Res Publica Vol.II no.1 [1996]

CAN EDUCATION BE MORAL?

by

MARY MIDGLEY*

There does seem to be something odd — even comical — about the idea of moral education; something that seems to set it apart from other aspects of education. When the British Education Secretary called on schools in 1994 to "teach children the difference between right and wrong", many people felt this oddness. Teaching *that* particular difference didn't seem to be quite like teaching other kinds of difference, such as the difference between wasp-stings and bee-stings, or between Hungary and Romania. Gilbert Ryle once wrote an article called "On Forgetting the Difference Between Right and Wrong"[1] to bring out that this would be a strange kind of forgetting ... But you can forget the difference between wasp and bee-stings quite easily.

We will come back to Ryle's serious point presently, but it may be best to deal first with a smaller matter about the language. This talk about "teaching the difference between right and wrong" is probably not intended to have its full literal meaning. It isn't a matter of explaining this huge difference in the first place to someone who doesn't know that it exists at all. That kind of ignorant person would presumably be like some one who doesn't know the difference between black and white, which means someone who was blind and without visual imagery. But anyone who was as lost as that morally would presumably be a very extreme psychopath, and it probably wouldn't be much use talking to them.

Moralists like Mr Patten are not usually talking about these rare psychopaths. They are talking about large numbers of quite ordinary people who (they think) misplace the moral borderline. These people may, for instance, believe that it's all right to steal or play truant, or that

* 1A Collingwood Terrace, Newcastle-upon-Tyne NE2 2JP.

1 Gilbert Ryle, "On Forgetting the Difference between Right and Wrong", in *Essays in Moral Philosophy*, ed. A.I. Melden (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1958), 147-59.

it's wrong to report offences to the police. But they do not necessarily approve of murder. They may be much like everybody else on other moral topics. They have, in fact, got a general moral apparatus in their heads for making these distinctions and they do make them, but they make some of them wrongly. They need, then, to be taught certain particular Virtues so that they will get these particular distinctions right.

Now the teaching of virtues is not a new project. It was high on the curriculum of the ancient Greek Sophists. Protagoras in particular promised to teach his pupils virtue for a fixed price and guaranteed to repay the fee if the treatment was not successful. "My young friend," says Protagoras in Plato's dialogue, "if you become my disciple, you will find that on the very first day you will go home a better man than you came; on the second day the result will be the same, and each succeeding day will be marked by the same improvement" (Plato, *Protagoras*, 318a).

Nobody, it seems, ever did sue Protagoras for non-delivery. (As that skilled public-relations expert had calculated, his pupils were not attracted by the prospect of coming into court to prove that they still remained vicious.) All the same, there is surely something very odd about the Protagorean claim, something which bothered Socrates in much the same way that John Patten's claims bother us. Socrates attacked Protagoras by entangling him in logical contradictions about the idea of teaching virtue and concluded, somewhat paradoxically, that virtue simply can't be taught at all. And this is paradoxical because it surely looks as though Socrates himself did in some sense set out to teach virtue, and indeed it looks as if his followers thought that he succeeded.

This whole situation, then, is a bit more complicated than it looks. Wild and simple claims, such as those made by Protagoras and Mr Patten, cram the intellectual and the moral aspects of life together far too crudely. They suggest that virtue is just one more school subject, a set of facts and methods which can be handed out to pupils, like any other, in the classroom and tested by examination (Question 3: Is Theft Wrong? ...). Against this, we want to protest at once *that people can only become better by their own efforts*. Other people can't make them better. We want to say that the only possible scene for this struggle is the free choice of the individual concerned. And we also feel that this struggle hasn't much connection with learning new facts or new methods of thought.

Yet clearly this is not quite the whole story. Other people's influence does make a difference to the drama, and grasping new facts and new

methods can also enter into it. For instance, when we discover that other people actually mind how we treat them — which is a fact — and again, that there do exist alternative possible ways of treating them — which is also a fact — these facts can radically change our attitudes. For instance, public attitudes in Britain both to domestic violence and to the oppression of colonial peoples have changed deeply in our lifetime as a result of some dim, dawning recognition of this kind of fact.

