# The Responsive Community

## Rights *and* Responsibilities

# The Moral State of the Union

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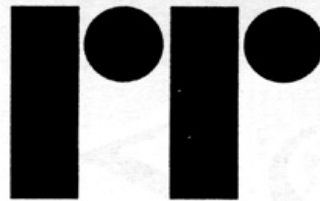
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# The Case for Moral Education

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Many observers trying to demonstrate the deplorable state of American education point to falling SAT scores, students' inability to locate the United States on a world map, or the simple illiteracy of so many high school graduates. Such indicators are certainly relevant to the problem, but they do not go to its heart. Our schools are failing us because they are not addressing what the received wisdom of the centuries has established as the essence of the educational enterprise: the development of character. The fundamental tragedy of American education today is not that we are turning out ignoramuses, but that we are turning out savages. Worse, while the failure to impart knowledge to students is the result of incompetence, the failure to transfer humankind's moral heritage is sanctioned by educational policy.

This is a harsh indictment. It rests on an older world view which is much out of favor today. It assumes there really is a moral heritage to be passed on, and that each person does not start fresh, choosing values like hairstyles. It assumes that children, if left alone, will not naturally become responsible and compassionate adults. It is leery of the worship of the "inner child" whose potential for evil seems underappreciated. This view understands the development of good character in the young to be a complicated but profoundly important process requiring unremitting diligence. It is a process in which all of society's institutions, but especially its educational ones, must play an active role.

Let us consider the frightening possibility that we are rearing a generation of sociopaths. Here are some sobering statistics from the FBI's latest Uniform Crime Report (1991): Between 1965 and 1990, the

murder arrest-rate for juveniles steadily increased, up 332 percent for the period. In just the last four years, the number of teens arrested for murder is up 85 percent. Since 1988, gunshot wounds have taken the lives of more American teenage boys than all natural causes combined. Even more frightening is the nature of these homicides. Murder used to be a crime of passion or associated with the commission of some other crime. It then became more random, as gangs fought for territory, with drive-by shootings, gangbangs, and trespass executions. Today, murder is committed for the fun of it. In Washington, D.C., a woman was shot to death driving home because a teenager felt like killing someone that day; elsewhere, three kids fired on a group watching an elementary school football game, killing a four-year-old girl. Between 1980 and 1990, the arrest rate for white juveniles for forcible rape jumped by 86 percent (compared to a 9 percent increase for African-Americans). In this same period, the arrest rate for aggravated assault for young people was up 59 percent for whites and 79 percent for African-Americans, while cocaine- and heroin-related crimes increased 2,373 percent for African-Americans and 251 percent for whites. Nothing suggests an end to these trends.

Many people may not be aware that the United States experienced a similar crime wave earlier in our history, in the early nineteenth century. The emotional reaction of most Americans then was much as it is now: revulsion at the carnage and disorder. The societal response, however, was strikingly different. Americans in the 1830s viewed criminal activity as the result of willful actions of individuals who lacked self-control and good character. The response, therefore, was to try to build character, especially in young people. Efforts were launched to reduce alcohol consumption, to proclaim the virtues of honest work and the evils of idleness, to provide familial associations for urban young people cut off from their rural roots, and to get them more involved in the practice of their religious faiths.

The common-schools movement was an important contribution to this effort. Its greatest proponent, Horace Mann, believed character education was essential to the life of the family, the school, and the country. "Moral education is a primal necessity of social existence. The unrestrained passions of men are not only homicidal, but sui-

cidal; and a community without a conscience would soon extinguish itself." Textbook authors like William McGuffey included moral lessons along with those on reading, writing, and arithmetic.

The notion that one important means by which a society can reduce criminal behavior is teaching self-discipline and good character, using sobriety pledges, YMCAs, and morality lessons in first-grade readers, may seem to us rather quaint, but the simple fact is that it worked. Their crime wave ended within two decades and remained in check for a century. Ours by contrast has not slowed in thirty years and relentlessly worsens.

