MORAL EDUCATION

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In several of the platonic dialogues, Socrates objects rather strongly to those people who, when they are asked to say what something is, reply by giving a list of instances in which it occurs. The answer to the question 'What is virtue?', he insists, is not adequately provided by giving a list of saints or heroes, or by giving a list of virtues, or by giving a list of virtuous actions, however loving or evocative or perceptive our descriptions of these people and activities might be. If I am asked to say what moral education is, Socrates will not be satisfied if I do no more than point to notable examples of morally well-educated men or women. Nonetheless, I find the question whether I know any morally well-educated people a stimulating and instructive one. Stimulating, because it is perhaps not a question which one habitually asks about one's friends and acquaintances; and instructive, because it forces one to reflect on what exactly it is that one is looking for. Examination of the end-product might well be a good way of approaching the problems connected with the process by which the end-product is produced. Even Plato did not altogether disdain this kind of starting point for his own enquiries, inadequate though he considered it to be. I shall begin, then, by asking not what moral education is, but a slightly different question. What would we be looking for in trying to find a man whose moral education had been successfully carried through?

Well, one might look for someone who consistently acted in ways which seemed to be morally admirable (forgetting, for the moment, about all the disputed questions which at once arise when one asks *which* ways of acting are morally admirable). Here, one might be tempted to say, is a man in whom the process of moral education seems to have reached a happy conclusion. But the suggestion is no sooner made than it is seen to be inadequate. As Aristotle reminds us, the moral person is not just the person who does just actions, but the man who does just actions in the way that the just man does them. The moral life is not simply the reproduction of certain approved patterns of behaviour; it has to do not merely with action but with understanding what it is that one is doing and why. Unless this understanding is present, education itself is seen somehow as a mere conditioning process; and the difficulty

of conditioning is that it is difficult for someone who has been well-conditioned to respond to one particular set of circumstances, like a rat in a maze with which he has long been familiar, to adapt his responses to the apparently labyrinthine complexities of very unfamiliar moral situations. The boy from the sheltered home and the protective school may be morally totally at sea in the new world of his job or a university. So when we look for understanding in the morally well-educated man, we are looking for something far more than, for example, the mere ability to recite a series of admirable moral principles. Reciting moral principles, however correctly, is quite a different matter from knowing how to apply them, or from knowing which ones are the ones to be applied. What we are looking for above all in the moral man is an *adaptability* in his moral behaviour and his moral understanding — the quality that Aristotle called *phronesis*, moral discernment.

Not that we should forget the elements of behaviour and theoretical understanding. As Aristotle also suggests, adaptable moral behaviour is itself impossible without the virtues; and adaptability easily becomes mere gullibility unless it is guided throughout by some degree of theoretical understanding of what the moral life is about. I shall therefore say something about each of these three qualities which we look for in the morally well-educated man — discernment, virtue, and understanding.

I

I make no apologies for the aristotelian framework in which my treatment of moral education is cast. I think it is a good framework in itself; and I also think that a return to Aristotle (and thereby a return to much of what is authentically thomist in Aquinas, if I may so put it) is at once closer to the terminology in which catholics, at least, are more accustomed to discussing morality, and a useful corrective against some more recent views on such topics as natural law which appeal with little justification to Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle. Perhaps our current understanding of the term 'virtue' is a case in point. 'Virtue' has become a cover-all word, about as general as 'goodness' or 'moral uprightness', and has as a result acquired many predominantly intellectualist overtones. Much closer to what Aristotle had in mind, when he spoke of the moral virtues, would be some term such as 'emotional stability'. It is Aristotle's view that emotional stability is the indispensable foundation of morality, and an essential prerequisite for moral understanding and moral discernment, as well as the basis of our ability

