Between Self-Denial and Narcissism

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Dr. Francis Ryan's view, while it is prompted by some very real problems with what passes as moral education today, is basically a view that mistakes forced acquiescence for social acceptance, social acceptance for morality, public policies for moral principles, consistency for truth, developmental psychology for moral reasoning, socialization for moral education, and a portion of moral thinking for the essence of it.

Beginning with the points that "plurality of values in America has fractured [the ...] moral perspective," "based on self-denial and self-discipline" that was "focused, coherent, and relatively consistent," Dr. Ryan goes on to essentially point out that narcissism among the masses is the problem and that it is a recent phenomenon. That self-denial was until only recently the basis for our moral perspective may be questioned in light of the sage Hillel's comment 2000 years ago pointedly asking "If I am not for myself, who will be; and if not now, when!" Hillel is also one of the first to whom the Golden Rule is attributed; and his concern about being good to one's self can be considered a parallel to the Golden Rule if it were to be stated that kind and decent people should also do unto themselves as they would do unto others. And, of course, Adam Smith, in *The Wealth of Nations* claimed that it was our collective individual self-interests which actually led to the public good that capitalism provided. While I would argue that Smith did not intend that to be the way it is generally understood, still there seems to be some historical evidence that moral principles in our culture have not historically been totally based on self-denial and self-discipline though that may have been a basic moral tenet of some groups.

Further, what, and, in some sense, how much, each of us owes ourself versus what and how much each of us owes other people is one of the important questions that ethical reflection tries to resolve. It is a reasonable problem to find an answer for in ethics, not a place to begin with an axiomatic principle.

But ethics is much more than just figuring out what is fair to yourself; it is also the determination of what is right over and above that. Even if you

were marooned on a desert island with no hope of escape, it makes sense for you to reflect on what sort of life you ought to lead insofar as you have the resources available to pursue different alternatives. And in society, fairness for yourself is only one element in the determination of what is the right way to act. When a judge or jury decides a case or sentence, the issue is not one of how much they themselves might benefit or lose by their action. Citizens and government officials are often called upon to vote on proposals that may have little expected effect on themselves personally. There are a host of ethical issues that have nothing to do with fairness. For example, what circumstances, if any, make it reasonable or justifiable for someone to break a date or even a promise; and what circumstances do not? Or who is to decide what is right or wrong? Are there characteristics besides how much good or harm will be done that determine whether an act or a policy is morally right or wrong or not? Is the Golden Rule always a good rule? What if other people don't want to be treated the way you would want to be treated? Or what if the way you all wanted to be treated is not really in your own best interest in the long run? What is the proper balance between treating people paternalistically and treating them autonomously? If people agree to a set of rules which they only later find out causes some outcomes they find morally objectionable, are they still morally bound to follow the rules they agreed to? And so on, and so on.

I would argue that everyone deserves, and owes themselves, certain things, and that this is not what makes people selfish. For to hold that everyone deserves certain things is not to say that only I deserve those things. One of the ways to test whether your principles are narcissistic or not then, is not to see whether you benefit from them, but to see whether you would still hold them when conditions differed in such a way that you would receive a burden by the application of your principles, while someone else received the benefit. For example, one cannot justifiably hold that, no matter what other circumstances, whenever one is going east-west through an intersection that the length of the traffic light ought to favor east-west traffic, but that whenever one is going north-south, it ought to favor the traffic in that direction. That would be to say that the light should always favor you, not that you have some legitimate operating principle in mind about how the light might best serve traffic in general. One should always be suspicious of how principled people are who generally change their alleged moral principles to benefit just their own circumstances as those circumstances change.

Now, while there are undoubtedly people who are quite selfish and self-absorbed, it is not clear to me that this is that widespread a general characteristic, nor that it is a characteristic that schools, even those emphasizing self-esteem, tend to promote. "Quiet, orderly, and passively

obedient" are still the way a great many teachers and administrators, when they are not busy promoting self-esteem in students, think students ought to behave. Recently a convenience store clerk looked after a pair of glasses for me that an optician left in her keeping when the optical place closed earlier than I could get there. I was very appreciative of being able to have access to the glasses and gave the clerk $5 for her trouble. She would not accept it. Since she was behind bullet proof glass, I could not force her to accept it, though I argued that she should. I don't find her behavior all that atypical. Most people I meet try to be helpful and fair, though they do not want to be taken advantage of. It is not narcissistic not to want to be taken advantage of for no legitimate reason.

There is good reason to believe that the life of self-denial and self-discipline, that Dr. Ryan nostalgically mourns, was involuntarily practiced mostly by the poor, the powerless, and the disenfranchised, particularly minorities, women, and children at their own, often considerable, expense. And the "plurality of values that has fractured this coherent moral [i.e., social] perspective" may mean only that second-class citizenship is no longer an acceptable position.