What has happened to us? Why do so many educators and parents now view formal moral education in our public schools with suspicion? We are not talking about controversial programs like New York's Rainbow Curriculum: the objections there were quite plain. We mean basic character education: teaching our youth the value of self-control, of taking responsibility for one's actions, of treating others decently. Is there any parent who would object to schools' teaching children not to steal, lie, cheat, beat people up, use foul language, etc? If not, why are school boards reluctant to become involved in formal moral education, and why hasn't our society insisted on it?

One fundamental, but perhaps not obvious, answer is that many Americans are in the thrall of an unconsciously held and profoundly misguided ethical theory known as relativism. In the 1940s college students learned from anthropologists that all values were relative to one's culture. One generation later, as our own culture's concordance on what constituted right and wrong fell apart, relativism acquired a new twist. On many campuses where it became a dominant philosophy, college students in general, and our future educators in particular, came to believe that everyone is entitled to his or her own unique morality and that one cannot judge other people because what is right for oneself is not necessarily right for others.

Not only is this philosophy false, it has dangerous implications. Cultural relativists assume that in the realm of morality, cultures cannot be wrong. They can. It would be morally repugnant to say, "The Serbs believe Muslims have no worth, no moral rights, and deserve to die. Thus, the Serbian extermination of the Muslims is

justified by the values of Serbian culture, and we must not judge them according to our own standards." In recent court cases in the United States, men who had murdered their wives for "dishonoring" them made the defense in court that in their native cultures, such actions were morally sanctioned. The judges, hoodwinked by cultural relativism, wrongly lightened their sentences.

The theory that morality is relative to each individual is even more delusive. No society could function if people were free to choose which rules would govern personal behavior. Everyone would quickly decide that lying, stealing, etc. was "right for me," and no one (were the theory of personal relativism true) would have the right to condemn that decision. This is not how we properly understand morality.

Schools have paid the price for the ascendancy of relativism in our society. The disintegration of our moral consensus in the 1960s led to the pedagogy of values-clarification in the 1970s. Working under the assumption that traditional moral education was by definition indoctrination, theorists such as Sidney Simon of the University of Massachusetts taught children that whatever they valued (their stereo, blond hair, the answers on someone else's test) was OK, and they taught teachers to remain morally neutral and non-judgmental as they "clarified" these individually selected values. For good children, this is at best benign; for bad children, it is perverse. Teachers ought not to limit themselves to clarifying any inferior values their students may hold, but they should do their best to change them.

Under the influence of this benighted theory, our schools have become moral vacuums, at least as far as any formal character education is concerned. Indirectly, of course, educators constantly send moral messages by how they treat students and each other, how strictly they enforce the rules, etc. But such indirect education is not only rather subtle, it is often neutralized by students, especially teenagers, who tend to embrace thoughtlessly the vagaries of personal relativism. This is partly a sign of the times, but mostly a matter of being young. Children have a task—to become themselves. They want to be unique and special, and this natural desire often results in their rejecting authority. Relativism is attractive to them because it

not only allows, it requires, that everyone choose what will be uniquely right or wrong for him- or herself. Even more important for adolescents, relativists preach tolerance, and they provide a rationale for why no individual has the right to judge another. This is wonderful for kids trying to defend their actions against the better-grounded wisdom of parents and teachers.

Unfortunately, acceptance of this wrongheaded theory exacts a price: young people are prevented from creating a moral community. Relativism offers no basis for criticizing peers when they misbehave. The kid spray-painting the walls of the school is just a rebel with his own cause, and even though everyone is secretly sick of seeing his ubiquitous graffiti, they (mistakenly) think they have no right to ask him to stop or to ostracize him if he doesn't. So bad behaviors are allowed to pass through the wide gate of tolerance, and the defense against the criticisms of parents proves a barrier to the encouragement of goodness among friends.