to act morally with constancy and comfort. Aristotle was well aware that 'emotional stability' itself is a morally loaded term, and that our conception of which emotional reactions should be encouraged and which should not will depend completely on our moral theory as a whole. The discussion rapidly becomes circular, because the emotional reactions which one wishes to inculcate in a child are precisely those which will unfailingly support him in what is the right course of action, and make him emotionally disinclined to do what is morally wrong. In the end, then, any adequate discussion of the required sense of emotional stability must follow, and not precede, a discussion of moral theory. However, there is perhaps also a very general and fundamental sense of emotional stability which, although it does inevitably embody several moral assumptions, still does not presuppose any particularly *controversial* moral positions. Just because this level of emotional stability is so fundamental, I suppose that it is likely to depend on the child's early environment, and in particular on his home, rather than on his school. The main lines of the solutions to the child's emotional problems are probably sketched in early on, and thereafter may prove very difficult to change to any radical extent. Nevertheless, it would seem to me to be obvious that a good deal can depend on the school, and that the school must take some responsibility for the emotional stability of the children if it takes any responsibility for moral education at all. As a minimum, I would suggest that a counselling service should be provided which involves not simply career-guidance but the possibility of really teaching the children to understand their own and other people's feelings and emotional reactions. It also seems to me that this might well be a normal part of the curriculum, quite apart from whatever provisions are made for helping seriously maladjusted children by, for example, referral to a specialized clinic. It ought to be taken for granted that a real understanding of the role of the emotions in the moral life is an integral part of moral education for the *normal* child, rather than something which might have to be undertaken as a last resort in the case of a child who is seriously disturbed. To restrict this aspect of moral education to some quasi-platonic view that emotions are to be controlled in the interests of morality or, better still, ignored if this is at all possible, seems to me to be a primitive and totally inadequate approach, and one which is all too widespread.

It is not the moral philosopher's job to attempt to make detailed suggestions about how this might best be achieved in the ordinary day-to-day school situation; this is something which will have to be left to competent educational psychologists and trained psychological

counsellors. So I shall leave the matter simply as a suggestion which I urge others to take seriously.

For similar reasons, I shall not elaborate on the necessity of every teacher becoming as aware as possible of the levels of emotional interaction which are present in his or her own classroom. I imagine that any good teacher tries to do this already — although perhaps not as consciously with older students as with the very young. Suffice it to point out that I believe that Aristotle stresses the importance of good example first of all in the realm of emotional stability rather than directly in connection with right action. He would, I think, regard it as extremely important that a young person pick up the emotional colouring which accompanies the moral behaviour of the well-educated adult, and that this emotional colouring should be the correct one. Some sensitive areas in this connection might be the emotional attitudes colouring our behaviour concerning race, sex, the expression of disagreement, anger, the treatment of notably less gifted children, the exercise of authority. Virtue — the right emotional background to right action — is perhaps harder to come by in these areas. Just for that reason it is extremely important that children should be helped by instruction and good example to be virtuous in these areas long before they are of an age to begin to understand the moral principles which are involved. Merely telling young children what to do and what not to do and getting them used to doing what they ought is no substitute at all for training them in virtue, which is altogether a more demanding exercise for everyone concerned, teachers and pupils alike.

Aristotle mentions a very large number of other moral virtues, most of which, as I have already pointed out, can be properly defined only after a detailed discussion of the moral principles which underlie them. Space clearly does not permit me to do more than give a few examples of the kinds of problem which can arise. It is important to remember, and to keep reminding ourselves, that when we are speaking of training in virtue it is above all the communication of attitudes which concerns us, rather than the enunciation of principles, or the mere eliciting of behavioural responses. Consider, then, the attitudes towards justice which are communicated by a teacher or a school, if they simply ignore or show little interest in the social problems of the area in which they live; if they never speak of the major issues of justice in our society, or do so in a very one-sided way; if they do nothing to help a child who has been unfairly treated by another member of staff; or if they run away from the problems posed in such a situation by the conflict between justice and loyalty. Once again, it is the attitude communicated by the

teacher which is just as important as anything he might say or do. The same goes for such moral virtues as a real desire to discover the truth, to be tolerant, to be generous.

So much, then, for the element of virtue — emotional stability — and for the communication of attitudes in which training in virtue consists. It would appear to me that the implications for the curriculum of the need for training in virtue are largely unexplored in practice. Discussions about moral education are apt too hastily or impatiently to treat of a few well-worn moral problems. I hope that by placing this section first, as Aristotle does, I might encourage someone to give some serious thought to a very underdeveloped area in the field of moral education.

II

Phronesis — practical wisdom, or moral discernment — is the ability habitually to notice and to weigh up all the morally relevant features of a particular situation. There has been a great deal of philosophical discussion about whether this is an intellectual or a moral virtue; and at any rate it is clear that it has some largely intellectual elements bound up with it. I shall try to say something about these in the third section of this article. The intellectual element in moral discernment is perhaps mostly concerned with the weighing up of the morally relevant features of moral situations. The element which Aristotle called 'moral', and we might describe as emotional, is principally involved in the recognition of the morally relevant features of particular situations. I would suggest that this aspect of moral discernment might helpfully be looked at as a combination of sympathy and imagination. It will follow that the development of these moral qualities will also be an essential and integral part of moral education.

