Moral Education and the Academics of Being Human Together

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mor•al. Pronunciation: 'mor-&l. Function: *adjective*. Etymology: Middle English, from Anglo-French, from Latin *moralis*, from *mor-*, *mos* custom. **1 a** : of or relating to principles of right and wrong in behavior : ethical <*moral* judgments> **b** : expressing or teaching a conception of right behavior <a *moral* poem> **c** : conforming to a standard of right behavior **d** : sanctioned by or operative on one's conscience or ethical judgment <a *moral* obligation> **e** : capable of right and wrong action <a *moral* agent>.[1]

I recently had the opportunity to sit in on a "working session" of a teacher education program in a small mid-west university. The meeting was focused upon the ongoing renewal of the university's teacher education program. Many items were discussed, but one jumped out at me and has continued to occupy my thoughts over the past few months. This particular item pertained to a discussion of possible design principles that might guide the revamped teacher education strategy within this university's College of Education. One proposed guiding principle (one of a dozen aims being considered) involved the notion of preparing future teachers to be *moral and ethical agents of social change* in their schools and communities. A strenuous discussion ensued among the participants as to the merits and practicalities of such a principle. The gist of the discussion involved a perceived fear that using the words "moral" or "ethical" might connote a narrow, moralistic agenda within the program. Certainly, fueled by the conservative right, the term moral has come to be used in public debate almost entirely for issues such as gay marriage, abortion rights, etc. Questions were raised: What exactly

do we mean by "moral"? Does moral education simply mean espousing, or indoctrinating, toward a universal list of right and wrong answers, thus creating a list of moral absolutes? Could we ever agree on such a list? Might not future applicants to the program choose other programs which could be perceived as more broadly focused upon the practics of teaching and curriculum development? Hence, other, less inflammatory, words were suggested; e.g., agents of diversity, democratic agents, etc. But, as we debated, moving further and further from the possibility of including "moral" language in the statement of aims, I began to wonder what was at stake in such a move. What were we losing by discarding the notion of "moral education"? Further, I began to consider what it might mean to train someone to become an agent of "moral and ethical change."

Not long after this conversation, I became aware of a lawsuit filed by FIRE (Foundation for Individual Rights in Education). In a press release by FIRE the following statement was made:

> A new trend in campus censorship is emerging: this summer, Washington State University used "dispositions" theory to punish an education student for his political and religious expression.... "Dispositions" theory, increasingly in vogue in education programs, requires professors to evaluate their students' commitment to concepts such as "social justice" and "diversity" in conjunction with their actual scholastic achievement. ...Washington State's College of Education threatened 42-year-old student Ed Swan with dismissal for allegedly violating two vague "disposition" standards. Swan was also subjected to mandatory diversity training—all because of clearly protected speech. "'Diversity' and 'social justice' do not mean the same thing to everyone," remarked David French, president of FIRE. "By using such vague and politically charged criteria for evaluating future teachers, colleges all but guarantee that students will be punished for their opinions rather than evaluated on the basis of their abilities."[2]

Here we see the fears of those teacher educators at that mid-west university realized. If we are to train our future teachers to be moral agents of change, we must ask which, or perhaps more precisely, whose morals? Of course schools undoubtedly are moral cultures, with clear systems of rules regarding behavior, attitudes and dispositions (e.g., bullying is prohibited, respect is required, cheating is punished), but this notion of teachers as moral educators seems to raise the stakes. Would not it be better, as was argued in this teacher educator discussion, to change the language (i.e., in some way make the notion of "moral" more palatable—typically by cloaking it in something more innocuous) or to dismiss it from our educational agenda altogether (i.e., leaving it to the family, or to community or to religious organizations)? Of course this debate,

then, raises the deeper question: What is the place of moral education within a democracy, what "morals" should be given agency and how might such moral education be enacted? In this paper I want to briefly consider such questions, raised within the context of training teacher educators, employing a provocative and telling notion espoused by John Dewey. But first, let us remember our educational roots.

Morality and Education

I had the opportunity to teach a graduate course last semester focused on an introduction to philosophy of education. Of course we read the classics in educational philosophy (Plato, Rousseau, Dewey, Freire, Jane Roland-Martin, bell hooks). As we read together, student after student was struck with the obvious link between citizenship, equity, morality, and education—links that have resided within educational efforts from the earliest of days. For example, Plato, disturbed by the condition of society—its corruption and shallowness—dreams of a new Republic, where education transforms citizens toward the Form of the Good.[3] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, convinced that men and women had lost themselves in comparison with each other, advocates that we educate via nature—so that we might learn to live together in ways that foster a better ethic of citizenship.[4] Paulo Freire sees such education as a means to equitable, if not moral, relations.[5] Jane Roland-Martin argues for not simply sameness of education, but for equity in education, thus allowing gendered opportunity—again, a directive of moral education.[6] bell hooks, passionate for greater gender, class, and racial equity, also sees education as a means toward a more equal conversation and communitarian personhood.[7] From the very earliest of days education has been linked with the "morals" of citizenry (i.e., forming moral citizens) and the "ethics" of common life (including the notion of creating societies which can live well with each other and with the greater world).

