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Helping College Students Make Moral Decisions:
Thesis One: Higher education appears to have
rediscovered the moral thrust of education, but the
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the dorm, the counseling center had done a series of workshops on alcohol abuse.

Across campus Professor Hendricks was in her office seeing another student who was going to school full-time while working more than twenty-five hours a week. She had sympathy for the student's excuse regarding his late paper, but was firm with him on the need to be punctual with assignments. After he left, she wistfully wondered about the good old days when students could just be students. Yet she understood the student's plight. Moreover, several students had recently talked to her of their fears that in the present state of the economy they might not be able to find a job. Some seemed genuinely scared. She wondered whether she had given this student enough time; she felt rushed. She reflected on how Jesuit education was supposed to stress care for students, yet she had this deadline for her publisher and felt irritated trying to balance her scholarly commitments with her desire to be attentive to student needs.

In the administration building next door, Father Hodges, the university president, had his own concerns. Several alumni had written angry letters regarding the university's decision to recognize a student gay/lesbian group on campus. Then there was the matter of the newly

endowed chair of business administration. Members of the School of Business were split on whom they would recommend for the chair. Several members wanted a nationally recognized scholar who was a national consultant for defense industries, whereas other members vocally demanded that the recipient reflect a "faith that does justice" persuasion. Down the hall the academic vice-president was meeting with the chair of the theology department. The recent department revamping of courses had been stymied due to an ideological dispute within the department. A clear conservative/liberal split had developed regarding ethics and doctrine courses; consensus seemed impossible. Neither the vice-president nor the department head knew quite what to do.

Admittedly, not every Jesuit institution faces such issues every day. Nonetheless, I doubt if any of us can deny that in any given year every Jesuit college or university faces some of the above situations and issues, as well as numerous related ones.

In this article I would like to reflect on student moral growth in the context of Jesuit education.² We will begin by offering three theses for discussion and conclude with some practical suggestions for faculty and staff to further young-adult moral development.

FIRST THESIS

Higher education appears to have rediscovered the moral thrust of education, but the reality is that this pursuit might have only minimal significance.

Of late, much public attention has been focused on the issue of morality. Indeed, instruction in "ethics" has become the rage on many campuses.³ According to a recent survey, America's institutions of higher learning offer 11,000 courses in areas of applied ethics over a wide variety of disciplines.⁴ This renewed interest in ethics is not surprising. Education is not value-free. A nation, in addition to knowledge and skills, must pass on to successive generations its vision and purpose. "In the United States schooling has always been connected with moral purposes. Moral education has been considered central to the formation of a democratic society. Democracy is so defined that it demands persons of good character and virtue."⁵ Former Harvard president Derek Bok noted that in the earlier part of this century a moral individualism developed, having little sympathy for communal understanding and shared vision.

During most of the twentieth century, first artists and intellectuals, then broader segments of the society, challenged every convention, every prohibition, every regulation that cramped the human spirit or blocked its appetite and ambitions. Today, a reaction has set in, born of a recognition that the public needs common standards to hold a diverse society together, to prevent ecological disaster, to maintain confidence in government, to conserve scarce resources, to escape disease, to avoid the inhumane applications of technology.⁶

Such a notion of "common standards" implies, at a minimum, a consensus on some values, some minimal limits on conduct, and a shared moral vision. Educators are increasingly willing to speak out on the role of higher education in articulating this communal vision and to challenge students to accept responsibility for the country's moral health. At his inaugural, Brown University's

new president, Vartan Gregorian, challenged his listeners to step out of their “moral enclosures” and turn their commitments into action.

We have no choice but to end the imprisonment of the self and concern ourselves with those outside our moral enclosures. We need a moral center, not a moral enclosure. We need to be capable of moral outrage and sensitive to the pain and sorrow of our fellow man and woman. It is important not only to be able to engage in new ideas, but also to be willing to make public declarations of one’s convictions and commitments and then translate them into actions and deeds.⁷

Although the above review of recent thinking in higher education is not complete, it does point out how seriously some educators have begun to consider value-centered education and student moral development.

This moral dimension of education is in harmony with the Jesuit philosophy and should be of particular interest to those working in Jesuit education. “St. Ignatius viewed education as an *instrument* to achieve the religious goals of giving glory and service to God.”⁸ From the earliest Jesuit code of liberal education, called the *Ratio studiorum* (first published in 1586), there has existed a deep interest in fostering an other-centered value orientation, an orientation through which one comes to experience the immensity of God’s redemptive love lived out through ethical behavior and service to others.⁹ Recently a number of writers have focused on what characteristics make Jesuit education distinctive. The Jesuit philosopher Arthur McGovern has listed the following as essential characteristics of Jesuit education: (1) a pervading philosophy, (2) a personal concern for the whole life of each student, (3) a striving for excellence, (4) an emphasis on critical thinking and effective communication, (5) the development of a broad liberal education, (6) a commitment to a “faith that does justice.”¹⁰

Yet, a vital ingredient needs to be added when we discuss moral education: the role of culture. Students today are decidedly immersed in their culture, and their cultural experiences often overwhelm the devoted commitments and intentions of faculty and professional staff to foster moral reflection. I term this insidious influence of culture on student moral development *cultural impairment*.¹¹ Let us explore this issue further.

