Abstract

The focus of this essay is philosophical. Arguments are offered stating that the Reflective Approach to Clive Beck's values education is either logically inconsistent or incoherent insofar as Beck muddles the theoretical distinction which needs to be made between moral and non-moral values, and between ultimate life goals and corresponding means values which may be either specific or intermediate. Criticisms are also offered suggesting that the Reflective Approach is relativistic and inadequate to deal with interpersonal conflict, an important aspect of moral value experience.

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Clive Beck's Reflective Ultimate Life Goals' Approach to Values Education: A Philosophical Appraisal

The Reflective, Ultimate Life Goals' Approach, as it is frequently called, is a system of values education which has been developed principally by Clive Beck and his co-researchers at The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto.[1] Funded by the Ontario Ministry of Education, the OISE Project was given the mandate to conduct research into the area of moral development, including teacher education, curriculum and pedagogy. Since 1971, a number of booklets and articles have been published and made available to teachers interested in conducting secular ethical instruction in the public schools.[2] Despite the fact, however, that the Reflective Approach has been in existence for more than a decade now, little if any satisfactory critical evaluation has been offered regarding its merits and/or limitations. Reviewing past reactions by Varga, Barclay, and Nelson (1976), Jerrold R. Coombs (1977) has commented that these critical responses to Beck's program have not been particularly enlightening. They have either not dealt with the program on its own terms or else they have been somewhat superficial, lacking any detailed analysis and argumentation. Given, then, that Beck's program is still in use and that a need still exists to provide a more indepth critical analysis of Beck's Ultimate Life Goals' Approach to Values Education, I will attempt to provide one which is designed to evaluate its ethical assumptions and question their philosophical justifiability.

The Reflective Approach is based on the psychological premise that human beings pursue ultimate life goals. It is claimed that all people seek fundamental, humanistic values such as ". . . survival, happiness (enjoyment, pleasure, etc.), health, fellowship (friendship, love etc.), helping others (to some extent), wisdom, fulfillment (of our capacities), freedom, self-respect, respect for others, a sense of meaning in life, and so on".[3] Within Becks' scheme, these ultimate life goals are considered the core of values education. The aim of secular ethical instruction is conceived of as helping students to establish what their specific and intermediate range values should be in light of personally selected ultimate life goals; formal instruction in ethics must help students to live consistently, or in a way which is congruent, with these values.

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Whether or not a particular value is one which an individual "should" be pursuing is determined according to Beck on the basis of its "soundness". Since there is no such thing, however, as "the perfect way of life", values cannot, in his view, be judged to be sound in an either/or fashion. The soundness of values is said to be a matter of degree.[4] Quoting Beck: ". . . objects are more or less good or bad, valuings are more or less sound or unsound. Probably there is a grain of soundness in almost every human valuing (even when, on balance, the valuing is grossly unsound). And probably there is an element of unsoundness in even the most appropriate of valuings".[5] Although sound values may, for Beck, vary from person to person or from context to context, he does provide us with a process for testing the soundness of values. Beck calls this process "reflection". The reflective process requires one to:

> (a) consider all the 'facts of the case' so that one's values are not based on misinformation or misapprehension;
> (b) bring the values one is not sure about into line with the values one is sure about so that in instances where incompatible values exist, those which one is unsure about can be discarded or dealt with appropriately;
> (c) bring means-values into line with end values so that one's ultimate life goals might be achieved by the proper channels and
> (d) arrive at a set of fundamental life goals in light of which one can determine specific and intermediate values.[6]

Concerning the process of reflection, it is important to note a couple of key points. First of all, by encouraging students to live according to ultimate life goals, no special status or overridingness is given to what we would call "moral" values. In Beck's view, "Morality, like other types of value, is a *means* toward 'ultimate' ends; and moral principles, such as 'Be humble', 'Be patient', 'Don't steal', and so on, are *intermediate* principles, serving these ultimate ends".[7] From the perspective of the Reflective Approach, it is held that there are many areas of value besides the moral and that all areas of value are equally subordinate to the ultimate life goals that extend beyond them.[8] Thus, it follows from this premise that economic, political, educational, social, cultural, and moral values all carry equal weight when making decisions as to what course of action should be taken or what judgment should be made in any particular set of circumstances. These are all "means-values" to be appraised and considered in relation to one's ultimate life goals.

