

New Perspectives on Young Children's Moral Education: Developing Character through a Virtue Ethics Approach

Tony Eaude

A wise and humble book, distilling a lifetime's observations about education and morality

Tony Eaude has spent a lifetime in the British schools, mainly as a teacher and headmaster in Episcopal schools. The schools multifaceted mission includes both academic and moral education. Eaude has seen a great deal of change since he attended upper-middle-class, mostly white public (I. E., Private) schools in the 1960s.

The book starts with the very real and humble observation that people have been talking about teaching virtue, ethics, and morality since the days of the Greeks. There is no agreement on a formula, and examples of success seem to be scattered and difficult to replicate. That does not mean that the task is unimportant or impossible, simply that it is very much a matter of judgment, societal context, and other variables which are difficult to control. In his preface, Eaude outlines the three main themes running through the book.

"1) The current social and cultural climate results in children receiving strong, often conflicting, messages and pressures about how they should act, encouraging a view of success, happiness and identity as primarily based on external factors such as money, celebrity and image; and underplaying, or denying, the extent to which most actions have a moral component. We live in a time of moral uncertainty and confusion, for children and adults.

"2) Educational policy, in England and elsewhere, has lost touch with the fundamentally moral nature of education and how young children learn. Increasingly, society and schools and settings, even for very young children, privilege cognitive processes and outcomes over emotional ones – intellect over feeling and attainment over care. The aims of education, in a pluralist democracy, are necessarily multifaceted and contested. Its main focus especially with young children, cannot, without damage, be reduced to the acquisition of factual knowledge and attainment in what can be tested. Education must address the needs of the whole child, both as s/ he is now and will be in the future. So, moral education must be developed throughout the life of any institution, not restricted to only some subject areas.

"3) The discourse on ethics has been too dominated by rationalism and individualism rather than relationships and context. This is reflected in the current emphasis on individual actions, rational choice and conscious decisions, rather than the social nature of ethics, the pressures resulting from external influences and early and preconscious patterns of response. I argue for an approach based on embedding intrinsic motivation, on developing character and the virtues associated with living 'a good life', and incorporation into a moral community, rather than relying on simple notions of right and wrong and adult prescription."

Eaude says that there are three fundamental systems of ethics:

1. Duty ethics is Old Testament, Koranic prescriptions. Do this, don't do that.

2. Virtue ethics derives from Aristotle. The central concept is that one should strive to be a virtuous person, which generally means finding the golden mean between extremes. Morality does not lend itself to many absolute statements.
3. Utilitarianism, the greatest good for the greatest number, or the greatest happiness, of which the second option, Virtue Ethics, is most applicable, most teachable.

Duty ethics is too simplistic. Absolute proscriptions such as "do not hit other kids" or "do not scribble on the walls" may be appropriate for younger children, but a system of absolutes simply cannot apply across the board. In particular, modern schools embrace such a diversity of students that very few absolutes would be agreed.

Utilitarianism assumes that we know what happiness is and how to achieve it. Most people, if asked, would equate happiness with a lot of money and the free time in which to use it. They do not understand the satisfactions that come from accepting and fulfilling responsibilities as spouses, parents, and contributing members of society. Without being dogmatic, Eade returns time and again to the pernicious influence of television, advertising, and the popular culture on the common conception of happiness.

Choices one and three being eliminated, Eade settles on virtue ethics. The objective of ethical teaching should be to develop virtuous people. The concept of a virtuous person must be left vague, the notion being a person of judgment and discernment who is able to draw on societal traditions, law, experience and the wisdom of others to come up with a virtuous course of action in ambiguous circumstances.

Eade addresses a recurrent moral dilemma which confronts every teacher: how to allot one's limited time among different students. There are three alternatives here as well:

- Give the most time to the students who have the least support outside of school. That would be those from disadvantaged families, without other educational support or moral guidance, and perhaps without a weaker intellectual background.
- Allot one's time equally to all students, ignoring their backgrounds.
- Allot one's time to the students who show the most promise, on the premise that these will be the future leaders of society and that investing in them will give by far the greatest return.

