

RIGHT AND WRONG, TEEN STYLE

By JAMES DI GIACOMO

WATCHING TODAY'S YOUNG PEOPLE make moral choices can be fascinating and baffling. Their idealism and concern for the world and its inhabitants, especially the poor and oppressed, are hard to reconcile with the way they sometimes make decisions of personal morality. To understand how and why they act as they do, you must take into account at least four distinct factors which have a significant impact on them. They are developmental, cultural, philosophical and religious. These influences are sometimes conscious and explicit, but more often unconscious or only dimly perceived.

The developmental dimension of moral decision-making has to do with the way children and young people grow and learn. They are on a journey from premoral perception to conventional morality, and toward principled thinking and activity. The way they think about right and wrong depends, to a great extent, on the point they have reached in the various stages of their maturation. The dominant culture exerts an unseen but pervasive influence on the implicit value judgements which underlie moral choices and decisions. The underlying philosophies which structure adult moral discourse often resonate in adolescent rationalization. Finally, the religious perspectives that have shaped their experience of God and Church also have their part to play.

Most adolescents are aware of these influences only in the most general terms. Ask them why people act the way they do, and they will often answer that 'that's the way they were brought up'. They are thinking of their parents, of course. And they are right in ascribing to them a dominant role in their formation. But other people and other forces play key roles as well. Adolescents are not alone in being subject to cultural and societal influences, but those factors operate in distinctive ways during the teen years.

Developmental

The moral universe of young people is a predominantly conventional one. They think about right and wrong in terms of the expectations of significant others. Before the onset of adolescence and the emergence

into a wider world beyond the family circle, parents and surrogate parents are the dominant players. But now there are peers to please, as well as the adults who serve as role models and exercise their influence in schools and neighbourhoods and through mass media.

At this time in their lives they are in the process of rearranging their relationships with family members. Adults and their growing children have different agendas and priorities. Parents want them to be academically and socially successful in school, to present an acceptable appearance and make a good impression on other adults. They hope their children are not involved with drugs or alcohol, are not having sexual adventures, and do not have the wrong kinds of friends. Young teens, on the other hand, are asking different questions. Am I normal? Do I have friends? Am I accepted? Or am I left behind, left out?

These conflicting expectations lead youngsters to assume roles and put on masks. If I am a teen, my need for acceptance and reassurance can create all kinds of tensions. I want to be honest and I feel guilty about cheating, but I cannot afford to fail. I know clothes are expensive and I want to economize, but I have to keep up with other kids in my circle. I want to be sexually responsible but I don't want to feel left out, so I go along with the crowd. I know drugs and alcohol can mean trouble, but I don't want to be called 'chicken'. I would like to succeed in school, but sometimes I play dumb so they won't call me a nerd. I don't want to hurt others, but when the group starts picking on some kids, I feel I have to join in.

Young people thus find themselves in situations like those of politicians running for office. They must satisfy constituencies who have competing and contradictory expectations. Of course, adults also have to do this sometimes, but they usually know which is their true self and which one is assumed for convenience. Adolescents, on the other hand, are passing through a stage of life in which the dominant feature is the search for identity. Playing contradictory parts, for them, can lead to identity confusion and a consequent blurring of moral clarity and responsibility. Magistrates in juvenile courts know all about this. Often they are confronted with crimes committed by youths in packs, where the individuals by themselves would never have gone so far.

Closely connected with the search for identity is the need for a sense of self-worth. Like all of us, they need to feel *competence* – that they are good at something. Some achieve this sense by getting good grades in school, or attaining success in sports, or developing skills in areas like art or music or scouting. Popularity, for them, is also a mark of competence. This may be achieved in wholesome ways, or in dangerous ones, like making a reputation as a stud or sexpot. I was talking

about sex with a group of seventeen- and eighteen-year-old boys and girls and asked 'Why are you and your friends in such a hurry?' Their replies were immediate and arresting. 'We're afraid of missing out.' 'We don't want to be left behind.' Nothing about passion or love or relationships or even fun.

Although this conventional level of moral decision-making is most characteristic of adolescents, there are many shades and gradations. When just talking seriously about issues and not actually confronted by the need to act in stressful situations, they talk as if the significant others were not just peers or family but the wider society and its need for law and order. And many middle and older adolescents have reached the point where they can understand principled thinking and admire those who act on principle, even though they themselves do not operate at that level. Conversely, they will sometimes act not in accordance with conventional norms but simply out of self-interest, to gain an advantage or to avoid punishment. For, as Craig Dykstra has reminded us,¹ the moral agent is not just a *thinking* but also a *feeling* person who is moved by powerful passions such as fear or greed.

Adolescence is a time when young people become more capable of self-reflection. They can go beyond knowing the rules to knowing themselves. They can begin to understand how the search for identity underlies many of the changes going on within them. With the help of caring and wise adults, they can name the forces which pull them in different directions. They should be helped not only to accept themselves as persons-in-process, but also to accept the challenge to become their best selves.