But of course, these examples beg the question, *what exactly are the morals and ethics that these societies might espouse*? In trying to answer such a question in a democracy we often move in one of two directions. First, we try to sift through all moral beliefs until we can find a common denominator—something we can all agree upon (e.g., perhaps justice, perhaps democratic freedom, perhaps respect). Some would say we "water down" moral education for fear of offending someone. But even here, as the FIRE lawsuits so aptly illustrates, moral education can be accused of circumventing free speech or the right of personal belief. We ask, what is the list of "morals" that we can require of all? That list always seems tenuous, always exists in fear of offending and always seems inadequate.

A second response involves simply taking such an agenda off the table. As the discussion with our teacher educators illustrates, using the words "moral" or "ethic" in terms of a teacher educator's job description seems so fraught with difficulty that we are prone to simply remove it from the discussion. We leave moral education to someone else. Or, more precisely, we "do" moral education covertly, requiring students to respect each other, to treat each other fairly, without allowing such aims to be at the heart of our teacher preparation. What is at stake by watering down or giving up such an agenda? We only must ask our friends: Plato, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Dewey, Paulo Freire, Jane Roland-Martin, bell hooks. They might argue that everything in the world is at stake. Education is, if not completely, then at least in large part, a moral endeavor. We are preparing the next generation of citizens for democratic life. For, "education," Dewey argues, "is the fundamental method of social progress and reform."[8] Obviously, this preparation involves the ability to read and write, but it also involves the dispositions necessary to contribute to society in meaningful ways. But, we are still left with the dilemma of "moral" education within a pluralistic society. What is the moral *list* that we might employ toward creating the next generation of citizenry? Of course, conspicuously to this point I have failed to define exactly what we mean by "moral" education. This "oversight" has been intentional in order to set up the discussion which follows. But, we can no longer continue this dialogue without addressing this question directly. To do so, I now turn to a curious statement made by John Dewey at the turn of the twentieth century.

Moral Education

In light of the moral dilemma outlined above (i.e., narrow morality within a pluralistic setting), John Dewey offers a provocative notion of moral education that may provide a model which allows the "moral" to remain as an integral part of our educative efforts, especially as it pertains to teacher preparation. In his *Pedagogical Creed* Dewey argues that,

> Moral education centers upon this conception of the school as a mode of social life, that the best and deepest moral training is precisely that which one gets through having to enter into proper relations with others in a unity of work and thought. The present educational systems, so far as they destroy or neglect this unity, render it difficult or impossible to get any genuine, regular moral training.[9]

Here, Dewey argues that moral education, as well as all education, is a social dynamic. Specifically, Dewey contends that the "best and deepest" moral training is acquired socially. Hence, it is as students enter

into proper relations with each other that moral formation is exacted. In fact, Dewey contends that such *proper relations* are fundamental in allowing us to enter into a unity of work and thought with others. Dewey makes his conviction exceedingly clear by reminding his readers that if educators destroy or neglect this unity, genuine moral training is forfeited. But what, precisely, is moral education for Dewey and what are the proper relations he seems to think are crucial for such training? To answer this question I turn to another Deweyan work, *Democracy and Education*.

"The development within the young," asserts Dewey, "of the attitudes and dispositions necessary to the continuous and progressive life of a society cannot take place by direct conveyance of beliefs, emotions, and knowledge."[10] One could reasonably argue that morals, at least in part, lie in attitudes and dispositions toward any number of various Others. For example, we might call a man "moral" who is careful to never break the speed limit (maintaining a disposition to live lawfully). We might call a young woman "moral" who chooses not to steal from her employer (maintaining an attitude that such behavior is contrary to the employer-employee relationship). A young middle-schooler may choose not to bully a classmate, perhaps even coming to the victim's aid, because he believes (attitudes) that such actions are "wrong" and is compelled (disposition) to take action. Might we not also call such a stand moral? In short, attitudes and dispositions shape our interactions.[11] More pointedly, Dewey clarifies the link between such disposition and democratic behavior. Dewey argues that the "social environment forms the mental and emotional disposition of behavior in individuals by engaging them in activities that arouse and strengthen certain impulses, that have certain purposes and entail certain consequences."[12] Dewey, then, links such dispositions specifically to moral development and schooling. "Schools remain," Dewey contends, "... the typical instance of environments framed with express reference to influencing the mental and moral disposition of their members."[13]