A second point to keep in mind about the reflective process is that at the level of ultimate life goals, there is a certain amount of indeterminacy. Although ultimate life goals are ones which are "largely" pursued for their own sake, Beck states that: "Nothing seems to be completely and absolutely ultimate; rather there is an interlocking system of ultimates that provide mutual support for each other. Some life goals, however, seem to be 'more ultimate' than others . . . What is meant is that certain life goals are more often ends in themselves than others".[9] For example, physical health may be sought for its own sake, but partly as a basis of achieving the more ultimate goal of happiness. Given, then, that ultimate life goals vary in their "degrees of ultimacy", Beck acknowledges that there is a problem of justification at the ultimate level.[10] He recognizes that if some life goals are more ultimate than others, then the degree of ultimacy of life goals must be established in particular contexts. He also states that because some goals that are regarded by people as ultimates are not really ultimates, one must sort out the true ultimates from others. The problem as Beck sees it, then, is ". . . . to arrive at a criterion for ultimacy in life goals or a ground of justification for adopting an ultimate".[11] He writes:

> The criterion or ground I wish to recommend is maximization of those life goals that after a great deal of experience, learning and thought are taken to be ultimate in a particular way and to a certain degree. What this approach emphasizes is:
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> 1. Solid grounding in the goals human beings actually pursue as ultimates.
> 2. A reflective, informed scrutiny of these goals to eliminate false beliefs and to see to what extent pursuit of one goal helps or hinders the achievement of others, both for oneself and for other people.
> 3. An attempt to achieve maximum efficiency in the pursuit of these goals.[12]

A logical implication following from the notion that life goals vary in terms of their degree of ultimacy is the idea that they are relative. By his own admission, Beck adopts what he calls a "limited relativist", or its converse, a "limited objectivist" position.[13] Apparently, this means that although ultimate life goals are themselves relative, once one has chosen certain ultimate life goals for himself or herself, and given specific sets of circumstances, it is possible in principle to work out "objectively" what is morally good or bad, right or wrong.[14] In Beck's view, assuming that one has a certain set of ultimate life goals, it becomes an objective question as to how intermediate and/or specific values are to be chosen and acted upon.[15] It is with respect to one's ultimate life goals that values are judged as being sound or objectively good or right. "A limited objectivist approach to morality . . . involves working out the more fundamental life goals that human beings do in fact pursue, with some difference in emphasis, harmonizing our more specific objectives in the light of these goals, and working out precisely what pattern of behaviour, in situations of conflict, will help promote these goals".[16]

In helping students identify their ultimate life goals and in assisting them to develop appropriate means-values (both specific and intermediate), Beck refuses to employ a pure "process" or "skills" model of values instruction. Unlike Kohlberg's Moral Development Program which primarily seeks to enhance better "forms" of moral reasoning, or unlike Values Clarification which mainly stresses rational procedures of clarifying, affirming, and acting upon values, the Reflective Approach incorporates "content" to a much larger extent into its methodology. By this is meant that specific values, ideals, and beliefs held by individuals are allowed to be brought into classroom discussion. Teachers, as well, are encouraged to deal with value topics, expressing their points of view and offering arguments for them. In an open and congenial atmosphere, students are provided with the opportunity to assess the values of their instructor along with those of other students. They are not expected to accept blindly or unquestionably what the teacher advocates. In assessing values, students are encouraged to bring in such "content" considerations as tradition, authority, family, and religion. For Beck, such things provide much of the essential raw material for the development of values.[17] They provide the basis upon which sound values can be worked out. Full respect is thus given to these factors and their influence on the values in question. However, it should be pointed out that issues concerning particular religious beliefs, family ties, tradition, and authority must like everything else be evaluated in terms of the likelihood that the values they support are sound. Beck's aim is to promote what he terms a "post-conventional" morality. A person espousing this ethical perspective critically assesses all established norms, values, and practices etc. in terms of their soundness. The ultimate responsibility is placed, therefore, upon the individual to decide for himself what is worthwhile, right, or ultimately good.