Cultural

When young people say they and their peers act the way they do 'because of the way they were brought up', they are not thinking of the powerful impact of the surrounding culture. Their parents' influence began to wane the first time they learned to work the channels on their television sets. There they met the most influential people in any civilization: the ones who tell our stories and sing our songs. With few exceptions, these taste-makers subscribe uncritically to the dominant culture of consumerism which defines the human person in terms of material things owned and consumed. For them, possessions, power, pleasure and prestige are not mere adornments of the self but constitute the very self. As an ad for Cadillac put it, 'You are what you drive'. Consumerism stresses getting, owning, producing, competing and winning, which put a premium on aggressiveness, self-satisfaction, status and security. All other values are subordinated to these.

Growing children absorb from mass culture what James Fowler calls the dominant myth of consumer culture: you should experience whatever you desire, own whatever you want, and relate intimately with whoever you wish.² While Christianity tells them to love people and use things, the dominant culture tells them to love things and use people.³ Meanwhile the insistent message of advertising, the engine that drives consumer culture, is that their highest calling is to be consumers, that happiness can be bought, and that the deepest human needs can be satisfied by the things that money can buy.⁴

It is remarkable and heartening that so many young people retain their idealism and altruism in the face of these powerful influences. But we should not be surprised when they do not. Recently I asked a group of fourteen-year-olds to imagine that, on graduating from university, the most lucrative job offer they receive is from an advertising firm which wants them to help run a campaign aimed at recruiting new cigarette smokers among the young. Several students said they would have nothing to do with it. This was too much for one forthright boy who said, 'I know it's wrong, but I'd take the job'. His classmates spoke from the head, but he spoke from the heart. In the unvarnished language of the very young, he was reminding us that morality is all very well, but it is the bottom line that counts.

Teenagers often speak of adulthood as a time when they will have to outgrow youthful idealism. One seventeen-year-old observed wistfully that he would like to be a caring person, but 'as I get older and have more to lose, I think I will harden and start looking to survive as best I can'. A classmate joined in: 'Most people are just out for Number One, and I presume that I will become like them. For I must get all I can.' Sometimes they contrast the world of ideals with the 'real' world. On learning that a survey of first-year university students showed an increasingly pragmatic approach to education and a lessening of interest in ideas, a sixteen-year-old professed not to be surprised, for 'a meaningful philosophy of life cannot help you in the real world'. In more picturesque terms, one of his friends opined that 'most of the kids in this school just want to look good, eat good and smell good'. Even though some of these youngsters are not talking explicitly about morality, the implications are clear enough. The 'real world', as they see it, is not run along the lines of honesty or integrity or similar ideals but in terms of Darwinian survival of the fittest.

From this perspective, idealism, which comes naturally to the young, is not seen as something to be maintained by resisting temptations to selfishness. Just the opposite. Idealism is itself the temptation that must be resisted in the name of self-interest.

Some of them would be helped by engaging in an intentional, explicit analysis of consumerism and mass culture. Erich Fromm says that the underlying theme of advertising is the fear of not being loved, and the hope that, by purchasing some product, one might be loved.⁵ Until they perceive the unspoken premises of consumerism and see it as a shallow and unsatisfying way of life, many will be vulnerable to manipulation. Christianity must be presented not as a prescription for self-deprivation but as a superior programme for achieving happiness in the deepest sense.

Philosophical

Adolescents often seem to live in a world all their own, with their peers, their music, their distinctive clothes, their favourite movie stars and preferred television shows. But the adult world impinges on them in many ways, not least in the area of moral assessment. Not only do grown-ups' expectations and pressures and example exert a strong pull on young people, but also the explicit and implicit moral philosophies that predominate among adults. I am thinking here of what philosophers call *realism* and *relativism*. Some teens are quite clear and level-headed. They know some things are right or wrong regardless of how some people may think or feel. They may find the right thing hard to do or fail to do it, but they do not rationalize or excuse themselves. Thinking about morality, for them, is a search for truth. Others are already caught up in the relativism that pervades much of the adult world.

John Kavanaugh describes these young moral relativists that he meets in the university classroom:

The primacy of individual conscience means to many that conscience, the personal moral judgement, cannot be challenged. The very fact that a man or woman *makes* a choice serves to defend its moral rightness. No other standard is allowed than the standard of private choice. As a student of mine once wrote, 'Who can be so arrogant as to tell others that they are right or wrong?'⁶

They do not wait until university to think and talk this way. Explaining why he approves of abortion, a boy in secondary school writes:

Everything goes back to the word 'choice'. As an individual you have the choice of how you want to do things in life. I think that God made everyone different, meaning everyone has a mind of their own to make decisions for themselves.

A girl writes:

I think that choice is a right. If a woman chooses to use abortion I don't think she should be looked down upon because that would be contradicting the saying that America is free to choose. This does not reflect my personal feelings (about abortion) but I think that a judgement should not be passed if abortion is chosen.