But, how are such moral disposition formed? Dewey argues that they are engendered socially. Dewey asserts that the inculcation of "beliefs, emotions and knowledge" (linked to attitudes and dispositions) does not take place via *direct conveyance*, but through the medium of one's environment. Hence, moral education for Dewey does not involve a list of rights and wrongs that are elaborated by teachers and then accepted and memorized by students. Dewey contends that when one is "trained" by the use of outside pressure (e.g., reward, punishment, coercion) aimed at conformity, often one's "instincts remain attached to their original objects of pain or pleasure."[14] While moral education involves an aim

toward transformed disposition and behavior, especially when directed toward life-long citizenship development, yet Dewey argues that such growth when instigated via direct conveyance, often stems not from an inward desire toward "moral" behavior, but, instead, from a desire to avoid pain or gain pleasure. Dewey contrasts such training with the conception of inward dispositional transformation as a result of common participation. "When one," Dewey contends,

> really shares or participates in the common activity ...his original impulse is modified. He not merely acts in a way agreeing with the actions of others, but, in so acting, the same ideas and emotions are aroused in him that animate the others. ...[It is the social environment that] forms the mental and emotional disposition of behavior in individuals by engaging them in activities that arouse and strengthen certain impulses....[15]

Dewey claims that through common participation individuals can be brought into "like-mindedness" within a community and that, in this participation, attitudes and dispositions are formed and re-formed, allowing for meaning and growth. Of course the fact that individuals are "environed" by the cultures within which they live is a fairly commonsensical notion. Dewey, though, would contend that this social environing must be due to more than simple habit (mindless mimicry), but is fostered through communication which informs and connects individual thinking (including attitudes and disposition) and action with others in the community. It is this participation, the back and forth movement reminiscent of democracy, that Dewey believes is, in and of itself, moral.

Here, then, some might conceptualize Dewey's view of moral education in this way: social situations (proper relations with others) become the means to moral development (toward specific common attitudes and dispositions that are "right" or that further democratic or societal life). In one sense this assessment of Dewey's moral philosophy is correct, but in another it fails to grasp a deeper implication; an understanding important to our directives of moral education within public and, thus, pluralistic schooling. In the last chapter of *Democracy and Education*, almost in a summary fashion, Dewey goes on to explain the connection between social and moral life. "All of the separations," Dewey summarizes,

> which we have been criticizing [throughout *Democracy and Education*]—and which the idea of education set forth in the previous chapters is designed to avoid—spring from taking morals too narrowly,—giving them, on one side, a sentimental goody-goody turn without reference to effective ability to do what is socially needed, and, on the other side, overemphasizing convention and tradition so as to limit morals to a

> list of definitely stated acts. As a matter of fact, *morals are as broad as acts which concern our relationships with each other*.[16]

Dewey argues that morals, more than a list of "rights" and "wrongs," are deeply embedded in our relationships with each other. Further, "morals concern nothing less than the whole character and the whole character is identical with the man in all his concrete make-up and manifestations."[17] Hence, according to Dewey, morals are centered in identity formed in social interaction. Succinctly, Dewey reminds us that "to possess virtue does not signify to have cultivated a few nameable and exclusive traits; it means to be fully and adequately what one is capable of becoming *through association with others* in all the offices of life."[18] We are morally made, or formed, in our associations with others. And, hence, we—morally—reflect the very nature of those associations. And, here, we come to the point, as Dewey eloquently and powerful summarizes in *Democracy and Education*: "The moral and the social quality of conduct are, in the last analysis, identical with each other."[19] One, then, might argue that the "proper relations" of the classroom are in and of themselves moral, and that helping students to grow in and attend to such proper relations is at the heart of their own moral formation. For, as students live in such mutuality their character begins to reflect that moral interaction—they are trained, not via direct conveyance, but through the medium of the environment. In essence, their character begins to reflect that environment; they reflect the "properly social" effected in relationship with each other.

Hence, one might argue that moral education for Dewey is not found in directives nor agreement, but in social deliberation; proper relational interaction. For Dewey moral education is not so much that we agree, but that we interact; moral education is in the exchange. And it is precisely this interaction that must not be destroyed or neglected if any genuine, regular moral training is to take place.