If we do absorb large new facts like these, we usually also need to develop new ways of thinking about them. In fact, at this stage, intellectual effort to understand the changed situation does become necessary. And that effort can often need help from outside — help which is, in effect, teaching, though it need not officially be so called. This kind of painful thinking is often simply too hard to perform quite on one's own. At this point, books as well as people may well be one's teachers, and it would be very odd to be so insistent on independence as to reject their influence.

This point that outside help may be needed may seem an obvious one. But it still needs making today because, since the Enlightenment, some of our moral views have become so individualistic — so obsessed with protecting individual freedom from outside interference — that they have tended to isolate each person in an unbreathable moral vacuum in a way that paralyses action. This isolationist strand of thought has stemmed partly from Social Darwinist insistence on commercial freedom but more deeply from Nietzsche. It was dominant in Existentialism and it seems to rule also in some postmodern moral views. When this kind of moral solipsism is around, we need to say that humans are social animals. Their morality, like every other aspect of their lives, has to be formed co-operatively. That co-operation doesn't displace each individual's own struggle. It supplements it. But both are equally necessary. That is why there is room for some kind of teaching.

Change

Perhaps, then, there is a genuine connection between the intellectual and the moral aspect of life, making a genuine space for some kind of teaching at that point. Though this link is far more subtle than our hopeful prophets suggested, it does exist, because hard, co-operative thinking is needed in order to make moral changes. This is a fact which British anti-intellectualism prefers not to know, but it is true all the

same. Except in the most stagnant cultures, thought is constantly needed for morals. Conceptual frameworks have to keep growing. And this growth is, of course, needed particularly badly in changing societies, societies where the force of custom is shaken and traditional restraints have been weakened.

However, moralising is always out of date. Societies are usually preoccupied with denouncing the faults of their predecessors. We keep fighting the last battle. On this principle, we still tend today to preach individualism and attack the faults of limited, stagnant, rule-bound cultures. We still repeat, in fact, the protests made by people like Nietzsche and Kierkegaard against the stagnation of European society in the late nineteenth century. It is of course true that small stagnant cultures have their own characteristic vices. They are often stifling, boring and frustrating. They do, however, tend to protect people's everyday life to some predictable extent. Putting it crudely, offenders in such societies tend to know that they are offending and also tend to get found out. By contrast, our societies today are mobile, interconnected and fluid to an extent that is quite unparalleled in history. All of them are changing fast. People in each of them are aware of a multitude of other societies quite unlike their own that exist around them and can be reached. This fluidity means that unthinking conformity gets harder and harder. Thought really is needed to see what we ought to do.

In very static cultures, people really may get on well enough without much thought by simply following example. But in times of change like ours, not only does etiquette give way but people often really do not know what they ought to do. The present confusion of commercial morality is only one of many obvious examples. There is then usually an increase in what are by anyone's standards seriously destructive actions — killings, injuries, demolitions, arson. Not only are dreadful things done, but people are no longer sure just why they should not be done. The reasons that used to be taken for granted have been forgotten, or if they are remembered they no longer seem adequate. The conceptual floor-boards have to be taken up and ruling moral ideas re-examined.

The Role of Philosophy

Now this was the kind of essentially practical emergency that first produced serious, full-scale moral philosophising in Europe. In Greece,

and above all in Athens, it arose, not in the full intellectual flowering of the successful Periclean age, but later, when things were unmistakably starting to fall to pieces. The reason why people listened to Socrates and Plato was that they were already badly shaken by upsets to their whole conceptual system — upsets which were primarily practical rather than theoretical. Moral philosophy didn't actually originate as a speculative exercise that was later applied to practical use, any more than modern physics did. (Galileo was an engineer working on the flight of cannon-balls.) But in order to meet these practical emergencies, both physics and philosophy had to stand right back from those immediate practical problems. They needed to take up more distant viewpoints and look at a much wider subject-matter. It is that kind of detachment — that gap between immediate needs and the theoretical viewpoint — which produces the paradox, the sense that thought both is relevant to our practical attitudes and is somehow too remote to be much help with them.