Most schoolteachers are of a liberal persuasion. Eade and I observe that the first option is certainly the most frequently chosen. This example of the moral decision an individual teacher must make can be broadened into a metaphor for all of society.

British society, and as well American and most Western European societies, have become significantly more diverse over the past half-century. The moral dilemma of allocating the schools' resources among students is thus exacerbated by the fact that there are many more students from more difficult backgrounds.

The schools' resources have also changed. Fifty years ago teaching was a respected middle-class profession, one of few open to women. Teachers were, on the whole, more talented and better motivated than they are today.

Schools used to have the support of the society. The courts, the police, municipal authorities and certainly parents would usually support the authority of a teacher or headmaster. If they used corporal punishment, or expelled a child, the assumption was that the child deserved it. This assumption has been almost entirely reversed. Schools are now in a position of defending their every action. Totally unsurprisingly, teachers and administrators are much less willing than they used to be to enforce discipline. Lost along with this resolution to hold children to account is the teaching of morality. Students even in the best of schools learned that they can get away with a great deal. In the worst of schools they create so much chaos that delivering an education is virtually impossible.

I will add a note about my own background. As a parent, teacher, trustee and education school student in the United States I observed the same things that Eade describes in England. My three grown children were poorly served even by the top rated Episcopal and public schools they attended in the Washington DC suburbs. The teachers, mostly graduates of schools of education, did not see moral education as a major part of their job description. Whether the school was ostensibly religious or not did not generally matter. The one shining exception was Georgetown Visitation, a Catholic high school in which I loved to substitute teach. In general, however, school administrations would put on an elaborate show of ruffling feathers and loudly harrumphing, but ultimately do nothing when confronted with situations of students' involvement with drugs, alcohol, cursing and cheating. The only thing that they dealt with seriously, it being the cause du jour, was bullying. On that they seemed to go overboard. I have a note on the specifics of my observation included in the first comment.

Let me now part company with Eade. Having agreed that the situation is as described, Eade envisions a solution coming from within the educational establishment. Somehow, though he offers no program, teachers must be prepared to teach morality and administrations to emphasize morality. He rightly says this has to mean deemphasizing success on standardized tests and the other measurements now so resolutely applied to judging school performance. Moreover, teachers must do this within the context of the multicultural societies and lack of parental commitment that all acknowledged to exist. Eade would like to think it can be done by the public schools or perhaps religious schools. I recommend looking for alternatives.

The most common alternative in the United States is homeschooling. The parents take control of the educational process. The observation is that schools, by their very organization, make vastly inefficient use of the students' time. Parents can lead their children to develop the required skills in the areas of language, mathematics, science, civics and other areas with a much more parsimonious use of their time. The children will thus be free to develop other skills such as music, sports, art, and reading in other areas of expertise. Many homeschool parents find that there is not even that much of a

financial sacrifice. When one takes into account the taxes on a two income family, the cost of childcare, the costs for a second car, a work wardrobe and so on, they can more or less break even deciding to homeschool, and they have the vast pleasure of being with their children as they grow up and forming them into the adults whom they would like to be the parents of their grandchildren.

A second alternative to consider is immigration to countries in which diversity is not an issue. Eastern Europe, Japan, China, Russia and some countries of Latin America have quite homogeneous school populations. These countries are not afraid to set high academic expectations on the children, and neither are they afraid to expect standards of behavior. They are able to assume that the children's parents will share the values that they wish to impart to their students and will support the schools in doing so. I observe that that is generally the case where I live in Ukraine.

A child must learn somewhere in the course of life that not everybody that they encounter will adhere to the same set of values, to the same morality. In my opinion early moral education works better if it is based on the shared foundation of a relatively homogeneous population. Later it can be generalized to others once the child has the ability to grasp the notion of differences, and a sense of judgment. A young child subjected to the chaotic mixture of rules, prejudices and behaviors that characterizes the diverse primary schools in much of today's America and Britain is hard pressed to sort out a pattern of desirable behavior.

This is without a doubt a five-star effort. I cannot fault Eade for his optimism in hoping that British schools will be able to successfully teach morality. My situation is different: I have a child to raise. I have not seen the school to which I would entrust the process.