Finding Universal Values in a Time of Relativism

by Arthur Dobrin

Each week in my university class in moral development, I present students with real-life moral issues. During the final week of a recent class, we talked about sports and ethics. Several in the class were athletes. I asked them if there was anything their coach would ask them to do that they would refuse. They could think of nothing, including deliberately maiming an opponent. Winning was good, especially when encouraged by the coach. The rest of the students felt the same about the conflict between personal beliefs and demands at work; success trumped all. I continued to press until they finally reached their limit. Everyone would have refused to stoke the fires for concentration camp ovens. The student athletes were willing to comply with a coach’s unethical request not because they feared losing their college scholarships (a real concern), but because they were part of a team and would do anything to achieve victory. The other students’ concerns were not with group loyalty but simply with individual success.

The students’ attitudes are disturbing on several levels, but the athletes’ attitude is an improvement over those unwilling to commit to any cause larger than their own. In fact, the athletes were a distinct minority, as most students stuck with an extreme relativism that prevented them from finding any cause to which they could commit.

The students in my class may not be typical, and they may only say what I want to hear. But I do not think this is the case. Colleagues at other universities teaching other subject matter report similar attitudes. Most students, I find, take the value of self-determination as paramount. They are ardent cultural relativists, thinking across national and cultural borders, and individual relativists as they think about domestic and personal relations. They can

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find no common set of values that ties them to other groups or to their fellow students or citizens. They are left mute when judging the actions of others, and they are bereft of an ethical standard they can use to make informed judgments about social policy and political affairs.

How can we expect anything different? Society and the university itself has lapsed into an incoherent conversation about morality, wobbling from the authoritarian values of a variety of fundamentalists on the one side and the elevation of the individual perspectivism to supreme heights from academic deconstructionists and social libertarians on the other.

VALUES, VALUES EVERYWHERE

It is not hard to understand how we have reached this point. Philosophers themselves are not in agreement upon a list of virtues. Though Plato and Aristotle agreed that wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice are the paramount virtues, Thomas Aquinas listed faith, hope, and charity. David Hume placed benevolence at the top of his list. Conversely, the list of vices also varies: ignorance for Plato and Aristotle, pride for Aquinas, and cruelty for Hume. The highest virtue for Confucius was _jen_, a concept variously translated as “goodness” or “human-heartedness.” For another Chinese sage, Lao Tzu, the highest virtue is _wei wu wei_, “creative letting-be.” For the Hindu, it is doing no harm. Even within a single religion, there can be differences over which values are most important. For example, the Dominican order founded a university in Paris in 1229 to study theology in order to teach correct doctrine of faith. Two years later, the Franciscans opened their own Parisian university, putting holiness before learning.

In addressing values and virtues, we generally refer to leading a good life. This is not the same as leading “the good life,” a phrase that refers to possessing material objects and comfort and a life of pleasure. Because the possible lives we may lead are infinite, there is also an infinite variety of good lives. No two lives are alike; no two good lives are alike.

Furthermore, most of us are not fully consistent in our sets of values. I would like to have everything: love and satisfying work; I want to be generous, emotionally expressive, and honest. Yet I have limits imposed upon me by my temperament, upbringing, and environment, as well as the times in which I live. I have conflicting demands between wanting to say what I feel and not hurting another’s feelings, between work obligations and demands of my family. I also have changed directions in my life over time. Indeed, this change is common as we mature. At one time we most prize friendship, at another point it is being competent at work, at another it is our spiritual development.

In recent years, many have pushed to teach morality to children in public schools. In fact, real moral lessons are taught all the time but not necessarily in classes designated as such. Generally, real moral lessons are not those found in the syllabus but discovered in the demeanor of the staff and the structures and procedures of the school itself. As Mitias (1992, 28) wrote, “The education of character does not take place only in the classroom 15 hours a week.” Though his work focused on colleges, Mitias’s (1992, 28) remarks pertain to any school:

> The cultivation of character is a function of all the experiences that the student undergoes on campus: in the library, in the classroom, in the lab, in the student union, in the teacher’s office, in the dormitory, or in the administration offices. The characters of young people are determined by what they do and what happens to them. But
Moral education is more than classes labeled "character education," "moral development," or "values clarification." The way in which a student truly becomes a moral being cannot be determined by examining a catalog nor by reading a syllabus. As Radest (1989, 78) noted, "Patterns of conduct, structure, and authority are curricular as much as the language we use to talk about them." Moral lessons are embedded in the very relations in the school. Respectful teachers, administrators, and staff members teach respect no matter what the course material. Yet when a teacher (or school system) is viewed as unfair and biased, then whatever may be said about moral behavior falls on deaf ears.