Critical Analysis

A serious problem with the Ultimate Life Goals' Approach entails its muddled position on the distinction between moral and non moral values. In places, Beck at least implicitly, if not explicitly, acknowledges that moral values do in fact exist and that there is an identifiable sphere of experience which relates to issues of morality and ethics. Recall that, for him, moral values like economic or political values are a "means" toward achieving ultimate ends.[18] Furthermore, comments such as the following would lead one to believe that Beck has some criteria by which to differentiate moral from nonmoral considerations; he writes: "Morality is concerned with what an individual ought personally to do in situations that typically involve inner conflict" (*Ethics*, p. 29), and "Moral decisions are distinctive, however, in the following way: they have to do with areas of life which people typically, though not always, experience inner conflict between the desire to do what they believe they ought to do and the desire to do something else" (*Moral Education in The Schools*, p.28). These comments may not be problematic in themselves; however, what is a little disconcerting is Beck's apparent confusion when he states:

> In this paper I have chosen to write of 'values' and 'value education' rather than 'morals' and 'moral education'. Such a choice of terminology deserves some explanation.
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> The term 'values' in this context is preferable to the term 'morals', in my view, because it suggests greater breadth of concern, and because it discourages preoccupation with the notion of a narrow and separate moral domain . . . The other alternative is to see moral value as just one type of value among many, with certain distinctive characteristics. However, after many years of attempting to identify a distinctive moral domain, I have been forced to conclude that there is no such domain . . . But if one weighs human conduct in terms of more fundamental life goals or life concerns one sees that all decisions are life decisions and that there are no distinctively moral decisions. In what follows, however, I will occasionally use the term 'moral' in deference to those writers who continue to find a use for it.[19]

On the one hand, then, Beck claims that morality involves what an individual ought personally to do in situations that typically contain inner conflict and that moral values are just like other "means-values", instrumental to life goals, while on the other hand, he refuses to acknowledge the existence of distinctively moral decisions or a separate domain of moral values. This appears to be a blatant contradiction in Beck's position. Beck's contradictory and muddled position on such a fundamental theoretical issue as the moral/nonmoral distinction would thus lead one to seriously question the internal consistency of the Reflective Approach and, therefore, its usefulness and justifiability as a program of ethical instruction to be used in the schools. If there are no identifiable moral values, then how could they serve as a means to ultimate ends? In order for something to be a means to an end, the something (i.e., moral values) must exist. Saying that moral values are a means to ultimate life goals, Beck presupposes the existence of the former. Saying that there is no moral domain and distinctive moral decisions denies the existence of moral values. Here, then, we find the contradiction. If, after many years of trying, Beck has been unable to identify a moral domain, and if he actually holds that there are no distinctively moral decisions, but says, nonetheless, that moral values are instrumental, then Beck's position on the moral/nonmoral issue must be considered confused. Furthermore, it is ironic to note that Beck initially entitled his work at OISE, The Moral Education Project, especially when

he refuses (sometimes) to acknowledge that a separate moral domain exists. If there is no such thing as a separate moral domain, as Beck claims, and if there are no distinctively moral decisions, then Beck's Reflective Approach becomes, in principle, an exercise in futility based on the pretence that the development of something called "morality" is being promoted. One cannot develop and conduct research on something which does not exist.