To combat relativism, and install a positive philosophy in its place, character development can and should be taught in schools even though it is not an academic subject but more a kind of wisdom we all share. Learning how to treat other people justly and charitably, as we would like to be treated by them, is a process to which we devote our entire lives. Every time we face a temptation to act selfishly, every time we discuss an ethical problem with another person, we are involved in that learning process. Moral instruction in a classroom setting is simply an extension of this. Teachers do not need to major in philosophy to teach kids right from wrong any more than parents do. They simply must pass on to their students the wisdom they already possess.

To adopt this position is not to claim that all teachers have a firm and judicious grasp of every aspect of morality, no more than the claim that schools must teach literature means every English teacher is widely read and filled with critical insight. It also does not mean teachers will always agree with one another about what's right and wrong. Such disagreements, and the dialogue that flows from them, are an integral and important part of a pluralistic democracy that values the free exchange of ideas. Having said this, it is important to keep in mind that for many children, the wrongness of shoplifting is

debatable. For a few, whether violent assault or murder is a virtue or a vice is an open question.

The maturing process by which young people will eventually come to appreciate and accept the shared moral beliefs in terms of which every society must operate is possible only so long as adults provide a firm and consistent moral base upon which children can build their own characters. This requires more than discussing the issues of the day (such as abortion and capital punishment). It means conveying to students a sense of what behaviors through time have proven to be morally good (for example, honesty and compassion), and which morally bad (such as envy and racism). Children whose family structures have broken down are especially vulnerable to the confusions of their peers, and our schools must not abandon them. The message from students may appear paradoxical, as they seemingly demand moral leadership while rejecting authority. In sharing our moral heritage, teachers have to defend and hold firm their convictions in the face of this paradox.

It should be emphasized that the development of good character cannot be accomplished by parsing dilemmas or debating public policy. Becoming a morally better person only begins with understanding intellectually what one ought to do. One still must *do* it, which is to say that students must form the habit of acting morally. This is a matter of training and practice, role models, and proper emotions, as much as it is rational insight. A sound curriculum will address moral thinking, moral emotions, and moral behavior, and the integration of these capacities, abilities, and dispositions into a virtuous character.

John Dewey wrote, "The child's moral character must develop in a natural, just, and social atmosphere. The school should provide this environment for its part in the child's moral development." In bad schools, the community of peers lionizes rule-breakers and ridicules rule-followers as toadies and cowards. Cheating becomes a way of life because everyone does it, and those who don't fall behind. Dishonesty passes as being shrewd, bullying and sexual harassment pass for being manly, and nothing gets taught because students are too undisciplined to learn. Administrators, therefore, must support teachers by creating schools in which good behavior can flourish. They must ensure that academic performance is honest, grading is

fair, everyone associated with the school is treated with respect, community service projects are encouraged, and students participate in an honor system for which they themselves are responsible. Finally, and most important, the school must adopt or develop a program for the direct teaching of moral values for the development of character.

Some are uncomfortable with this vision. Not without some justification, they fear hidden religious or political agendas by educators. For this reason, they argue that parents alone ought to have the task of morally educating their children. It is true that parents have the *primary* responsibility in this area, but families are not islands. To be effective, families must be supported by schools, as well as churches and synagogues, communities, business, the media, government, etc. Otherwise their children are at risk the moment they leave the front door. We must see every citizen as a stakeholder in this enterprise; both in terms of duty and in terms of prudence, we all share the responsibility to grow good children into good adults. In the words of a Nigerian proverb: "It takes a whole village to rear a child."

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. summed up the foundation of every school curriculum in human history when he said, "Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education." Or, as it was once put more informally, "Education is what's left over after you've forgotten all the facts." It is important to understand that introducing character education into America's schools is not some new and radical idea. What is new and radical is the elimination of such instruction. From antiquity to our own century, schools have inevitably taught character. History leaves open to us only the question: Will we do it well?