The social critic Alan Durning quotes one retail analyst’s vision at the close of World War II.

Our enormously productive economy . . . demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our *spiritual* satisfaction, our *ego* satisfaction, in consumption. . . . we need things con-

sumed, burned up, worn out, replaced, and discarded at an ever increasing rate.¹² [Emphases added.]

On-going consumptive purchase leads to an experience of fleeting value and parallels the sense of impermanence that so characterizes the young-adult psyche. From a developmental perspective, young-adults must negotiate a significant amount of impermanence. During their undergraduate years they often make some initial, if tentative, commitments. A love relationship, the excitement over finding a close friend, or the discovery of a career possibility that “fits”—all enable the student to acquire self-knowledge. Unfortunately, this road of initial psychic investments is fraught with negative experiences as well. Fondness for another is often transient, and the end of a relationship is an all too real possibility in the student’s life. Friends sometimes go their separate ways or have misunderstandings. Vocational interests wax and wane. The vicissitudes of changing desires and the sometimes painful realization of limited talents are added factors. Even the support of family can be eclipsed by the urgent need at times to distance family ties in order to meet identity needs. Given their developmental struggles and the consumer ideology around them, I am struck at how many youths assuage their uncertainties through consumptive purchase and distract themselves by obsessing over ever-changing styles.¹³ Indeed, our consumerist culture is often the *locus of identity* for young-adult self-definition, with education, the family, and the church community exercising far less influence.

Yet this incessant purchasing bears directly on the very meaning of “the good life.” In his crucially important work *All Consuming Images*, sociologist Stuart Ewen describes the triumph of style over substance, and the emergence of transient image making as perfected by today’s advertising and technology.

The danger is this: as the world encourages us to accept the autonomy of images, “the given facts that appear” imply that substance is unimportant, not worth pursuing. Our own experiences are of little consequence, unless they are substantiated and validated by the world of style. In the midst of such charades, the chasm between surface and reality widens; we experience a growing sense of disorientation.¹⁴

As noted above, a relentless feature of consumerist “style” is its impermanence: fleeting changes of style invite continual purchase. In such an atmosphere, the stark reality for many young adults is that “being good” is equated, not with “doing something,” but with “buying something.” Tragically, in our culture youth’s exposure to advertising teaches them that “the good life” is not lived

but “bought.” When one is reared in such a culture, ethical reflection falters under the onslaught of glitz and illusion. A student’s manipulated consciousness—one that construes altruism and commitment as unrealistic, if not unobtainable—might well have difficulty forming enduring values. As educators we must face the sobering fact that our consumerist culture complicates and even undermines our attempts to engage students in substantive ethical reflection.

This consumerist mind-set is supported by suppositions undergirding our culture. Alasdair MacIntyre has characterized the current state of moral thinking as one of moral disarray; he notes that the contemporary state of moral discourse is one “of grave disorder.”¹⁵ Robert Bellah re-frames this “disorder” in terms of sociological insight.

Now if selves are defined by their preferences, but those preferences are arbitrary, then each self constitutes its own moral universe, and there is finally no way to reconcile conflicting claims about what is good in itself. In the absence of any objectifiable criteria of right and wrong, good or evil, the self and its feelings become our only moral guide. What kind of world is inhabited by this self, perpetually in progress, yet without any fixed moral end?¹⁶

The ethos of individualism, says Bellah, has sundered the person from his or her historically felt rooting in community. The end result has been the illusion that well-being for oneself and others arises from individualistic pursuits culminating in material gratification. We live under the “treacherous notion that we can create a good life simply by striving for individual comfort and security, and that by so doing we are indirectly enriching the lives of those around us.”¹⁷

I suspect this individualism has heavily influenced today’s young adult. I am struck by how many students speak of their desires merely in terms of a “good job” or being “successful.” I suspect too that our current economic climate exacerbates self-preoccupation and the drive for success. In an individualistic world, one is evaluated by material success, and any threat to or forestalling of this success tempts many to retreat to a defensive posture

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that enshrines the self and its pursuits. Moreover, in such a cultural climate the personal values of compassion and care find difficulty taking root with many young people; but equally threatened are any type of moral sense of community and social bonding. Preoccupied with private pursuits and individualistic concerns, young adults, like their elders, are more inclined to think in terms of “private” rather than “public” well-being. Thus emphasis on social justice and communal values—that “moral center” Gregorian argues for—becomes illusive.