Individualism

As I've suggested, this shake-up of tradition typically occurs when smaller, more rule-bound societies dissolve and get merged in larger, more mobile ones. Today, this is, of course, happening in spades all over the world. All contemporary societies, even the most protected, are changing fast. On top of this however, there is at present a positive propaganda campaign against traditional submission to order. Both from the right and from the left, Western culture preaches individual ism, making personal freedom itself a central ideal and calling for constant innovation. People don't only find themselves isolated from their traditional backgrounds and forced into competition, they are also told that they *ought* to be innovative, independent and competitive, that this is the way to adapt to a fluid situation. In official Western theory as well as in practice, the social aspect of morality has been considerably neglected — indeed, it has often been treated as something disreputably close to Communism. So it surely ought to be no surprise to anyone if crime and irresponsibility increase.

The question, however, is of course not just about causes and who is to blame. It concerns what we can do about this increase. Now the right-wing answer to this question recommends "teaching them a lesson" by stern deterrent punishment, if necessary involving lots of boiling oil.

This notion of how moral education works is very old and it has been most thoroughly tried out in practice. The trouble is that it doesn't actually work. Disappointingly, it turns out that "the difference between right and wrong" cannot be effectively taught by this method. The threat of punishment may frighten people, but they often get used to it and go on as usual, just as people threatened with hanging for sheep-stealing still stole sheep.

Moreover punishment, however frightful, does not, of itself, have any tendency to inculcate better practical attitudes. It won't teach people respect for the feelings of others or willingness to spare their property. The reason why it doesn't is that those attitudes are — fairly obviously — quite complex. They are not the sort of simple habit that can be taught to rats or pigeons by giving them electric shocks. Nor are they patterns which could be programmed into computers. Moral attitudes of this kind involve a great deal more than the fear of being punished. They usually need to be caught from people who have already got them, people whom one respects and with whom one can identify. That process is necessarily slow and not very articulate. That is why people growing up always absorb their first moral attitudes unconsciously from those around them.

These attitudes involve deeply ingrained habits of *attending* to differences between different ways of acting — differences such as, for instance, the difference between hurting people's feelings and not hurting them. Grasping this difference is not just learning that these two things are encouraged or not encouraged or are called *right* and *wrong*. And the reason why — as Ryle pointed out — these differences are not easily *forgotten* is that, once one has seen the point of them, they take their place as central factors in one's whole habitual attitude to choice.

Punishment can help this process only where it is seen and accepted as a comment from people whom one already respects, inside groups with which one can identify. That can happen much more easily with parents than it can with schools, which is why there are limits to what schools can be expected to do. It also happens more easily with schools than with the law. The trouble with judicial punishment is that it is usually administered by people outside the group in which the offenders mostly live. If those offenders have already begun to feel that their own group is alien to the wider society, then legal punishment is likely to strike them either as an accident or simply as a hostile act from an

enemy. They may then quite easily take pride in ignoring it. Where that kind of respect and identification is missing, then, offenders usually receive punishment like bad weather, simply as bad luck, reflecting that they will be more careful not to get caught next time. By contrast, the process of real attitude-change is much more like planting trees or tending a garden than it is like programming or conditioning. People who expect school-teachers, rather than prisons, to reform the offending young do no doubt sometimes have this kind of gardening process in mind. They may think of "teaching the difference between right and wrong" rather more realistically as involving a combination of example and advice, rather than just as drilling in something like the difference between wasp-stings and bee-stings.

Undoubtedly, good school-teachers do often manage to do a lot of this gardening, in spite of the countless difficulties of their lot. Counsellors and therapists may do it too. And it's important to notice here that effective counselling of this kind is never going to be what is proudly called "non-directive". The idea that neutrality is possible is just self-deception. All professionals, however professional they may try to be, have their own moral attitudes. Communicating these attitudes is always a necessary part of any teaching process, even teaching the multiplication table. Attempts to hide or neutralise them can only result in confusion. The pupil or client doesn't have to accept those attitudes, and may indeed react against them. But they have to be there, perceptibly on offer. And in so far as they are offered to the client or pupil, some kind of teaching is necessarily going on.