One of the main aims of moral education should be to help the student or child to develop the capacity for a genuine emotional sympathy with an ever-widening range of different kinds of people. This is so because without such an ability a person is rendered much less capable of even noticing morally important features of the situations in which he is involved. He will find it difficult to know who is being hurt and how, who is being helped and how, and what factors in the rest of the situation might be considered to be morally operative by different people. Aristotle is surely right to regard the lack of this capacity for sympathy as a basic moral defect, indeed as one of the most potentially crippling of moral vices, leaving a man intolerant, bigoted, and limited.

One of the best ways of developing this kind of moral sympathy seems to me to be through the development of the moral imagination — the ability to think oneself realistically into the moral shoes of people whose moral outlook may be quite different from one's own, really to see the moral world as they see it. Examples of how this might be done are easy enough to provide from teaching the history of ethics. Thus, it is of the greatest importance, it seems to me, that the student of moral philosophy should study Kant: and that in studying Kant he should not content himself with simply knowing about the categorical imperative, or the postulates of practical reason, or the meaning of the kingdom of ends. The student will not understand Kant until he has learnt of his lutheran background, and something of the emotionalism and relativism against which Kant was reacting. To understand Kant's theory involves living imaginatively in Kant's moral world, just as to understand how Butler could hold the views he did, involves developing an imaginative sympathy with the comfortable, aristocratic, stable society in which Butler moved. To see Bentham as more than a somewhat tedious moral arithmetician it is necessary to feel something of the deadweight blocking all efforts at moral and social reform, and grasp how it was that someone could hope that hard-headed calculation might provide a sharp weapon against entrenched moral and political prejudice.

No doubt it is a commonplace to suggest that in a school this is best achieved through the study of history and literature. But it is worth repeating, I think, because it should be stressed how important it is that this imaginative effort should be made not simply in the case of those historical or literary figures whom one finds initially sympathetic or edifying. Some major effort should also go into imaginative identification with those whose whole outlook is unfamiliar or whose moral judgement seems to us to be misguided. Imagination and sympathy must be stretched if our powers of moral discernment are to develop at all.

It will, I hope, have become evident from all that I have said that I believe moral education to be a very wide-ranging project indeed. In particular I have tried to stress the affective side of it, because I believe that this is often either left out altogether, or is relegated to other subjects in the curriculum instead of being made an integral part of a course of moral education. Morality itself is all too often reduced to questions concerning sex or the right to life; and even here it is reduced still further to a mere consideration of moral *truths* — answers to questions about what one may or may not do. But surely morality, and therefore also moral education, should cover the whole range of human interactions, the whole wide spectrum of human happiness and misery,

where there are many other questions besides those surrounding sex or killing. And there are many other aspects of morality besides the attempt to provide practical answers to questions about the rightness and wrongness of actions. Small wonder that the traditional answers so often cut little ice, when they have been divorced from the whole imaginative and emotional context in which they have to be lived out, and when children have never been trained in the affective perceptivity required in order to appreciate and evaluate them over against other answers which might be given.

III

For these reasons, I have relegated my treatment of understanding, or moral reasoning, to the third part of this article. Understanding is indeed important, but it cannot operate effectively in an emotional or imaginative vacuum. That being said, though, it must also be admitted that moral understanding is just as important as emotional and imaginative maturity for a balanced moral education.

Now, in speaking of moral understanding, we can talk about two different things. One is the intellectual virtues (as Aristotle would have called them) required in order to have any facility in thinking about morality (or anything else, for that matter); and the other is the substantive content of morality which is there to be understood. Or, to put roughly the same point in a different way, we could speak of content or we could speak about method. In practice, of course, we must surely be concerned with teaching both content and method, if only because it is hardly possible to teach method at all without having something on which the methodical skills can be exercized; and it is hardly possible to teach content with any hope of its being really grasped and understood unless we teach something about good and bad method as well. This, I take it, would be axiomatic and obvious to the good teacher of any other subject in the curriculum, be it physics, literary criticism, or cookery. But one wonders how many of those engaged in moral education have any clear idea about the theory of moral argument, or about the methodological problems which could be raised about ethics?