Supporting this pursuit of personal gain is the limited socialization of many young adults. Most readers of this article were formed by a religious upbringing and/or some type of character education wherein values were articulated and there existed a large “con-

tent” area of moral knowledge that is still referred to. Many students today, however, often seem to lack an upbringing that stresses moral and self-knowledge.¹⁸ Frankly, I am amazed at how many students, when commenting upon their behaviors, make no mention of “moral feelings” such as guilt, compassion and sensitivity. The philosopher Christina Hoff Sommers notes “students come to college today as moral stutterers. They haven’t been taught much respect for what I call ‘plain moral facts’—the need for honesty, integrity, responsibility.”¹⁹ Some undergraduates seem particularly deficient in moral knowledge (of any school or persuasion) or the basic feelings so vital for the development of compassionate responding. This lack of moral feeling and knowledge is particularly seen in the areas of sexual expression. Though perhaps he overstates his position a bit, the moralist Timothy O’Connell is on to something when he notes that “perhaps for the first time in human history, the young have received from their parents no message about sex. Dismayed, both educators and moralists are seriously examining the ways in which values are passed along.”²⁰ What does it mean for an institution of higher learning to be a community proclaiming Christian values when, in student relationships, words like “forgiveness,” “honesty,” “fidelity,” and “commitment” are experienced as unimportant or even meaningless? Besides the typical rea-

sons students relate sexually, (e.g., affection, self-discovery), as a clinician I suspect sexual expression increasingly reflects (1) a craving for the attachment that has been denied them in their own upbringing, (2) an attempt to reduce their own anxieties, and (3) an easy method to escape “the burden of selfhood.”²¹

SECOND THESIS

The possibility for mature moral reflection in many young adults is compromised by their problematic life histories and impaired family backgrounds.

As a clinician I am growing increasingly concerned about the destabilizing effect that dysfunctional backgrounds are having on healthy young-adult development.²² Increasingly students who attend our schools come from backgrounds that, with many exceptions, are more and more psychologically tenuous.²³ Divorce, family conflict, addiction, and lack of attachment or healthy role models are increasingly part of many students' life histories. Accumulating evidence shows that such backgrounds are taking their toll. One recent survey noted that “although still a minority, the proportion of new students who smoke, who feel depressed, and who feel overwhelmed has risen in recent years. In addition, the proportion who consider themselves ‘above average’ in emotional health has slipped.”²⁴ For example, how many readers of this article know students still struggling with residual feelings after the divorce of their parents?²⁵ For such students commitment is sometimes difficult. For many there is a continual struggle with anger and the negative feelings that surround self-image problems. Trust, too, is often an issue. Yet how does the moral life develop, much less flourish, when the self is so preoccupied with hurt and mistrust? The lingering effects of difficult family backgrounds—psychic pain, abnormal degrees of loneliness, and poor self-esteem—cannot help but adversely influence how young adults make moral decisions. Self-knowledge, a coherent value system, moral reflection, and compassion may *never* be fully developed in students from dysfunctional families, who may tend to assuage their hurt through self-destructive, escapist, and immature behaviors. The mental-health problems of today's young adults, of course, raise an interesting question regarding the mission of the Jesuit college or university. Most certainly a hallmark of Jesuit education is “care for students.” However, is it the college's

In sum, the “moral mission” of higher education is a noble goal; but, in view of the cultural impairment that exists today, it is more and more a mission facing imposing if not insurmountable odds as we face the full brunt of culture's dominating influence.

or the university's mission to be a “quasi-therapeutic community”? In other words, how much time and resources can we adults put into such care, particularly when faced with limited budgets, the need to uphold basic rules and regulations, and the obligation to pursue professional and scholarly interests? I have heard from colleagues at several schools that at times they don't know if they are professional educators or care givers.²⁶

The consumerist culture spoken of above as well as the shaky psychological development of many young people today might well explain the observations of the cultural historian Christopher Lasch. Lasch notes that “Americans have no compelling incentive to postpone gratification, because they no longer believe in the future.”²⁷ Though youth are often friendly, this “cheerfulness,” says Lasch, masks a deep-seated hopelessness. “I believe,” he says,

that young people in our society are living in a state of almost unbearable, though mostly inarticulate, agony. They experience the world only as a source of pleasure and pain. The culture at their disposal provides so little help in ordering the world that experience comes to them in the form merely of direct stimulation or deprivation, without much symbolic mediation.²⁸

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