One might at first attribute Beck's apparent inconsistency to historical factors. Given his acknowledgment that moral values exist is found in *Ethics* (1972) and *Moral Education in the Schools* (1971), and that his denial of a distinctive moral domain comes later in an article published in 1976, it seems possible at least that Beck's position on the moral/nonmoral distinction has evolved over time. Even if this is true, however, it should be noted that in a recent publication he again discovers the existence of a distinctive moral domain of values.[20] He says, "In morals, then, the crucial question is not what is *the* right solution, but what is *a* good solution."[21]

Thus his position has once more flip-flopped from his earlier 1976 viewpoint. Beck apparently now recognizes that there are in fact distinct moral values. If, however, Beck escapes my criticism of inconsistency on historical grounds, it still remains for him to clarify his most recent position on the moral/nonmoral issue.

In reply to my charge of inconsistency, Beck could also possibly argue by saying that by his remarks, he does not mean to suggest that no moral values exist at all, only that there is so much "overlap" among different types of values that it is difficult, if not impossible, to identify a distinctive domain of moral values. Such a rebuttal is plausible at first glance and seemingly weakens my critique. However, even if, say, economic and cultural values do overlap to some extent with moral values, one must still presuppose the existence of moral values and be able to define that which is being overlapped. Moral values and economic or cultural values may share certain common characteristics, but it still remains to be identified what those common characteristics are and what those separate and distinct characteristics of moral values consist in which are not being overlapped by other types of value. One need not dispute the claim that moral values cover much the same ground as other values to ask what is distinctive about them. It is incumbent upon Beck, therefore, to provide us with a definition of moral value. At best, his present conception of moral value is vague, at worst, it is self-contradictory.

A second major problem with the Reflective Approach involves Beck's conceptualization of ultimate life goals. He claims that at the level of ultimates, there is a certain amount of "indeterminacy". No goals are absolutely ultimate. Some goals may be "more ultimate than others". That is, "certain life goals are more often ends in themselves than others". From this, it would seem to follow that one ultimate life goal could be a "means" to achieving an even more ultimate life goal. For a particular individual, the ultimate life goal of respect for others, for instance, might prove to be in the interlocking system of ultimates a means-value toward achieving friendship, say, a goal considered by the individual to be even more ultimate. If this is so, however, certain logical problems arise. How can something which is an "ultimate" extend beyond itself? If a goal like wisdom is an end in

itself, then there can be nothing further toward which it is a means. It is logically incoherent to suggest, as Beck does, that ultimate life goals are a means to an end and end in themselves. Something cannot be "p" and "not-p" at the same time.

In his own defense, Beck might wish to argue that a particular value may for an individual be an ultimate at t_1, but a means to an ultimate at t_2. Claiming this would appear to remove the problem of logical contradiction. However, another problem immediately arises from this line of thinking. If ultimate life goals can act as a means to an end sometimes, depending on the time and who is involved, then the question arises as to how one distinguishes ultimates from nonultimates. Recall that, for Beck, economic and political values, for example, can be distinguished from ultimate life goals insofar as they represent a means to achieving a further end. If ultimate life goals can also act as a means to achieving further ends, however, then the logical basis of distinguishing between specific/intermediate values and ultimate life goals collapses. Any ultimate value could in principle be a means to a further end.

Another major problem with Beck's Reflective, Ultimate Life Goals' Approach revolves around his notion of "limited relativism" or its converse, "limited objectivity". Given the way "sound" specific and intermediate values are established and the indeterminacy allotted to the priority of ultimate life goals, one must question "how limited" is this limited objectivity that Beck advocates, or, to what extent is a rampant relativism being advanced. In deciding which values are sound, "Beck has virtually nothing to say about the standards that might guide reflection about values. He does not tell how one is to resolve the conflict of means-values that are out of line with end-values, or what establishes the soundness of an ultimate life goal" (Coombs, 1977, p.63). Before we draw any hard and fast conclusions, however, let us examine a bit more closely what Beck does in fact say about relativity. In his short monograph entitled, *Moral Education in the Schools*, Beck writes:

> A limited moral objectivism may be maintained on the following twofold basis: there is a great deal of communality in the ultimate life goals that human beings pursue; and even where there are differences in life goals, there is a great deal of room for objective inquiry into how best to pursue them (p.26).
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> It is important, however, not to go to the other extreme and seek an entirely objective basis for moral theory. There is *some* relativity in moral matters, particularly at the level of ultimate purposes (p.26).

