The paper deals primarily with the currently popular notion of "moral education". While the author believes that the concept of "education" itself has a moral connotation, he points out some of the theoretical problems that must be resolved before adding the prefix "moral" to education as well as the practical difficulties that will be encountered in teaching this confused "subject" in the public schools in a multi-cultural society.

N. C. BHATTACHARYA*

Moral Education: Some Philosophical Observations

In what follows I intend to point out briefly that (i) the concept of "education" itself has a moral connotation, that (ii) in spite of greater human concern about moral values in our contemporary society, educators interested in "moral education" are not expected to get any clear guidance from moral philosophy, and lastly (iii) the moral aims of education are to be derived from the educative process itself and not from discourses of other sorts including moral discourse. In other words, the purpose of this discussion is to show that "moral education" is a profoundly confused notion.

I

Educational systems with clearly stated moral or social purposes and inflexible procedures have mostly been, and still are, fairly successful in accomplishing their goals. Education in ancient Sparta, that of the Jesuits in the sixteenth century and thereafter, Calvinistic education in such diverse regions as central Europe, Scotland, and New England, the English Public School System in the last century, the Nazi education in Germany, and Communist education in Soviet Russia and more recently in China, have all been definitely purposeful and on the whole successful. There were individual exceptions; Uriah Heep and Voltaire, Stalin and Gandhi seemed to have had different effects from those intended for them. However, in Russell's words,

> . . . in the main the ablest educators have been fairly successful. Take as examples the Chinese literati, the modern Japanese, the Jesuits, Dr. Arnold, and the men who direct the policy of the American public schools. All these, in their various ways, have been highly successful. The results aimed at in the different cases were utterley different, but in the main the results were achieved.[1]

In a few societies including our own there are some educators who are (or claim to be) secular and objective, and who usually reject any directly purposeful system of education on grounds that are generally characterized by one or more of a large variety of adjectives: "rigid," "repressive," "dogmatic," "authoritarian," "illiberal," "bigoted," "intolerant," 'irrational," "immoral," and so on. But the defenders of educational systems so characterized have their own set of appraisal-adjectives or "virtue-words:" I have known Catholic educators defending indoctrination by claiming that "after all, *freedom* lies at the heart of indoctrination." And readers are certainly aware that educational aim-statements containing con-

---

[1]Bertrand Russell, *Education and the Good Life*, N.Y.: Boni and Liveright, 1926, p. 48; see also, Ralph Barton Perry, *Realm of Value: A Critique of Human Civilization*, N.Y.: Greenwood Press, 1968 edition, pp. 425-426.

cepts of "happiness," "mental health," or "whole man," can easily end up in lengthy disquisitions on the moral consequences of that exciting game known as "bingo." I do not wish to examine here that long string of words which are often used with sufficient ingenuity as *aims* in educational discourse. Instead, I want to go back to a more basic difficulty. Bertrand Russell put it in this way:

> We must have some conception of the kind of person we wish to produce, before we can have any definite opinion as to the education which we consider best.[2]

Ralph Barton Perry, whom Harold Q. Laski once described as "very conservative and an eager adherent of 'correct form' "[3] and who thought of combining liberal, moral, and religious education for the development of what he called a "conscience of mankind," was understandably troubled by the difficulty. He wrote:

> Thus there arises the *fundamental dilemma* of education. To define in advance an end result and then to seek by all possible means to achieve it, is held to be too narrowing, too repressive, too authoritarian. But if, on the other hand, there is no end in view, educational activity is confused and incoherent. Its various parts and successive phases do not add up to anything. Without a definition of the end there is no test by which means can be selected, and no standard by which practice can be criticized and improved.[4]

The difference between Russell's "some conception of the kind of person we wish to produce" and Perry's statement of the "fundamental dilemma" should not be ignored. For while one can have a definite opinion as to the kind of education one considers to be the best, it does not follow that the end must be sought "by all possible means." Nor can it be assumed that there can be activities which are educational but which are "aimless," i.e., without any end in view. In other words, one can escape between the horns of this "dilemma."

Moreover, even if we take Russell's phrase — "some conception of the kind of person" — as an ethical assertion, it does not from Russell's own point of view imply more than an emotional expression of approval. For what he specifically recommends as "aim" of education is the "education of character," and suggests that vitality, courage, sensitiveness and intelligence are the qualities which *jointly* form the basis of such a character.[5] Russell is more interested in the formation of mental dispositions as the aim of education than in adopting or supporting some pre-determined 'ought'-statements as the goals of education.