Schooling Today

Arguably, schools today are predominantly focused upon academic achievement. Moral education, while important and certainly evidenced by school placards (Thou Shalt Respect Others, Thou Shalt Not Cheat on Tests, etc.), is largely secondary to Essential Learning Requirements and Standardized test results (to which are linked funding, prestige, etc.). When we do venture to think of moral education, as evidenced by the teacher education discussion at the top of this essay, we become quite nervous. Morals are narrow, controversial, and smack of the conservative right. Certainly these matters must be left to others. Or, if we are

to "tack on" moral education to public education we must water it down (only advocating what all can agree upon). Morals are simply too divisive. But, in doing so, we lose something important. If education is about forming citizens for the next generation (as Dewey advocates), then minds, hearts and bodies all become important in our educative endeavors. We cannot simply give "morals" over to "someone else," declaring them too much of a "hot button" issue for public education. Following Dewey, we must pay attention to the Academics of Moral Education.

The Academics of Moral Education

Dewey is not arguing, here, that there are not "rights" and "wrongs" either educationally or morally. In fact, Dewey often expresses just the opposite. He is also not advocating a morality of consensus (i.e., all agreeing on a list of moral codings). As history has proven, consensus does not automatically equate with moral activities. What Dewey is reminding us of is the responsibility schooling must shoulder to secure moral spaces (proper relations) which allow for moral discussion (surrounding varying views of right and wrong) to flourish. For, it is in the fostering of such relational aptitudes that students and teachers alike might be trained (or better environed) toward the relationships which are at the heart of democratic citizenry.[20]

Julie A. Reuben in her book *The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Morality*[21] convincingly argues that moral education was essentially discarded by higher education, not because it was deemed unimportant, but because of its unscientific, pluralistic nature. The age old question—whose morals?—largely banished such agendas from much of higher ed. In our discussion surrounding "morals" and "ethics" in that mid-west teacher education renewal meeting I heard similar echoes. Schools, after all, should focus on academics. *Moral dilemmas, except for the hypothetical, are too controversial; too difficult in the pluralistic setting of public education*. Yet, Dewey would not allow the dichotomy of moral versus academic education to stand unchallenged. For Dewey, human growth (including both academic and moral aspects) is effected by the social climate of the school and of society. And, more deeply, the very nature of that relational climate—the ability to be together in all our moral diversity—becomes the foundation of moral citizenship. Hence, teacher education programs must continue to pay close attention to the academics of student learning, to Essential Learning Requirements, etc.; but teacher education must also attend to the academics of being human ... together. In essence, I am arguing for a relational pedagogy—attend-

ing to relational instruction and cultivation within the classroom—as a foundational means of moral education.

But, what might that mean? Space does not permit a thorough answer to that question, but I do offer the example of Vivian Paley's classroom. In *The Boy Who Would be a Helicopter*[22] Paley focuses upon one boy (perhaps we might even say one immoral boy) who does not fit in the classroom. Jason destroys the work of others, he is unwilling to listen, he is disruptive of the class. But, what is Paley's response? She allows for him (not letting him do whatever he wants, but becoming intent on working to establish "proper relations" between him and the class). The class discusses his alienation; the class allows room for him to grow morally—to become like-minded. Jason's transformation is remarkable. But, we might ask, how did Paley know what to do to build such a space? Each day Paley would place tape recorders around the room in order to catch her students' conversations. At night she would pour over these conversations; analyzing, studying, reflecting. Hence, as she attended to the academics of her class, she also attended to the relational interactions of her students. Insights were birthed in this listening; insights that allowed her class to be a space of moral formation for a boy who would be a helicopter, as well as a classroom of students who did not know what to do with such a boy. The solution was not the key; the social conversation was.

An additional example from Paley's work will be helpful. In her book *You Can't Say You Can't Play*[23] Paley is wrestling, essentially, with the bullying and exclusionary propensities at work among her students. One student would simply deem another unworthy; expressing to them that they could not enter whatever activity was at hand. Paley, in the name of moral education, could have simply offered a new rule: *you can't say you can't play*. Instead, she began a relational dialogue with her students as well as students throughout the school. She began to create a relational culture, a place where a variety of opinions were allowed, and a moral dilemma was debated. Here, perhaps even more important than the final "moral" solution to the problem, her students were morally shaped by the very nature of the dialogue. The solution, again, was not the key; the deliberation was.

