UNDER COVER

On Moral Education

We could do without most academic conferences on the crisis of American morality. "Ethics and Moral Education" (Working Paper No. 1, National Humanities Center) reports an exception to the rule.

In the opening essay Alasdair MacIntyre argues, with his usual trenchancy, that American political culture in its healthier state combined the classical ideal of civic virtue with the contradictory, individualistic ideas of modernity. In the older view, political society exists for the sake of the good life and, hence, for some idea of the good that orders and ranks the goods of human life. The institutions of political society are designed to develop certain virtues that conduce to that good life; and politics, in such a society, *is* moral education. The more modern view begins with the individual as the unit of morality. All our desires, in this teaching, are equal by nature. Government has no right to evaluate our desires and may only judge and regulate the means we use in pursuit of our private ends. Moral education is reduced from the older aim of shaping character to the teaching of enlightened self-interest. In principle this is a matter of rational calculation, and, paradoxically, the importance of the schools as moral educators rises as the importance of moral education declines.

Holding both ideas, American culture was profoundly incoherent. The Jacksonians saw this, McIntyre notes, and insisted on home, church, and school as the "fourth branch of government" needed to produce a virtuous people who could be trusted with individual freedom in public life. This communitarianism produced a consensus so powerful that it deceived later Americans. They forgot that American morality was the *product* of our particular customs and institutions and came to see it as a universal principle, dwelling in each individual, which only needed to be freed by the right education. Rationalistic individualism consequently has become the established wisdom, helping to isolate more and more of us and make us strangers.

This individualism is false because the individual does *not* have an identity "prior to and independent of membership in any community," as the theory presumes. It is also dangerous because individualism regards all moral teaching—even enlightened self-interest—as "indoctrination" in "conventions." Individualistic doctrine concedes that it would be desirable to lead a lawless life if one could do so without damaging society and without being detected. And, McIntyre is suggesting, individuals in America are tempted today to suspect that their weakness and anonymity make this lawlessness possible.

McIntyre is not optimistic, and the rest of the conference suggests that his is the right stance. Most participants were concerned to salvage the "value" in individualism or to minimize the conflict McIntyre indicated. John Daugherty, attempting to show what the schools can do in educating citizens, claims that the classroom is the "*polis* in microcosm." It is not. Classes, unlike political society, have no continuity and hence no responsibility to the past or to the future. And ideally at least, the form of classroom government is not open to change. Schools are places of more limited powers.

"How," Diane Ravitch asks, "do you teach virtues like courage and justice and compassion?" The answer is that you don't, for the most part—at least not in school. Morality is crucially affected by an early education that is essentially pre-rational. This involves more than that learning of "limits" which David Falk addresses, since we can learn that there are limits and still yearn to escape them. As Plato taught, virtue requires the education of the passions, a kind of wooing that leads us to want what is truly good, to desire what is desirable. The emotions need security, the sense that the world is safe and rewarding enough to be worth our allegiance, that nature is a home and not a prison, and that mortal life is more than a bitter defeat. Morality depends on the right objects of love, and love is something not often taught in school.

We would not look to the schools if the rest of society were not in desperate shape, but it is. A classroom can be playful because it is not part of the real world, just as a philosophic discussion can be shameless, letting us entertain shocking ideas for the purpose of argument. But do we have teachers who know what, and how, to teach? William Bennett and Edwin Dellattre suggest exploring moral issues through the great literature of the Western tradition—a sensible suggestion, since our residual respect for great texts is one of the few graces of American culture. Yet given Dellattre's assertion that Achilles and Patroclus, David and Jonathan, and Madison and Jefferson are all apparently equal "vivid cases" of friendship, does he understand *friendship*?

Even the best methods are delicate. Most participants agree, for example, that we ought to teach morality through exemplary models. As McIntyre points out, however, we need to recognize that even these excellent human beings are subject to original sin and limited by political circumstance, so that the later "recognition of frailties and social forces does not discredit the original moral teaching."

David Falk is right to say that moral education involves learning "the art of choosing between right and wrong." That art involves studying the masters, but it does not demand that we be great artists ourselves. Quite the contrary, it requires the willingness to accept one's limited excellence, to imitate, and to learn from others. My friend and colleague George Lanyi, who died February 20, was a master of moral aesthetics because he was unexcelled in that *good* humor which, confident that our humanity is enough, gently punctures the pretensions of those who refuse to accept the limits of our estate. "Really," George said once, "morality is only good taste." And so it is, if we have teachers who are the salt of the earth and give life its savor.

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