itself. But, attempting to keep moral

content out of the curriculum is equally hopeless. As Fullinwider states, a school that attempted this would probably have to close down:

> It could not teach children their native language since so much of any natural language is about how to be and not to be. It would have to deprive its students of all stories of human affairs, since those stories are structured by evaluative concepts—by ideas of success and failure, foresight and blindness, heedfulness and heedlessness, care and negligence, duty and dereliction, pride and shame, hope and despair, wonder and dullness, competition and cooperation, beginning and ending. But without stories of human affairs, a school could not effectively teach non-moral lessons either. It could not teach about inflation, log-rolling, scientific discovery, coalition-building, paranoia, ecological niches, deterrence of crime, price controls, or infectious disease.[40]

Worse, anything resembling critical thinking would need to be eliminated from the schools as well. Thomas Reid notes that our "power of reasoning, which all acknowledge to be one of the most eminent natural faculties of man, . . . appears not in infancy."[41] This capacity, like that of moral discernment, also needs to be duly cultivated and properly exercised. The recent hue and cry that the schools are failing to help students develop critical thinking skills echoes Reid's observation. So, there is a nationwide call for getting beyond rote learning. Hardly anyone would oppose critical thinking in the schools—as long as it can stay away from the moral domain. But it cannot be kept away.

An anecdote will illustrate the problem. A few years ago I visited a fourth-grade class. I spent the half hour discussing assumptions with the students. I gave them several "brainteasers" that can be solved only if one examines unwarranted assumptions that block our ability to proceed. For example, six toothpicks can be placed end-to-end to form four equilateral triangles only if we construct a three-dimensional pyramid, rather than lay them all on a flat surface.[42] As long as we assume we are restricted to a two-dimensional, flat surface, we will not be able to solve the problem.

After class, one of the students told me a story. A father and son are injured in a car accident. They are rushed to separate rooms for surgery. The doctor attending the son announces, "I cannot perform surgery on this boy. He is my son." The student then asked me to explain how the boy could be the doctor's son. I had heard the story several years earlier, so I quickly answered the question. Some of today's fourth graders still struggle with this question for a while ("The first father was a priest," "The doctor was his step-father"). But when this was first aired on television's *All in the Family*, Archie Bunker was not the

40. Fullinwider, *supra* note 14, at 206-07.

41. REID, *supra* note 1, at 595.

42. The pyramid will have an equilateral triangle as its base, with each side of the triangle being a toothpick. Each of the remaining three toothpicks can then have one of its ends placed at one of the angles of the base triangle, while the other ends are brought together at a single point. The result is a four-sided pyramid.

only one who was stumped. A significant percentage of adult viewers were as well.

Why did this fourth grader come up with this example? We had been talking about assumptions, but none of my examples had any social content. Here was an example resting on an unwarranted assumption—an assumption that contains gender stereotypes. The student apparently understood very well the basic point about assumptions. Then, like any good critical thinker, she *applied* it in a novel way—a way that has everything to do with moral education. So, even critical thinking about seemingly innocuous "brainteasers" threatens to get out of control.

Given this, it seems best simply to face up to the task of moral education, rather than act as if it could be avoided altogether. However, something interesting happens when moral education is put on the main agenda, rather than remaining on the hidden agenda. If schools explicitly acknowledge they are in the moral education business, how will they defend themselves against the charge of indoctrination? Fullinwider suggests that we see moral education as something like learning a vocabulary, learning how to use words and concepts. This is much like Gareth Matthew's suggestion that we view moral development more in terms of enlarging concepts, as well as like Ronald Dworkin's notion of being guided by a concept of fairness while working out particular conceptions of fairness. As Fullinwider puts it, "A moral education supplies tools of evaluation (a vocabulary) rather than a doctrine for adhesion (dogma)."[43] To this we should add that students need to be encouraged to *use* these tools in the classroom. That is, they need to be encouraged to engage in evaluative thought—with each other.

When this is done in a mutually supportive atmosphere, what evolves is a *community of inquiry*.[44] In such a classroom each student is regarded as having the potential to make valuable contributions to the issues discussed. Students are expected to give reasons in support of what they say, to listen to one another carefully, and to be responsive to one another. This kind of learning environment can be expected to help develop and refine the reasonableness of students. Such a community of inquiry, Reid might agree, affords students opportunities to "duly cultivate and properly exercise" their "seeds of moral discernment." And this is what *empowers* students eventually to go on responsibly, on their own, rather than under the watchful eye of teacher or parent.

To deprive students of such opportunities in the schools is to deprive them of an educational right as basic as any other. No one seriously suggests that students should be legally required to go to school, but that math and science education have no place there. Why should it be any different if we substitute 'moral education' for 'math and science education?' If the answer is that most parents cannot handle the math

43. Fullinwider, *supra* note 14, at 207.

44. For a thorough discussion of the idea of community of inquiry, see Ann M. Sharp, *What is a 'Community of Inquiry'?*, 16 J. MORAL EDUC. 37 (1987).

and science education of their children all by themselves, the same is true of moral education.

Moral education agendas developed exclusively in the home may result in over-dependency of children on their families for moral support. The kind of autonomous, critical thinking that children are likely to need once they leave the home to lead their own lives may be blunted by a family that itself exhibits highly egocentric thinking. While not an inevitable consequence of the morally insular family, the risk of children emerging who are not well equipped to deal with the complexities of a pluralist society is substantial. Finally, we should ask, what about those children whose homes provide little, if any, moral support?

VII. Conclusion

Earlier I listed four features of a well-developed, moral person about which we might expect there to be broad consensus. What has emerged from subsequent discussion is that there are substantial obstacles in the way of enabling children to achieve this end. These obstacles are of various sorts, and they are formidable. A start, however, would be to carefully identify them and determine what may be required to minimize their severity—and to do so with a resolve to work toward making those changes that are most likely to enhance the moral development of children.