

ON ETHICS AND EDUCATION

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John Dewey, a philosopher concerned both with education and moral value, quotes the following story about Imperial China:

A Chinese, aided by his wife, flogged his mother. The imperial order not only commanded that the criminals should be put to death; it further directed that the head of the clan should be put to death, that the immediate neighbors each should receive eighty blows and be sent into exile; that the head or representative of the graduates (who held the BA)--among whom the male offender ranked--should be flogged and exiled; that the granduncle, the uncle, and two elder brothers should be put to death; that the prefect and the rulers should for a time be deprived of their rank; that on the face of the mother of the female offender, four Chinese characters, expressive of neglect of duty toward her daughter, should be tattooed, and that she be exiled to a distant province; that the father of the female offender, a bachelor of arts, should not be allowed to take any higher literary degrees, and that he be flogged and exiled; that the son of the offenders should receive another name, and that the lands of the offender for a time remain fallow.¹

Now, all this is patently unjust, but there is clearly a certain logic to it: the emperor's judge was punishing not only the guilty parties, but also the entire social order which allowed the crime to happen. Anyone who had the slightest responsibility toward the moral education of the offenders, and anyone whose duty it was to maintain order, suffered the consequences.

This is an interesting principle. Under it, if one of your students went home and talked back to his mother, you could be tattooed with characters indicating you hadn't done your duty. Not only that. The school board could be removed, the superintendent and principal could be flogged and exiled, and the dean of the school of education and your old professors could be given 40 lashes and barred from writing books on sabbatical, for not teaching you how to do your job. That the Chinese sentence focused so much on education is significant. The offenders were of the educated elite;

as such, it had been their duty to learn, and for others to teach them, to be morally upright. I can see why Dewey was attracted to this story. It was his philosophy that education with a strong moral component was crucial to the viability of democracy. For democracy to work, the great majority of its members must be able to function as morally competent individuals in one nationwide community.

As Dewey put it, moral ability is the mark of a great and working society, and the lack of that ability is the mark of the isolated man, the isolated group.

Let me quote Dewey on this point:

The isolation and exclusiveness of a gang or clique brings its antisocial spirit into relief. But this same spirit is found wherever one group has interests "of its own" which shut it off from full interaction with other groups.... It marks nations in their isolation from one another; families which seclude their domestic concerns as if they had no connection with a larger life; schools when separated from

the interest of home and community; the divisions of rich and poor; learned and unlearned.²

That imperial Chinese judge would no doubt have agreed, for he held the criminals' next-door neighbors responsible for the fact that he beat his mother. For that judge, there was not such thing as an isolated immoral act. Society and morality were one and the same thing.

As Dewey put it, speaking of the ancient Greek gods, a moral life has as its object the preservation of society, which in turn preserves the individual. He quotes a statement from the Dialogues of Plato: "The gods gave men a sense of justice and of reverence, in order to enable them to unite for mutual preservation."³

Something of this kind of thinking shows up in the criticism of our schools these days, although it frequently has far less sophistication and credibility than Dewey had. Some of the "Back to Basics" folks want you to

teach the four "R's -- 'reading, 'riting, 'rithmetic, and right thinking.

While the argument has considerable merit, too often the proponents ascribe to the "empty jug" theory of education. The students sit there, like so many empty bottles, waiting to be poured full of information and ideology.

And, of course, there is considerable disagreement as to what "right thinking" consists of.

As teachers know, you cannot simply fill a student's mind with mathematics or grammar. You have to teach them both. And you have to teach ethics, too. The questions are, what should you teach, and how should you teach, where the student's moral life is concerned, so that you will not be tatoed, flogged, and exiled, after the Chinese fashion?

The method of teaching, I will leave to you, since you are the experts.

But I would like to discuss, for a few minutes, what I think proper moral teaching may be, and why students need to have it.

Let me go back to that idea that mutual preservation depends on two things: justice and reverence. I think that is very well put. You must have both. Without justice, reverence will not suffice. A person's sense of reverence comes out of an appreciation of our moral heritage. A sense of justice sees to it that this heritage is carried forward, that it continues to work in the real world. Moreover, reverence for lasting value gives justice to its meaning. How can we know what is just, and what is not, without reference to lasting values? And finally, justice is the sense which permits us to put ourselves in the other fellow's shoes, and thereby to temper our reverential belief with mercy.

How do students learn these things? Dewey gives us a clue:

To learn to be human is to develop through the give-and-take of communication a sense of being an individually distinctive member of a community; one who understands and appreciates its beliefs, desires, and methods....⁴

In other words, the learning of moral skills happens to a great degree when the student learns what Americans have long believed and long valued, and also the methods we have devised for acting on those beliefs. In no small measure, then, teaching morals is the same thing as teaching history.

This is what learning reverence means: taking one's own frame of reference, not just from experience of life, but from other people's learning experiences.