There is, in any case, a particular difficulty in the interaction of method and content which is more prominent in ethics than in other fields (though it is equally serious, if more hidden, in mathematics and the physical sciences). Consider a teenage boy who is asked what it is that the fifth commandment forbids, and who replies that it forbids killing, anger, vindictiveness, and so on. He is then discovered beating up some other boy, and, when asked did he not consider this wrong, he

replies that he considered it an expression of legitimate anger and justified punishment. Did he simply not know the fifth commandment properly, or did he have a faulty knowledge of the method for applying it to particular cases? Take someone who is firmly convinced that murder is always wrong, and who nevertheless has no compunction about performing certain abortions; is the dispute here about content, or about method? In general, what does one have to know or understand in order to have a proper understanding of the content of a moral principle? To demand a knowledge of all its possible applications would seem to be to ask for the impossible; and yet if we require that someone at least know how it *could* be applied, we seem to be shifting away from content towards method. Indeed one might go so far as to assert that agreement about the content of morality tends to presuppose a large measure of agreement about method. Accordingly, I shall concentrate my attention on questions of method, rather than on the content of moral education, a procedure which has the additional advantage of not requiring a detailed discussion of the whole range of moral problems which should enter into a course on moral education.

One way of trying to discuss method in ethics is to ask what counts as a good reason for adopting a course of action.

To begin with, we should be clear that appeal to an authority may indeed be a sufficient reason for adopting a course of action, but it cannot be an *ultimately* sufficient reason. Ultimately, we are either driven to saying that the authority itself is simply arbitrary in its commands, or else we are forced to admit that the authority's claim to be an authority must in the end rest on the validity of the commands which it issues; and *this* issue can be determined only by appeal to some criteria apart from the existence of the authority itself. One example of this is the familiar old conundrum whether something is right because God says it is, or whether God says it is right because it is right. To adopt the first answer is ultimately to be led into a voluntarist position in which God issues arbitrary commands. And although the second position has to be modified in order to be a fully adequate statement of the truth of the matter, it is basically correct in so far as it insists that God's commands to us are based on the kind of beings that we are. It follows from this that we can check what God's commands mean, and also whether an alleged expression of the will of God genuinely is God's will in so far as we can determine whether it does accord with the kind of creature that man is. *A fortiori*, we can do the same for the commands of other alleged authorities, be they parents, the Church, one's peer-group, the customs of one's society, one's political or military superiors.

Consequently, as soon as children are able to see the point of the distinction between something being right because an authority says so, and an authority being an authority because what he says is right on independent grounds, they should never be subjected to authoritarian argument just on its own. To do so is to give the children a radically false impression of method in ethics. 'Because the Church teaches so' may on occasion be an acceptable short-cut; but it can never be, and should not be, presented as the end of any discussion on morality. On the other hand, neither is it helpful to present as the alternative to authoritarianism an anarchic individualism which, in effect, sets up the individual as an authority in his own right. What is wanted is a set of criteria which stand some chance of not simply reflecting the moral prejudices of any given individual or group.

At this point I shall have simply to dismiss in the most cavalier fashion all the still unsolved controversies which surround philosophers like Kant, and deontological theories of ethics generally. All that I have the space for is to present in the briefest outline a sketch of one part of one kind of ethical theory, and no more than mention the other part in passing. In essence, then, I would argue that an ethical theory is based on the satisfaction of individual needs, tempered (in the case of irreducible conflict between the interests of individuals) by a theory of justice. I shall say little about justice; partly because the questions surrounding the concept of justice are extremely complex; partly because I believe that irreducible conflicts of interest are in any case less frequent than they appear to be; and partly because those which do arise in, say, a school, seem to me to be comparatively easily resolved.

To say that morality consists in the satisfaction of needs, however, is too bald and oversimplified. We need some way of evaluating and criticising the needs we, and other people, have. I suggest that there are three main ways in which we might argue that it is irrational to try to satisfy a need.

1. *When we have the need only because of a false belief that we hold*

Thus, a person might want to go to a university only because he believes (falsely, let us suppose) that unless he does he will be unable to earn a good living. John might want to marry Angela because he believes (falsely, let us suppose) that she will be happy with him and he with her. If it is true that these beliefs are false, then they cannot function as justifications, as good reasons, in support of the actions in question. Now, of course, it may be far from easy to determine whether the

beliefs are in fact true or false. But that is not directly a moral issue; it is a matter of morally uncontroversial information. Hence, to settle the moral issue, we need as much information as possible. An essential part of moral education is therefore to stress the necessity of making moral decisions on the basis of the best information available, and the necessity of subjecting one's factual beliefs to proper criticism before making them the basis of moral decisions.