Many contemporary writers on the subject are well aware of the elusive nature of the concepts used to describe human excellences which are often characterized as the end-states of education. Those who recommend philosophical analysis do so more as a technique for getting a clearer grasp of these concepts than as a proven method for reaching universal agreement as to the conditions and criteria for the use of these concepts many of which are not sufficiently determinate. The examination by P. H. Hirst and R. S. Peters of the main contours of the concept of 'human development' in an attempt to determine the ideals which may be intimately connected with the content of 'education' illustrates the problems that crop up in discussions of this sort. However, they admit,

> . . . what does emerge clearly from this analysis is that the concept of 'human development', like that of 'education', is inescapably valuative. Some ideal conception of a human being is presupposed. A teacher of progressive persuasion, therefore . . . cannot proceed purely on the basis of empirical facts . . . . In the end he, like any other teacher, had to make up his mind about valuative issues.[6]

---

[2]Bertrand Russell, *op. cit.,* p. 47.

[3]See, *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell,* Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1968, Vol. II, p. 163; also, 1967, Vol. I, pp. 347-348.

[4]Ralph Barton Perry, *op. cit.,* p. 426. Italics not in the original.

[5]Bertrand Russell, *op. cit.,* pp. 59-83.

[6]P. H. Hirst and R. S. Peters, *The Logic of Education,* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970, p. 58.

What, then, is implied is that education in the stricter sense (i.e., as different from "bringing up," "socialization," "indoctrination," and the like) must have certain objectives. However, these objectives must be consistent with the conception of education; and secondly, the methods used to achieve these objectives must not in any way distort the meaning of education. The problem of teaching "values" — and particularly "moral values" — in *educational* institutions must be looked into from this perspective. Questions concerning "*some* ideal conception of a human being," or who is a teacher of "progressive persuasion" and why so, are not easy to answer for any system of *formal* education. The difficulties are more obvious in a society composed of people from different religious, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds.

These and other difficulties notwithstanding, it must not be overlooked that the concept of "education" itself has a *moral* connotation, and education has always had certain objectives embracing human excellences and worthy practical pursuits. What is important about education — and what really distinguishes it from calculated conditioning of human thought and behaviour — is that it must involve procedures which are compatible (or in agreement) with the meaning of education, and which enable students to fulfill the educational goals. If this much is agreed upon, the first problem that arises in determining what is meant by "moral education" is what are precisely those additional goals not generally covered by this strict sense of "education." The additional goals, if any, of a formal system of education must be directly linked with some kind of "moral" action; otherwise the distinction between "education" and "moral education" becomes entirely vacuous.

It can be argued that the goals of "moral education" are not any "extra" or "additional" goals, but only those that need to be specified *within* the general goals of the strict meaning of education. In this sense the purpose of "moral education" is to identify and possibly to emphasize the need for the realization of these goals by the pupils. What can these specifiable goals be? How are they to be identified, emphasized, and taught? We know, more or less, what is taught as "physical education," and why. Can we be nearly as clear about the contents and methods of "moral education" *within* the general meaning of education?

It has been customary among educators interested in "moral education" to look to moral philosophy for answers to these questions. Is it not possible, they ask, to reduce concepts and theories of moral philosophy to the concepts and aim-statements of educational discourse? Then, again, is it not possible to reduce moral issues to what might be called educational issues? In raising questions of this sort and in their search for clear affirmative answers, the moral educators, more often than not, fail to grasp that though moral and educational discourses can at times go side by side, moral discourse is not reducible to a discourse on educational aims. For, moral philosophy is the study of ideas and ideals "about morality" whereas the aim of the teacher is to impart, wherever possible, through subject-matters and methods of instruction values, both intellectual and moral, without keeping them constantly uppermost. These values are much more directly related to human actions from the educator's point of view than are the theories of moral philosophy. The latter are concerned with impersonal evaluations whereas the former are directives to act in a certain way. The moral philosopher is not necessarily a curriculum designer except in his own field which is not taught in schools, and would probably resent the title of a "moral educator."

II

A brief look at the contemporary philosophical discourse on morality, particularly those that seem to have some bearings on "moral education," would be

of interest at this stage. It is not that the philosophers' prescriptions are contrary at every point, but it can be shown that they rely upon or at least emphasize somewhat different elements involved in a notion of *morality*, and consequently on what may constitute a basic moral education.

Firstly, there are the autonomists, who reject authoritarian moral codes, and object to the teaching of blind conformity to any set of values, and in moral matters generally. Among contemporary moral philosophers, P. H. Nowell-Smith, for example, concluded his *Ethics* by stating:

> The question 'what shall I do?' and 'what moral principles should I adopt?' must be answered by each man for himself; that at least is part of the connotation of the word 'moral'.[7]

However, as critics have pointed out, such a second-order philosophical recommendation cannot be adopted as a basis for moral education for young children in schools, who lack the necessary understanding of moral principles as well as the capacity to act as autonomous human beings.