In conclusion, morals as defined by Webster are about right and wrong beliefs, opinions, actions, etc. In this way they are contentious and divisive; especially so in a democratic setting. Because of this we wonder if such education is too politically sensitive for our teacher education programs. But, morals as defined by Dewey are centered in *proper relatedness* which allows for the democratic strength which can withstand the debates of right and wrong inherent within a diverse

society. It is such proper relatedness which allows students to debate deeply contentious issues without resorting to war (whether in words or actions). We may not agree, but in being together we are being trained and acting morally. This ability to develop such relational connections, allowing for serious debate, is at the center of democratic life and central to our educational efforts. Moral education, rather than cast aside by our teacher education programs, must, instead, be integral to all we do educationally; schooling must attend to the academics of being human together. Remember, for Dewey the moral and social (democratic) qualities of conduct are identical with each other. Might we not, then, shift the wording of his foundational pedagogical statement: democracy centers upon this conception of the school as a mode of social life, that the best and deepest democratic training is precisely that which one gets through having to enter into proper relations with others in a unity of work and thought. What was at stake in that conversation in a mid-west conference room? Perhaps, ultimately, our ability to live democratic lives. If so, then that is a moral conversation worth having.

Notes

[1] "Moral," *Merriam-Webster online dictionary*. http://www.m-w.com/dictionary/moral (October 2, 2006).

[2] Press Release. Education programs may have a 'disposition' for censorship." Disturbed by National Trend, FIRE Defends Liberty from Coast to Coast. http://www.thefire.org/index.php/article/6280.html (September 21, 2005).

[3] Plato understands education in moral terms—forming a just man—one that is initially situated in controlling oneself which will, thus, make one a just man within the Republic (i.e., a man whose inward and outward Self reflect the ultimate Good) (Plato, *The republic*, Second revised edition. Translated with an introduction by Desmond Lee (New York: Penguin, 1987), 161).

[4] Commenting on Rousseau's educational aims, Bloom in the introduction to Rousseau's *Emile* contends, "The primary aim of education of civilized man and woman is to prepare them for one another" (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, on education*. Translation and notes by Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 25. Rousseau believes that the primary goal of education is to prepare men and women to be moral agents who, while living autonomously, also live well with each other.

[5] For Freire, education is far from a simple transference of information; education, instead, is a moral process of becoming aware of ourselves in the world, of transforming the world, of living with others in equitable solidarity (Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*: 30th Anniversary Edition. Translated by Myra Bergman Ramos. Introduction by Donald Macedo (New York: Continuum, 2002), 81.

[6] Roland-Martin contends that education must take into account, and includes the horizons, of our moral relations as wives, husbands, partners, sons, daughters, employers, employees, teachers, students; ultimately our lives as

co-citizens (Jane Roland-Martin, *Reclaiming a conversation: The ideal of the educated woman* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 6.

[7] According to bell hooks, education is not simply a matter of information; it must be a practice of freedom. Education is fundamentally tied to theory and practice, situated in critical awareness and thoughtful action. For hooks, education, a process that must be situated in community, in experience and in voice, is fundamentally a moral endeavor (bell hooks, *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

[8] John Dewey, My pedagogic creed," in *Philosophical documents in education*, 2nd ed., edited by Ronald F. Reed and Tony W. Johnson. (New York: Addison-Wesley Longman, Inc., 2000), 99.

[9] Ibid., 95.

[10] John Dewey, *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education* (New York: The Free Press, 1944), 22.

[11] The debate on the importance, as well as the formation, of dispositions, especially within education is certainly not new, nor without contention. For a broader discussion on dispositional formation within educational settings see the *Journal of Educational Controversy* (Volume 2, No. 2, 2007).

[12] Ibid., 16.

[13] Ibid., 19.

[14] Ibid., 13.

[15] Ibid., 13, 14, 16.

[16] Ibid., 357, emphasis mine.

[17] Ibid., 357-358.

[18] Ibid., 358, emphasis mine.

[19] Ibid., 358.

[20] Of course this discussion of the importance of relational, critical discussion and its role in both education and democratic development is certainly not new. Matthew Lipman in *Thinking in education* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003) specifically addresses this notion. My aim in this article is not necessarily to reiterate the need for critical thinking and/or democratic spaces, but specifically to address our aversion to "moral" education based upon tightly controlled boundaries of what is right and, thus, what all must accept. This view of moral education (one right answer) has, at least to some degree, relegated any discussion of moral development to the periphery of public education. In such relegation, I argue, much is lost and overlooked. Taking up democratic spaces of critical and plural discussion, such as is outlined by Lipman, may provide an avenue for the reintegration of public spaces and moral training, both of which are essential to a functional democratic society.

[21] Julie A. Reuben, *The making of the modern university: Intellectual transformation and the marginalization of morality* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

[22] Vivian Gussin Paley, *The boy who would be a helicopter: The uses of storytelling in the classroom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

[23] Vivian Gussin Paley, *You can't say you can't play* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).