The concern for the moral fate of the young is not new. The ancient Greeks worried about the decline of their children's moral standards. Every generation wants to pass on its cherished values and is fearful that it is failing in the task. From conservative to progressive, people want a means by which to teach morality to the young.

Teaching virtue, developing good character, and the various methods of teaching ethics have gone in and out of fashion. In the early years of the nation, cultivating virtues was standard fare, either through religious or secular sources or, more likely, a combination of both. For example, young Benjamin Franklin drew up a list of virtues he wished to acquire, and George Washington, while as an adult inspired by Roman virtues, at 16 was copying by hand the "The Rules of Civility," a book composed by French Jesuits in 1595 (Brookhiser 1996).

By the time I was in grammar school, we were not reading either the instructions of the Romans or "Rules of Civility." Instead, my diet was Parson Weems's fanciful tale of George Washington cutting down the cherry tree then confessing his misdeed to his father. I remember cherishing a commemorative coin with Washington's likeness on one side and words about Washington being first in the hearts of his countrymen on the other. The first president was a hero of mine. This marked difference between my moral education and that of Washington and his era—stories of moral example instead of moral dicta—indicated no attempt to learn morality through rules. I had no book of moral instruction. Morality was no longer a direct and explicit concern.

There was, as always, an implicit moral curriculum, a set of values assumed to be so widely held that they were beyond question. In my school, it was Christian morality. We sang Christmas carols by candlelight in hallways, for example. Schools expected students to adhere to basic moral standards, such as honesty and responsibility. There was one value, though, that was still taught explicitly: patriotism. We stood every morning, pledged allegiance to the flag, and sang "My Country 'Tis of Thee." The texts were full of examples of the nation's moral certainty—every war was just and every change progress. However, even this remaining value came under attack by the time I was in high school. My 1964 graduating class created a stir when the recipient of the American Legion History Award used the occasion as an opportunity to castigate the nation's foreign policy. The principal, incensed by the student's disrespectful audacity, interrupted the student's speech, halted the commencement, and sent graduates and guests home.

By the time my children started school, every institution was under scrutiny, from
the family to the state. Protest was the order of the day. Many schools, not wanting to impose one set of moral standards, adopted a different tack by introducing values clarification. Values clarification accepts as given a lack of common agreement upon a set of values, that there is no one right answer regarding ethical matters.

Higgins (1995, 56) noted that the values clarification theory “advocated that children can and should learn: (1) to be more aware of their own values and how they relate to hierarchies of decisions; (2) to make their values consistent with each other and to order them into hierarchies for decision-making; (3) to be more aware of the differences between their value hierarchies and those of others; and (4) to learn to be tolerant of those differences.” The theory did little to satisfy those who thought the problem the country faced was the inability to state clearly the difference between right and wrong. Values clarification, critics charged, was really the promotion of moral relativism, an “anything-goes” ethic lacking standards.

The dissatisfaction with values clarification led, in the late 1980s, to a return to a method of moral education popular in the 1920s and ‘30s—character education. The original character education programs fell into disfavor with educators when observations revealed that children could recite a list of virtues (the importance of being honest, for example) but behave in a contrary way. There were community institutions, though, that continued programs in character education. The Boy Scouts are a prime example. Again, parents are interested in character education, in the hopes that it will provide a foundation for sound moral behavior.

A WAY OUT

Anthropologists study culture; generally confirmed cultural relativists, they choose to remain mute on values questions. Shweder, Mahapatra, and Miller (1987), however, wanted to know whether some moral values could be found in widely divergent cultures. Rather than take cultural relativism as an operating principle, they chose to study the question empirically. The researchers studied three groups of about 250 people each, all composed of equal numbers of males and females. In every group, children outnumbered adults about three-to-one. They questioned middle-class Chicagoans and two groups from Bhubaneswar, India: first, high-caste Brahman and business owners and, second, Untouchables and laborers.

Rather than start with a list of virtues, the researchers wanted to know what people thought of particular behaviors. The situations studied, they explained, were chosen as samples of the types of issues that every social system must address: personal boundaries, sexual identity, maturity, autonomy, ethnicity, hierarchy and status, identification-empathy-solidarity, personal protection, and the relationship between individual and group power. People were then asked to rank the perceived seriousness of each event. They were asked questions such as, How serious is the violation? Is it a sin? Would it still be wrong even if no one knew? Would it be best if everyone followed the rule?

Chicagoans and Indians differed considerably in evaluations of the social practices presented. Most Indians said it is morally wrong for a widow to eat fish, while no Chicagoan objected. Most Indians thought so. All the Brahman children between five and seven thought that being beaten by a cane was not only proper but a universally binding moral obligation. Only 10 percent of the Chicago children understood caning this way. Likewise, 60 percent of the Indian adults thought virtue; Shweder, Mahapatra, and Miller, in their view, Shweder, Mahapatra, and Miller (1987), however, wanted to know whether some moral values could be found in widely divergent cultures. Rather than take cultural relativism as an operating principle, they chose to study the question empirically. The researchers studied three groups of about 250 people each, all composed of equal numbers of males and females. In every group, children outnumbered adults about three-to-one. They questioned middle-class Chicagoans and two groups from Bhubaneswar, India: first, high-caste Brahman and business owners and, second, Untouchables and laborers.