Beck's suggestion is that moral objectivity is a matter of degree and not a matter of "either/or". Ultimate life goals are relative to a certain extent and they are objective to a certain degree. Allowing, for a moment, that the notion of "objectivity by degree' is *prima facie* plausible and that it is not intrinsically incoherent to say that ultimate life goals are both objective and relative, let us consider its logical implications. One might be willing to say that "health", for example, is a universally shared ultimate life goal and in that sense objective, while at the same time admitting that it is less ultimate, say, than "wisdom" for a particular individual. Granting this, it would seem to follow that in the pursuit of wisdom, one might possibly choose means-values that are detrimental to one's health, but instrumental in the attainment of wisdom. Because wisdom is considered more ultimate than health for a particular person, the means-values associated with it, which can be contrary to good

health, would nonetheless be considered sound, i.e., objectively better or preferable. If this is what is entailed by limited relativism (or limited objectivity), then one is faced with insurmountable problems. As suggested by Coombs (1977), the main problem is determining what makes one ultimate life goal more or less ultimate than another. In other words, "What establishes the soundness of an ultimate life goal?". In response to this question, Beck, offers us only vague criteria for determining the soundness of ultimate life goals and no guidance whatsoever as to how one appraises their relative worth. Calling to mind the criteria for ultimacy given earlier (p.5), one must wonder exactly what it means to say that a sound ultimate goal is one that is selected "after a great deal of experience, learning and thought" and one which is taken to be "ultimate in a particular way and to a certain degree". The criteria for soundness at the ultimate level are expressed in such a desperately vague fashion as to render them vacuous, lacking any substantive meaning. After a great deal of experience, learning, and thought, it is quite conceivable that no two people will ever have the same ultimate life goals or that they will attribute to them the same degree of ultimacy. Different thinking patterns and learning experiences would no doubt lead to a host of diverse "sound" ultimates with correspondingly different and incompatible means-values that are "objectively" right for different individuals. Since Beck provides no real way of comparing or evaluating ultimates, one would have to conclude that his notion of "limited relativism" is not limited at all and that the Reflective Approach seems to be totally subjective in orientation, promoting a radical form of relativity which supports what in the vernacular is commonly referred to as a "do your own thing" philosophy.

Implications for Curriculum and Pedagogy

In closing, I would just like to make a few brief comments regarding the pedagogical and curricular problems which arise as a result of the philosophical difficulties inherent in Beck's Reflective Ultimate Life Goals' Approach to Values Education. In the *Final Report of the Moral Education Project* (Year 5), Beck explicitly states what objectives, learning materials, methods, and teacher skills should be included within values education. Beck's first educational objective enunciated is to ". . . help students deal with important current life problems, having to do with both their own needs and the needs of others".[22] In the context of this objective, he says that, "It is only through dealing *successfully* (my emphasis) with a wide range of specific values problems that students acquire general principles and skills that may be carried forward into later life".[23] I underscore the word "successfully" here. The reason is that Beck's theory and his philosophical assumptions do not provide us with adequate criteria to establish whether or not value-related problems have been dealt with properly. As I argued before, Beck's criteria for soundness are expressed in such a desperately vague fashion that one cannot really determine whether or not particular ultimates are, in fact, sound. Also, Beck does not provide any way of helping students to resolve conflicts which arise because means-values are out of line with end-values. He provides no standards or means by which to determine whether or not conflicts have been resolved in a correct fashion. Given this, Beck cannot determine whether students have been "successful" in dealing with life's problems relating to value issues. He needs to articulate, therefore, more concrete and reliable ways and means of evaluating success in value decision-making. At present, his philosophical criteria for soundness cannot be used to judge success in any dependable way.