As Poor Richard put it: "Experience keeps a dear school. A fool will learn in no other -- and scarce in that."⁵

Too often, a reverential attitude toward the past amounts to nothing more than idolatry. The person who takes a vain pride in our history erects a false god. He does not understand enough about those beliefs, values, and methods to temper his reverence with mercy for those who disagree, when the facts of the case are that our ancestors welcomed disagreement and established methods for dealing with it. The results are likely to be a

great deal of flag-waving, little true understanding, and less true justice.

True reverence does not mean idolatry of the past. Rather, it is realistic and it is specific. It means the individual knows where he stands in a tradition, in which imperfect human beings accomplished something which continues to be of benefit to him and his fellowman.

We have two highly organized methods of resolving disputes over moral questions. One is one political system, the other the judicial system. Both were worked out by people of uncanny genius, who could themselves comprehend the experience of the past, and who could arrange something workable for the present and future.

It was no accident that the people who founded our government, and who wrote our Constitution were history buffs, almost to a man. They were aware of the great moral questions going back to the Greeks and Romans. One of the chief occupations of their day was the design of a philosophy of human life,

using all the historical resources at their command.

What were some of the moral values they built our political and judicial system around? Let me mention a few -

First and foremost, I believe they valued privacy, for, in a way, it is the basis of everything else. Justice Brandeis has called it "the right to be let alone."⁶ But it means many things, not just the right to seclude oneself.

The right of privacy means that each person may believe what he will on religious questions, without interference from the government or competing religions.

Privacy means each person may pursue his own economic betterment, and that he cannot be deprived of what he has earned without compensation.

Privacy means that a person may travel freely without control by outside authority. Tell your students when they go from one town to the next, they do not have to get permission from the police. And when they come back, they do not have to check back at the police station. But they would in Russia.

Privacy means that the decision as to the fundamental question of government -- who shall have power? -- is decided by each voter in the silence of his heart. He votes in secret. It's nobody's business but his own.

Privacy also means the freedom to speak out of one's own heart, and to choose to join whom he will, for any legal purpose. Those are matters of individual choice.

And finally, respect for privacy also lead our forefathers to limit the authority of the state in crucial ways when it does intervene in the affairs of individuals. No person may be deprived of life, liberty, or property without due process, which means the right to be heard and the right to defend himself.

Thus, the foremost value our ancestors held, out of a very full knowledge of history, was the value of individuality, and the methods of government were designed to protect the individual and his choices. They demanded that we, as a people, cleve to the value of generosity toward the individual. His beliefs, his speech, his property, his liberty, his protection, and his associations -- all are sacred to us, even when we disagree with him.

What all this means, of course, is that each and every one of us must find his own way to moral value and ethical action. Our heritage demands of us that we educate ourselves and choose. Here are some of the questions we

must answer, first in our youth, and again and again as we grow older:

- What shall I value?
- What shall I believe?
- Whom shall I emulate?
- Whom shall I join?
- What shall I demand of others?

To return to my main theme once again, the answers to these questions are not to be found in isolation or in ignorance of the past. Moral ability grows from experience in communities -- family, school, church, clubs, friendships. It grows, as well, from deliberate study. To learn, each person must explore his moral environment. I think there is a very close analogy between our moral environment and our natural environment. We want now to preserve our natural resources. We should also want to preserve our moral environment -- for moral values are simply the natural resources of the

just man.

That's what they are: resources. When a person is confronted with a moral problem in his personal or public life, he needs to know what solutions others have found. He needs to have searched out his heritage, his ethical environment, and to have found his resources. Otherwise, he is trying to work in a vacuum, to reinvent the wheel, so to speak. When a teenager is pressured to join a clique which smokes dope and takes pills, he needs to know a thing or two. He must not be at sea.

First, he needs to know what the question is - I've already stated it: "Whom shall I join." It is not stretching the truth one bit to say he has the Constitutional right to ask and answer that question for himself. He needn't be pressured by bullies. It's called "freedom of association."

Second, he needs to know what the options are. He needs to know that he can seek out the company of people who are doing other things.

Third, he needs to have a test which will provide him the basis for making a choice, and to do this he must have reference to values.

These, too, are to be found in the moral environment of community and past.

Let us take the evidence most closely at hand. If an older student's teachers happened to have discussed the value system espoused by John Dewey himself, as part of the general movement of American Pragmatist philosophy, he would have an answer for his consideration. And it is this:

Just as one's moral authority comes from his experience in a community, so does it lead to further involvement in that community. This is in direct contrast to the spirit of the dope-smoking clique, which is closed, isolationist, and anti-social. So, with a little adult guidance, the teenager might well choose to associate with a service club or other group dedicated to constructive community involvement.

So, we have answers to two of the questions I posed:

What shall I value? -- community, involvement with life, contribution.

Whom shall I join? -- Those whose actions lead them out into the world of service and work, not those who turn away from the needs of others.