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adults believed caning to be a universal virtue; 15 percent of the Chicago adults thought so. From a developmental point of view, Shweder et al. (1987) found that, between the ages of five and seven, children in all three groups agree with most of the virtues and vices identified by the adults in their society.

Where does this information leave us in our search for universal values? Shweder et al. (1987) found nine virtues and vices amongst Chicago, Brahman, and Untouchable adults understood by all as objective, unalterable, and universally binding. The virtues are: keeping promises; respecting private property; fairly allocating rewards and punishments; protecting the vulnerable; and reciprocating with gratitude. The vices are: incest; arbitrary assault; nepotism and bias; and biased classification. I think these researchers have identified values that cut across all cultures. Though perhaps not universal, these virtues and vices get to the basis of what, as a minimum, human beings must do to live decently with one another.

The values found in these groups fall into two basic categories. One type of value encourages amicable relations by focusing upon equitable treatment, reflecting a natural propensity toward wanting to be treated fairly. When that spirit is violated, resentment, anger, sulking, and other kinds of withdrawal and hostility develop. Violating this sense of justice unravels the social networks we need as human beings. The other type of universal value is designed to prevent harm to the vulnerable, which issues from our nature as creatures that cannot survive alone. Truth telling and the prevention of gratuitous violence are both types of social insurance. They establish trust.

The two broad categories of values (or ethical principles, if you prefer) are related to each other because they address basic conditions necessary for humans to survive. They provide guidelines that, if followed, at least keep us from isolating ourselves from one another. Kekes (1990) defined evil as “undeserved harm.” The reason evil plays a central role for both religious and secular philosophies is that its presence “jeopardizes human aspirations to live good lives.” When a person is harmed through no fault of his or her own, we are in the presence of evil.

Shweder et al.’s conclusions conformed to my own experiences in rural Kenya. I lived there on two separate occasions—in the 1960s, as a Peace Corps volunteer, and again in 1975, with the friends we had made a decade earlier. I found that the people I identified as ethical were the same ones so identified by the Kenyans themselves. Despite stark differences between U.S. and Kisii culture, I found that the core moral values for each group were similar, if not identical.

So universal ethical values underlie cultural differences. Whatever differences separate Asian Indians, U.S. citizens, and Africans, all are human beings; as such, they must behave in certain ways to ensure survival. As Rachels (1993, 26) argued: “There are some moral rules that all societies will have in common, because those rules are necessary for society to exist…. Cultures may differ in what they regard as legitimate exceptions to the rules, but this disagreement exists against a background of agreement on the larger issues.”

There is more to moral education than identifying universal values. As Rest (1986) noted, morality develops along several streams at one time: the emergence of empathy, the acquisition of the ability to reason at increasingly complex levels, the psychological capacity to act on one’s moral convictions, and the internalization of social rules. First is the awareness that our actions affect other people. Second is the...
ability to make judgments between possible courses of action. Third is being sufficiently motivated to want to do the right thing. And fourth is having the combination of ego strength, courage, and perseverance to follow through on wanting to act ethically.

Teachers must recognize that, behind the apparent differences in values that guide cultural practices, a higher level of values exists to which all cultures adhere. When our students present us with the distinct values they have acquired from their environment, we must recognize that we are there to help them realize the higher, universal values. Using carefully guided and respectful discussions rather than preaching, we help them to see for themselves the value of maintaining such standards. Universal values are not reducible to a set of rules; instead, they present a groundwork for ethical living. The implementation of those values will depend on the particular circumstances confronting the student. This view is not relativism, as it is often understood; it acknowledges the uniqueness of the lives each of us leads.

The Final Comment

When we open our students' eyes to the responsibilities they share with one another and to the world outside the classroom, we also share our own responsibilities. That commitment must stretch far beyond the normal confines of any given course.

The final comment in my class on moral development was made by one of the student athletes who had said that she would deliberately maim an opponent if called upon to do so. She chided me good-naturedly, saying that the class had challenged her to reflect in new ways on her life. Until this last class, she had thought that at least she had been spared needing to think about the role of morality in sports. Now I had ruined even this safe haven for her. She could not have made me happier with her statement, and we both smiled as she left the classroom.

The next semester, this same student stopped in my office. She wanted my advice about an ethical problem she was having. "I have a friend," she began. I was glad that I had made the connection for her.

References