
Moral Education and Critical Thinking: The Humanist Perspective

Tim Madigan

Perhaps the most hoary of all prejudices about moral education is the belief that it can be taught as a separate subject-matter, unrelated to all other subjects in the curriculum; that didactic instruction, whether by preaching or by less explicit means, can instill patterns of acceptable moral behavior in those subjected to this educational regimen.¹

—Sidney Hook

The cry grows ever louder for moral education in our schools. Liberal politicians like Mario Cuomo and conservative politicians like William Bennett equally stress the need for courses that will teach children basic values—what Paul Kurtz has called “the common moral decencies.” Parents and educators are united in their concern over the increasing reports of dishonest behavior, apathy, irresponsibility, vandalism, and outright violence among the nation’s schoolchildren. But there is little consensus as to *how* to deal with these matters, or *what* to teach.

In this issue of *FREE INQUIRY* we address the need for moral education and critical-thinking courses in the schools. Moral education is especially of interest to humanist parents, who must deal with the prevailing notion that to be moral, a person must be religious. In “Moral Education: Homo Sapiens or Homo Religiosus?” Wendell Watters attempts to dispel this myth, and to show that religious indoctrination can actually be detrimental to a child’s moral development. And R. Joseph Hoffmann takes a critical look at attempts to “objectively” teach about religion in the public schools.

Nevertheless, many humanists were brought up in religious households, where ethical issues were presented through readings from sacred scriptures or the lives of the saints. As their own children

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begin to grow, these parents often wonder if their nonreligious life-stance might be depriving their offspring of crucial moral lessons. What alternative does humanism have to offer to the Bible stories they grew up with?

In “Opening the Door to Moral Education,” Edythe McGovern, an expert on children’s literature, provides a list of books for young ones that deal with critical ethical dilemmas from a strictly secular framework. Rodney F. Hiser, in “How to Raise an Entrepreneur,” gives some helpful tips for bringing up independent-minded, responsible children.

A great misconception about the teaching of morality in schools is that such courses can exist apart from the rest of the curriculum. Morality should not be a subject one learns in the classroom and then quickly forgets once the recess bell rings. The great humanist philosopher and educator John Dewey continually stressed throughout his long career that moral principles do not arise outside of the social life of an individual. The school does not exist in a vacuum, nor does the child who attends it. If a child perceives a difference between the moral principles learned in school and the moral principles learned in other areas of life, he or she will pay little attention to the course material. Like everyone else, the child is determined to learn how to live in the real world. In Dewey’s words,

Interest in community welfare, an interest that is intellectual and practical, as well as emotional—an interest, that is to say, in perceiving whatever makes for social order and progress, and in carrying these principles into execution—is the moral habit to which all the special school habits must be related if they are to be animated by the breath of life.²

Tied in with this must be a renewed emphasis on *cognitive* education: teaching children to think for themselves. Steve Allen and Paul MacCready, both laureates of the Academy

of Humanism, stress the importance of critical-thinking courses in helping children to evaluate the myriad truth-claims that confront them every day. According to Allen, a fourth “R” should be added to “reading, ’riting, and ’rithmetic”—namely, “reasoning.”

As Paul Kurtz suggests in “Eupraxophy: The Need to Build Secular Humanist Centers,” a solid grounding in moral education and critical thinking should be a central component in the secular humanist movement now growing rapidly throughout the country.

Moral education and critical-thinking courses are sorely needed today, but one cannot overemphasize that these must not be taught in isolation from the students’ other interests and activities. To quote again from Dewey:

Relate the school to life, and all studies are of necessity correlated. Moreover, if the school is related as a whole to life as a whole, its various aims and ideals—culture, discipline, information, utility—cease to be variants, for one of which we must select one study and for another another. The growth of the child in the direction of social capacity and service, his larger and more vital union with life, becomes the unifying aim; and discipline, culture, and information fall into place as phases of this growth.³

In a very real sense, the frontier for the development of secular humanism is in the field of education—*lifelong* education. The following articles provide a good look at this important and exciting field.

Notes

1. Sidney Hook, preface to John Dewey’s *Moral Principles in Education* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1975), pp. vii–viii.

2. John Dewey, *Moral Principles*, p. 17.

3. John Dewey, *The School and Society* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), p. 55. ●