After the litany of the supposed defining characteristics of narcissism, Dr. Ryan is forced to point out that these traits are ones that to some extent many socially quite normal people "display in their daily lives." And further, at the end of the article, he is forced to recognize the distinction between positive and negative narcissism, following his reference to Carl Goldberg. Socially normal narcissism and positive narcissism are either oxymorons or they are synonymous with the kind of self-confidence and justified self-esteem that Dr. Ryan seems to have decried earlier.

There do exist rather trivial self-esteem programs in some schools whereby whenever a teacher comments consciously on a child or the child's work, praise is given, even when it is insincere, idle, or intentionally false. And there is good reason to suspect this sort of praise is more harmful than helpful to students, and that it also does not really encourage self-esteem in the way that honest, demanding, but also kindly appraisals do. Requiring teachers to be kind to deserving children (particularly those in need of more reasonable emotional reinforcement than they receive at home) in order to bring out the best in those children is not the same thing as requiring teachers to ignore bad behavior or accept work that is less than a student's most reasonable effort. The cultivation of self-esteem does not have to be the cultivation or the condoning of arrogant, egotistic, sloppy, lazy, brutish, or boorish self-centeredness.

Similarly, there is a better alternative than, on the one hand, offering courses and using teaching methodologies that have absolutely no meaning to students and, on the other, giving credit for those courses which are only glorified bull sessions. The call for relevant or meaningful college courses in the 1960s and 1970s frequently was justifiably prompted by a significant number of required courses that were poorly taught about subject matter that was only of narrow and pedantic significance to some scholars in a given field. The answer did not have to be a profusion of only transiently useful electives taught in trivial ways with little structure or discipline. The answer should have been the offering of additional intellectually stimulating and demanding courses with a broader range of subject matter, along with the greater use of methodologies in lower level courses that could help contemporary students better understand and appreciate meaningful classics whose language has become formidable, and whose perspectives mistakenly appear quaint.

Now, much of the literature on moral education, including that to which Dr. Ryan refers, is actually literature about the ***socialization*** of children or the ***usual*** developmental steps in that socialization. Often children are socialized into quite immoral behavior, when a society has immoral practices. And often, children's initial, quite early, senses of what is right or wrong, good or bad, and what is reasonable or not – though they may sometimes be unsophisticated due to lack of experience or sufficient awareness of complicating factors – are actually more morally sound than what a given society may be trying to inculcate, or than the values schools impose, wittingly and unwittingly.

When Dr. Ryan talks about the ***morality*** of the past in a society, or about one's "parents' or grandparents' morality," he really means the set of beliefs and principles held by a society or by one's family. But the fact that the authorities in a society, church, business, or family may all hold the same sorts of views does not mean they hold the right views or that what they are espousing is morality. It is not consensus or who holds them that makes views right or moral, but what those views are. One does not need to be a relativist to hold that authority is not what determines what is right and wrong. Consistency of moral viewpoint in a society makes socialization of children into that moral viewpoint easier; it does not necessarily make it right. The existence of unresolved conflicting moral views in a society does not mean authority and mandated consistency are the proper alternative, even when some of those views, such as some which advertising and television portray, are bad. And authoritarianism may itself foster narcissism as those prone to it merely await their chance to be in charge without feeling the need to concern themselves with the reasonableness of the orders they will give.

Shielding people from bad ideas is not the same thing as fostering their own understanding of the lack of merit of those ideas. And I take moral education to be the fostering of moral understanding and moral reasoning, not the inculcation of alleged values, no matter how admirable those values. Dr. Ryan says that "moral education contains values, beliefs, and behaviors which are directly or indirectly imparted to students." Given his examples, my view of moral education is quite different. It might be that we will achieve the same student behaviors, but if we do, it would be in vastly different ways, ways that I think make the difference between education and mere enculturation.

I do agree, but for reasons besides his, that values-clarification as it is usually taught in the public schools, is faulty; and I believe that most teachers and schools are not knowledgeable enough about the study of ethics to be able to teach moral reasoning as such or to do it using values-clarification. Much of this is for the same reason it is difficult for most schools to foster student rationality and meaningful or deep understanding in *any* subject matter. And I certainly believe that it is important for students to know and to appreciate that some cases of altruism are very important; but that can be done without teaching it as the whole of moral philosophy or having some sort of time-consuming altruism-education program. Most students, as most people, recognize, understand, and disapprove of narcissism – in others. It is important to help students learn to recognize it and understand why to avoid it in their own behavior, but this can certainly be done without requiring unnecessary sacrificial self-denial or basing its practice primarily on self-discipline. Reasonable altruism does not have to be a joyless, coerced, or constraining attribute. One should not have to be either a martyr or a lackey in order to be a good person or a good citizen.

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