Example and advice, then, do have a teaching function at this stage. But example and advice alone aren't enough once you are teaching a child that is old enough to think for itself. There has to be serious thought as well, thought which involves explicit discussion. Questions have to be answered. Objections have to be taken seriously. In times of change, this interactive stage of moral education can't be avoided.

The Fear of Dialogue

Discussion, however, scares right-wing theorists. They see that discussion has to start by positively inviting moral criticism, and that the first critical move will nearly always be a destructive one. Many people, of course, only make one such critical move in their lives — the one that takes them from their parents' position to that of their peer-group,

where they follow whatever honour-code is locally going. Others, going a little farther, pick up some simple moral theory which looks like a useful justification for change — hedonism, egoism, relativism, nihilism, subjectivism, immoralism, Social Darwinism, general scepticism or (more usually) a jumble of bits and pieces from all these. Socrates got executed for "corrupting the youth" because he had encouraged a lot of young people to start thinking and arguing destructively in this sort of way. And many of them had not bothered to go any further. It is possible, indeed, that Socrates was rather naïve about this. As Plato seems finally to have concluded, something more positive may indeed be needed.

But there is nothing to stop anyone going further. Reasoning about morals is indeed one of those courses of action that need to be carried through properly; they are only dangerous if you stop halfway and don't see where they have taken you. (A little thinking is a dangerous thing ...) Thus, Benjamin Franklin, as a young man, took up with immoralism and published a pamphlet to prove "that nothing could possibly be wrong in the World, that Vice and Virtue were empty Distinctions, no such Thing existing" (there was, in fact, strictly no difference between right and wrong).

His friends were much impressed with his reasoning. But Ben was then annoyed to find that two of these friends took his arguments seriously. They now refused to pay him back quite large sums of money which he had lent them ... He also noticed that he himself had been behaving meanly to his girlfriend. At this point, Ben says, "my Pamphlet appeared now not so clever a Performance as I once thought it, and I doubted whether some Error had not insinuated itself unperceived into my Argument ... I grew convinced that Truth, Sincerity and Integrity in Dealings between Man and Man were of the utmost Importance to the Felicity of Life."[2]

That experience showed Ben where he had got to. Without a difference between right and wrong, his life didn't make sense any longer. He didn't like this, and accordingly revised his reasoning. When he asked himself where he would now put that difference, he found quite good reason for putting it, on that matter, where it had been before, though on other matters he later saw reason to shift it. He ended, not by ditching morality, but by making a shift within it to an

2 Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography and Other Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 59.

emphasis on different standards, different claims.

This kind of progress through extreme positions to more subtle ones is a perfectly normal and proper response to a clash of values, even in stable times. In an age of violent change, when there simply is no single, solid unquestioned framework to shelter in, it may well be the only way forward to some kind of tenable position. We can't put ourselves back into an age of monolithic moral simplicity. (We wouldn't like it if we could and indeed there have been few such ages.) Instead, we can rethink our values, noticing where they clash, where they still seem to be right and where changes of priority are actually called for.

Right-wing theorists share a mistake about this with some of the violent rebels who confront them. They suppose that there are only two choices. We must either swallow traditional morality whole or else drop it altogether. That assumption leaves no room for morality to grow. But we know that morality does grow, that it *has* grown in the past and that it is bound to go on growing in the future. Our business is to contribute to that growing by trying to see better the wider spectrum of possible ideals, standards and values which lies beyond the narrow choices currently before us. The simple moral dualism that sees only two choices springs partly from the mere habit of feuding — from always seeing issues as fights between Them and Us. But it arises also from sheer lack of practice in reasoning. People who are used to seeing every argument treated as a quarrel find it really hard to suspect that more than two possibilities can exist at all. To bring this idea into perspective calls for serious discussion.

Discussing — serious, open-minded discussing rather than just disputing — is not easy. It is something that people need to learn to do while they are still young and flexible. As is recognised in almost every civilised country other than our own, that discussion is inevitably philosophical. Philosophy, in fact, is not a luxury. At least in confusing times like ours, philosophy is an unavoidable necessity. It will be done, well or badly, in any case. Even the individualistic, monetarist-minded views which now prevail are themselves quite recent contributions to philosophy, though they are bad ones. There is a great deal to be said for finding better ones instead.