2. *When we falsely believe that two needs can be jointly satisfied*

Quite commonly, we like to think that we can get all the things we want when in fact this is just not possible. It may simply be out of the question both to spend the easter vacation holidaying in a ski resort in the Tyrol and to pass one's A-levels. It may be impossible to continue a particular relationshipand avoid damaging any of the people involved. It may just not be possible to retain a given structure in society and to avoid a bloody racial conflict. It is irrational, and therefore, I suggest, immoral, to act on the basis of a set of needs which cannot be jointly satisfied. Of course, most of us like to have our cake and eat it, and we at times do our best to conceal from ourselves that this is what we are doing. An essential part of moral education will therefore be to help the student to identify cases where this kind of hidden conflict is likely to arise in his life; and to stress the importance of the personal honesty required in order to deal with this kind of situation when it does arise. He will need to be given many examples, and asked to provide many of his own. He will need to be taught how to look not just at his present needs, but also at the future needs with which his present needs are in potential conflict. It is at this point that he will need to call on the imaginative perceptivity and emotional stability on which I spent so much time at the beginning of this article, in order to identify what his needs are, and to project them into the future.

3. *When our needs have been incorrectly identified*

There are many times when we are simply not clear about what it is that we want, or what our own needs really are. And there are, it seems to me, many occasions on which we thought we knew, but, when we obtained what it was we thought we wanted, we discovered that we were still somehow quite unsatisfied. A man who is unhappy just may not know whether his dissatisfaction springs from his job, or from his marriage, or from his misuse of his leisure time, or from his own temperament. He may think that a change of job will solve his problem,

and may find out that his problem remains in essence unaltered. It is instances of this kind that I wish to refer to as misidentified needs. And, of course, we can misidentify not only our own needs, but also the needs of those with whom we live or for whom we work. Such misidentification can be the cause of great unhappiness both in ourselves and in others. I would suggest that misidentification of needs lies at the root of many of the most apparently intractable moral problems with which ordinary people are faced in their ordinary day-to-day lives.

Here, once more, the possibility of learning correctly to identify needs in ourselves and in others will make heavy demands on our sympathy and imagination, and will, I think, normally demand the services of teachers who are specifically trained to assist with this process. Moreover, moral education at this level will make heavy demands on the integrity and honesty of the teachers themselves. They will have to make available to their students at least something of their own experience of learning how to identify their own needs, and feed this information into the discussion of the many moral issues which students will wish to raise. How many teachers would be willing or, indeed, able, to involve themselves in a discussion at this level about sex, marriage, or their jobs? Or about their religion? Yet it seems to me that all of this must be a central component of any worthwhile programme of moral education if it is going to reach the students at the kind of level which would really help them.

I suggest, then, that these three are the principal elements in the intellectual and moral virtue of understanding. If this is correct, it will readily be seen how method and content are so intimately related in morals, and why it is that I have found it most helpful to lay most of the emphasis on method, at any rate as a point of departure. It is my conviction that to conduct moral education along these lines will both be more defensible theoretically, and of more practical use to the students, than an approach which starts from direct answers to practical questions about what may or may not be done. I also believe that to do this effectively requires a professional training in moral theory as well as personal qualities of the highest order. It has frequently been remarked that proper qualifications are normally demanded by a school in every subject on the curriculum, but not for theology, and that this is a lamentable state of affairs. The same is true, in my opinion, also of moral education. Simply to be an averagely good man is not, if I am right about any of this, anything like a sufficient qualification for being a good teacher of morality.

IV

There are many other topics I might have discussed, and which I will simply mention if only to show that I am not unaware of their existence. The first is the relationship between moral education and religious education. I believe that what I have said about moral education could in large measure also be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to much of religious education as well. I also believe that religious education has an important role to play in moral education, and *vice versa*; but it is my view that an adequate discussion of what that role should be will depend on a great deal of theoretical discussion about the precise relations between theology and ethics generally. I must content myself with hoping that nothing I have said here about moral education falsifies that relationship.

Even more briefly, I must mention the set of difficulties connected with the relationship between moral education and discipline. I should like simply to say that it is important to allow people to learn from their own mistakes as far as possible, and to concentrate on helping them to refine the techniques which they are using to discern their own moral situations, and insisting that they be honest enough with themselves to do this properly.

Finally, I have not even mentioned the problems concerned with the relative importance these elements in moral education should assume with children or students at different ages, or of widely differing intellectual abilities. All I would say is that a process of moral education, which never takes full understanding as a goal, rapidly becomes indoctrination. And one which excludes virtue and discernment rapidly loses all contact with the real lives of the pupils and becomes, as a result, largely ineffective. It therefore seems to me that something of all three of the elements I have mentioned should be present at every stage, and that enough time should be made available in the curriculum, especially higher up the school, to enable all these elements to be communicated as fully as they deserve to be. Moral education is too important and too demanding to be relegated to one or two periods a week, in which religion has to be taught as well. Morality, after all, is something in which we are all examined; and the examination is likely to be, sooner or later, an extremely searching one. We owe it to ourselves, and to one another, to be as well prepared as we can.