• Inherent in all this is the concept of "modeling." That was another thing valued by our 18th-century forebearers, did you know? When Thomas Jefferson wrote his nephew a long letter about his education, the main thing he told the boy, after listing worthwhile subjects to study, was to find -- in life or in history -- a person to model his behavior after.⁷

Modeling is probably innate in us. In its immature and unrealistic form, it is mere hero-worship. It is another form of idolatry, which I have mentioned before. In its mature form, it is a skill. It is the ability to look at other, more experienced people, and learn from them what to do. One learns, in very specific terms, what works. You will notice perhaps that I keep coming back to that word "realistic." The morally healthy

person is realistic. He has no illusions about his fellow-men. Neither is he ignorant of what is truly worthwhile. Realism is not mere negativism although the two are often confused. True realism means an appreciation of worth, value, and effectiveness, however it may be alloyed by human frailty. The realistic person has neither his head in the clouds, nor his hopes in a dungeon.

What can you do to give children this ability to make a realistic appraisal of the natural moral resources which are available to them? The key, I think, is what Dewey suggests: early, systematic involvement with the community. Take your students out into the business and professional world of your home town. Somewhere, there is a businessman with a creed hanging on his office wall, a creed which asks the questions, Is it right, is it honest, is it fair to all concerned? And

ask that businessman how his creed operates in his experience, and how it jibes with making an honest profit.

Go to history, and let your students consider the words of the men who founded our nation. It is better to take a text from a great man's speech and consider it in depth, than to make a dry survey of history, as if human beings had nothing to do with it.

Go to individuals, and let your students come to know them. The library shelves are full of the words of men like Lincoln and Jefferson. Those words can speak to us directly, as one person to another, separated only by time. I do not think they are separated from us by experience. The moral questions they had to answer, each and every one of us has to answer over and over again, with each new generation.

One of the greatest resources for you, I believe, is the law. Get your students out into the justice system, to see how our moral conflicts are resolved on a daily basis. Let your students judge for themselves what is right and wrong, and how wrong should be dealt with. Let me quote Chief Justice Robert Jackson on the country lawyer's involvement with his community, its conflicts and its resources:

Such a man as the country lawyer understands the structure of society and how its groups interlock and interact, because he lives in a community so small that he can keep it all in view. . . . He sees how this society lives and works under the law and adjusts its conflicts by its procedures. He knows how disordered and hopelessly unstable it would be without law.⁸

To sum up, I think the best source of information about moral resources available to the young is the community itself. Only through involvement with that community can a young person

come to know the moral issues in concrete form, and only in that way can he see how older and wiser people deal with those issues. And, let me hasten to add, by community I mean not only one's own town, but the entire community of thought and experience which has developed throughout our history. There are people of tremendous moral ability, back there in time, ready to speak to us if we will only listen.

Let me close by returning to those few questions I framed a while ago. And let me give some suggested answers, based on what I have said about the witness of the American past and our present communities.

What shall I value? Value that which works, based on a realistic and yet hopeful appraisal of human limitation. Value that which leads to growth, construction, and expansion

of human spirit. Value that which leads to peace and reconciliation.

What shall I believe? Believe what you will. That is the law of the land. But do not fail to test those beliefs in commerce with one's fellowmen, and test them against the facts as experience teaches them.

Whom shall I emulate? Emulate the successful person. By successful, I mean the person who is successfully human, and whose moral values sustain him, rather than hinder him.

Whom shall I join? Join those whose work is constructive, who are not afraid to involve themselves with the needs of the community, and those whose aims are just.

What shall I demand of others? Demand nothing you would not demand of yourself. That bit of wisdom is older than our

country: it is nothing more than the golden rule. But it is built into the foundations of our legal system, which holds that all shall be equal under the law.

There are other questions, and there are other answers.

Human life was never simple; moral authority requires study and reflective thought, not unbending rules and reflex action.

But these are some of the key questions, I think.

The answers to them I believe are available in our own law and history as a people, and in the on-going experiences of our communities. The answers show as much reverence -- reverence of principle -- as did that sentence handed down by the judge in Imperial China. And, I might add, they show a far, far more realistic and effective sense of justice. The two, reverence and justice, are available to all of us, from

our own traditions as a people. Help your students seek them
out.

FOOTNOTES

¹John Dewey and James H. Tufts, Ethics (New York, Henry Holt, 1929), pp. 17-18.

²Dewey, The Essential Writings, David Sidorsky, ed. (New York, Harper & Row, 1977), p. 223.

³Ethics, p. 2.

⁴Essential Writings, p. 212.

⁵Benjamin Franklin, Poor Richard's Almanac (for 1738).

⁶Louis D. Brandeis, Olmstead v. United States, 277 U.S. 438, 478.

⁷Thomas Jefferson, Family Letters,

⁸Robert H. Jackson, "The Country Lawyer",