Secondly, as William K. Frankena insists "Being autonomous does not mean being responsible to no transpersonal standard in morality," and goes on to suggest that

> there is a Moral Direction or Way which transcends the individual . . . This way is for each generation more or less embodied in a set of rules, principles, ideals or virtues, and this set is what it must proceed to teach to the next generation . . .[8]

R. S. Peters, in maintaining that "moral education is certainly a very important aspect of education at school," argues that there is a "minimal code of basic rules which are in any man's interest to observe . . . "[9] He believes that "a strong case . . . can be made for basic rules which are universal . . ."[10] However, these claims raise a number of questions. Two are raised by Mary Warnock:

(i) how does he arrive at the knowledge of this code, so that he can pass on to his pupils?

(ii) whether a code is what he ought to teach, even if he can arrive at the knowledge of it.[11]

It can be shown that claims that there are moral rules which are universal and that these are in "any man's interests to observe," are highly contentious. It is not difficult to show that a moral code or set of rules by itself cannot be an adequate guide for moral behaviour since rules of love and justice, truth-telling and respect for persons, impartiality and benevolence, cannot always be practised together. Mary Warnock also points out that if one moral code is possible then certainly "There could be others."[12] (cp. Confucius.) And, how do we settle a moral issue where people are allowed to follow their different moral codes?

---

[7]P. H. Nowell-Smith, *Ethics*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1961, p. 320. Also, "The main dispute in Ethics these days lies between people who stress the *autonomy* of morals to avoid debasing them, and those who stress the *continuity of morals with other topics* in order to make them intelligible." Mary Midgley, "Is 'Moral' a Dirty Word?", *Philosophy*, Vol. XLVII, No. 181, July, 1972, p. 226. Italics in the original.

[8]William K. Frankena, "Towards a Philosophy of Moral Education," in Israel Scheffler (ed.), *Philosophy and Education*, Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2nd edition, 1966, p. 237.

[9]R. S. Peters, *Ethics and Education*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1968, p. 173.

[10]*Ibid.*, p. 175, see also, p. 202.

[11]Mary Warnock, "The Moral Code — 1," *Moral Education*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1969, p. 13.

[12]Ibid., p. 13. For a discussion of related points, see Keith Ward, "Language and Understanding in Morality," *Philosophy*, Vol. XLVII, No. 181, (July, 1972), pp. 249-262.

Mrs. Warnock's first question, namely, "how does he arrive at the knowledge of this code . . .?" identifies the basic philosophical problem that underlies the notion of "moral education." I shall call it the problem of epistemological competence or authority that a teacher of morality must have for his criticisms and commendations of moral practices. For such moral criticisms and commendations cannot be entirely based on socially-created "ought"-statements or on accepted institutional rules. Where this is done, "moral education" can easily be insulated from many overriding moral considerations. Nor is it enough — and this must be obvious to the readers by now — to invoke "religious belief" or "intuitive conviction" as the source and justification for teaching a certain moral code. For religious beliefs take many forms, and intuition is not infallible. And moral philosophy does not claim that the fundamental moral issues of our complex personal and social lives have already been decided.

The other view — which does not necessarily exclude either the notion of 'autonomy' or the usefulness of a moral code for the purpose of teaching morality — emphasises the role of "reason" in moral education. John Wilson's *Introduction to Moral Education* is one example of this approach. For in Wilson's view a "reasonable man" is one who is willing to listen to and consider arguments in moral matters. For him expressions such as "giving of reasons," "having reasons," "abide by the rules of reasons," and the like constitute the criteria for being a reasonable person.[13]   In his view, moral education should involve "teaching children principles of rationality, which will help them to think and act *in the sphere* of morals. . . .[14] But here again the question is: How is this description distinguishable from what teachers are expected to teach in "education" which is not prefixed by the word "moral." And of reason alone, Max Black has reminded in a recent paper:

> But a morality entirely based upon reasonableness would be at best anaemic and frigid: a man can reason and reason and still be a villain.[15]

This is not to suggest that reason does not play any directive role in human action. However, there is nothing especially "moral" about its role; the activity of reason can be used to achieve ends which are not exactly moral. If the primary aim of "moral education" is to make man virtuous, I doubt whether this can be achieved simply by adopting an unduly exaggerated view of the moral powers of reason.

A notion of "morality" is a many-storied structure built upon various attitudes, personal qualities, and capacities which may include sensitiveness and sympathy, sense of responsibility and faithfulness, tolerance and conscience, and qualities of various other sorts. All these, in turn, must be based on an intelligent exercise of clarification and evaluation of consequences of the various alternative modes of action in any given situation. In other words, morality is not a single acquired skill, it is much more complex than learning to be merely autonomous, or to be devoted to a set of pre-determined code, or to be proficient in the exercise of reason. For such learning, devotion, or proficiency can always be properly or improperly exercised. It is also obvious that these emphasized trends — of autonomy, devotion to a code, and exercise of reason — cannot be combined and practised together.