A second philosophical problem with Beck's approach which causes difficulties with its implementation concerns his understanding of the distinction between moral and nonmoral values. I spoke earlier about the logical inconsistency inherent in Beck's formulation of the distinction. I mentioned as well that Beck allots no priority or "overridingness" to moral considerations in value decision-making. Learning strategies and teaching methodologies thus allow students, in principle, to arrive at the conclusion that other economic or prudential values, say, are more important than moral values. Teachers using the Reflective Approach are expected to treat moral values just like any other means-values, i.e., as instrumental to the achievement of ultimate life goals. In practice, this allows for the possibility that students will choose ultimate life goals (e.g., absolute power) and means-values (e.g., corruption and deceit) which are morally questionable. Given the vague nature of the criteria for soundness and the lack of priority allotted to moral values, Beck's teaching strategies and learning materials thus pave the way to the possible pursuit of immoral ends. A values instruction program which has built right into it the possibility that students will choose, "soundly", using the reflective process, goals and means-values that are immoral must be held suspect.

A third practical problem resulting from Back's philosophical perspective relates to the inability of the Reflective approach to deal with, and resolve, situations of interpersonal value conflict. If ultimate life goals are ultimately relative, as Beck seems to suggest, at least by logical implication, then there are, in effect, no transpersonal, impartial, and objective standards that might be used to settle value disputes between or among different individuals and groups. Considering, however, that in the history of moral philosophy, if not in the minds of most ethical thinkers, the settling of sociomoral disputes by objective means has often been seen as one of the major functions of morality, it would appear that the Ultimate Life Goals' Approach is seriously deficient in its ability to deal with an essential element of moral value inquiry. Beck's theory and teaching strategies are thus best geared to treat purely subjective, personal, and private value considerations. They are not adequate to deal with social value issues relating to interpersonal conflicts and the just resolutions of those conflicts.[24]

Notes

[1] For discussions of the approach see, for example, Clive Beck, *Moral Education in the Schools, Profiles in Practical Education No. 3*,The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education; 1971; also see, *The Reflective Approach in Values Education*, The Moral Education Project, Year 3, OISE, and "A Philosophical View of Values and Value Education" in T.C. Hennessy (ed.), *Values* and *Moral Development*, Toronto: Paulist Press, pp.13-23, 1976

[2] See Clive Beck, Norma McCoy and Jane Bradley-Cameron, Reflecting on Values, and informal publication of the OISE Press, 1980. Discussions referring to the implementation of the Reflective Approach can also be found in Beck et al., *The Moral Education Project (Year 5): Curriculum and Pedagogy for Reflective Values Education* Published by the Ontario Ministry of Education, 1976-1977

[3] Clive Beck, "The Reflective, Ultimate Life Goals' Approach to Values Education" in John R. Meyer, (ED.) *Reflections on Values Education*, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Wilfred Laurier Press, 1976, p.149

[4] Clive Beck, "A Philosophical View of Values and Value Education" p.14

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid., pp.14-15

[7] Clive Beck, *Ethics: An Introduction* Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd., 1972, p.13

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid., p.16

[10] Ibid., pp.16-17

[11] Ibid., p.17

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid., p.10

[14] Ibid.

[15] An explanation of the differences among specific, intermediate, and ultimate values is given by Beck in *Ethics*, pp.15-16. It might be said that specific values are justified by intermediate ones which are in turn justified by ultimate life goals.

[16] Ibid., pp.10-11

[17] Clive Beck, "The Reflective, Ultimate Life Goals' Approach to Values Education", ibid., p.153

[18] Clive Beck, *Ethics* p.13

[19] Clive Beck, "A Philosophical View of Values and Value Education", ibid., p.13

[20] Clive Beck, "Education in Controversial Areas," in Donald B. Cochrane and Martin Schiralli, eds., *Philosophy of Education: Canadian Perspectives* (Collier-MacMillan, Canada, 1982), pp.218-241.

[21] Ibid., p.235

[22] Clive Beck, *Final Report 1976-77, The Moral Education Project (Year 5)* p.7

[23] Ibid.

[24] I am currently developing this point in my doctoral dissertation, *Moral and Values Education: A Philosophical Appraisal*, University of Toronto.