---

[13]See John Wilson, *Introduction to Moral Education,* Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1967, pp. 93, 102, *et. al.*

[14]John Wilson, "The Moral Code — 2," *Moral Education,* Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 17. Italics in the original.

[15]Max Black, "Reasonableness" in R. F. Dearden, P. H. Hirst and R. S. Peters (eds.), *Education and the Development of Reason,* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972, p. 205.

III

To say this, of course ,is not to say that morality (or immorality) cannot be learnt. However, in a multi-cultural society and where every individual is an "immigrant in time" how do yesterday's teachers decide what moral values they should teach in the schools to the members of tomorrow's society? Education is a social process, and there are in any large community (i) many kinds of sub-societies and social groups with their particular moral ideals, (ii) about which and about the means for realizing these there may not be any general agreement. It does not seem possible to draw up a list of moral goals of the educative process with which every one in any given society might agree. Can we expect any large group of people to agree, for example, about "what is best for humanity?"

If, as we have noted earlier, that in education "some ideal conception of the human being is presupposed," how can we go about determining a single group of uniform *moral qualities* in our "ideal" human being? We know that even saints and heroes are not universally respected and admired; and about character-traits Gilbert Ryle has this to say:

> We can think of some of our own acquaintances who speak of toughness as a virtue, and others who speak of it as a vice, and vice-versa of meekness. How should we decide who is right?[16]

The point is that the values and morals we want to impart through education must be derived from the educative process itself, and not from discourses of other sorts including moral discourse. What teachers do teach the young people in schools is not entirely un-connected with morality and values of other sorts. Literature and mathematics, history and science, cannot be learnt carelessly or perversely; nor can one learn a subject without an open-minded will to learn. But this does not require us to have teachers of "open-mindedness." We expect and urge our children to be industrious, but do we have teachers of "industriousness?"

To teach physical education in our schools we have a group of specially trained teachers — physical instructors, and this also applies to other subjects like arts, mathematics, language, and social sciences. And these subjects themselves, when properly taught, can communicate various norms to the children and young adults. Is it at all necessary to go beyond this? For the subjects we teach and the way we teach them are not at all value-free. And there are in this procedure the elements of flexibility and independence which are necessary to have in a system of formal education which is simply interested in inculcating the values and norms inherent in *sound* education.

John Dewey, for example, who wrote extensibly on moral philosophy (with which I do not agree), and was at the same time an educational thinker of great insight saw the point quite clearly. He wrote that the

> critics of education . . . look through the school programs, the school courses of study, and do not find any place set apart for instruction in ethics or for "moral teaching." Then they assert that the schools are doing nothing, or next to nothing, for character-training; they become emphatic, even vehement, about the moral deficiencies of public education. The school-teachers, on the other hand, resent these criticisms as an injustice, and hold not only that they do "teach morals," but they teach them every moment of the day, five days a week. In this contention the teachers *in principle* are in the right . . .[17]

---

[16]G. Ryle, "Can Virtue be Taught?" in R. F. Dearden, P. H. Hirst and R. S. Peters (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 446-447.

[17]JJohn Dewey, *Moral Principles in Education,* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1975 edition, p. 3. Italics in the original.

If we have teachers in our schools to teach "morals" whose morals are these that the teachers will teach? In other words, whose moral values will control the educative process in the public schools in a multi-cultural society? Moreover, where from can a teacher in our public schools derive his or her "social authority" to induct pupils in any kind of moral norm and attitude except the specific perspectives required for learning and appreciating the subjects that he or she might be teaching?

The problem of teaching "morals" in schools has other serious and deeper implications. It has been suggested that

> . . . the attempt in schools to define one set of attitudes as superior to another, the attempt to teach patriotism, conventional morality, or even their opposite in a *compulsory* public institution represents a gross violation of civil rights.[18]

Teachers may not be willing to recognize in their dealing with a captive audience that the pupils have any such rights. But is there a way of identifying the specific goals of "moral education" distinguishable in some ways from what teachers are supposed to teach in educating the young generation about which, hopefully, educators themselves may agree? I am not thinking of the philosophers who, like natives, may not know that they need converting.

RESUME

Cette étude traite surtout de la question "d'éducation morale" populaire en ce moment. Bien que l'auteur croie que le mot "èducation" indique en lui-même la notion de morale, il souligne certains problèmes théoriques qui doivent être résolus avant qu'on ajoute "morale" au terme "éducation", ainsi que certaines difficultés qui existent sur le plan pratique, lorsqu'on tente d'enseigner un "sujet" aussi embrouillé dans les êcoles publiques d'une société multi-culturelle.

[18]Michael B. Katz, "Present Movement in Educational Reform," *Harvard Educational Review,* Vol. 41, No. 3, August, 1971, p. 356. Italics in the original.