A boy responds to a writer who thinks that handing out condoms in school is not the answer to unwanted teenage pregnancies. Ignoring all the evidence and arguments adduced in the article, he writes: 'Your stand on contraceptives is really a personal opinion'. After presenting his own views, he concludes: 'This is only my opinion, much like, I believe, your article was. You seem to be forcing your opinion on people and that puts a negative tone on things.'

These young people have not lived long enough to know from experience that unwise choices, however earnest, can do great damage. A bright but unrealistic boy observed: 'Most teenagers agree that haphazard premarital sex is wrong. But in cases where there is an intimate relationship, sex is a beautiful thing and can be engaged in, even though there may be consequences.' He and many of his peers have not yet come to grips with the problem posed by Charlie Brown in the popular comic strip *Peanuts*: 'How come our baseball team always loses, when we're so sincere?'

One of the things schools are supposed to do is help these naïve young people to analyse issues and develop decision-making skills that may spare them the harsher and more damaging lessons of experience. Their teachers often fail them not because they lack concern but because they are trapped in their own unconscious biases. After a tour of state school classrooms and watching attempts at inoffensive, value-free sex education, the then USA Secretary of education commented:

This is a very odd kind of teaching – very odd because it does not teach . . . It displays a conscious aversion to making moral distinctions . . . [It] is tantamount to throwing up our hands and saying to our young people: 'We give up teaching right and wrong to you. Here, take these facts, take this information, and take your feelings, your options, and try to make the best decisions you can. But you're on your own. We can say no more.'⁷

These young people have a laudable respect for personal conscience. It is part of growing up and becoming one's own person. What they

need from adults is help in understanding what conscience is, its limitations as well as its dignity. They also must learn how to *form* a conscience; how to discern the good from the apparently good. No matter how caught up they are in the subjectivism of the times, they are still young and adaptable enough to entertain and take on a new perspective. But their teachers need a great deal of skill, understanding, patience and determination.

Religious

What role does religion play in the moral universe of the young? It depends, for the most part, on how they think of God and Church. The ones who are doing best at getting it all together see the moral life as an attempt to find God's will and to do it. They see the Church as fellow-members of God's family trying together to be good, and church leaders as those whose job it is to help people figure out what is right and wrong. That combination of perceptions is easy to put into words, but very difficult to pass on to many of today's youth.

For the last thirty years religious educators and other youth ministers have been trying, and quite often succeeding, in depicting God as loving, caring and accepting. The complementary notions of God as judging, demanding or condemning are often neglected and implicitly denied. The avowed purpose of this approach to the divine is to avoid promoting a religion based on fear and to substitute one based on love. There is much to be said for it, but it does create some problems.

A girl on a retreat for secondary school students, after listening to a spirited dispute about the morality of abortion, could not see what all the fuss was about. 'I see that God forgives you for your sins, so why is there such a big argument over abortion being wrong?' A Catholic secondary schoolgirl, explaining why she disagrees with the Church's teaching against premarital sex for teenagers, writes: 'I don't think it is up to the Church to put the label "wrong" on something as personal as sex. The Catholic Church is not to impose their views as they do, on anyone. God can be the only judge – and he forgives everyone – doesn't he?'

When youth ministers realized how important it is for young people to have a positive self-image, it seemed like a good idea to present this kind of God – one who does not pass judgement, who is never disappointed in us, who accepts us just as we are. This is the God of unconditional love, who never stops loving us and reaching out to us, no matter what we do. Unfortunately, what some youngsters hear is that they are loved so much that God does not care what they do. Try to correct them, and they will explain that it was the Old Testament God

who used to threaten and punish. The New Testament God is much nicer, and does not get angry at anyone. This is very bad theology, but it fits in nicely with consumer culture's myth that we should experience whatever we desire.

Some young people appeal to this kinder, gentler God against the Church. Insisting on her and her peers' right to premarital sex, a girl explains: 'God gave us life and told us he would not stand in the way and would let us make our own decisions. Individuals should be the ones to dictate to themselves what their opinion on premarital sex is.'

The more one listens to these young people the clearer it becomes that relativism, individualism and subjectivism make it almost impossible for them to accept church moral teaching and even to understand why the Church should teach at all. A boy objects to priests preaching against abortion. 'They shouldn't be passing judgement on their neighbour. (I believe the Bible mentions that somewhere.)' About sex, a girl says, 'The Church can guide us, not tell us to say no, because the ultimate decision is ours alone'. And a girl wonders, 'Why doesn't the Church believe in the person that is having the baby make their own choice on what they want to do with the child?'

How did it come to this? Some blame it on poor religious instruction. Perhaps. But even good catechesis, when filtered through attitudes moulded by a hostile culture, can lose a lot in the translation. A God who makes demands, who calls evil by its name, who denounces injustice and calls to repentance, is not very attractive and will have trouble getting a hearing. These young people have come to expect a tolerance which makes no judgements and equates righteousness with sincerity, and they assume that God must do the same. Anything like prophetic religion is put down as 'fire and brimstone'.

Things might get better if we present them with the one who tells us what God is really like: Jesus. But it must be the *whole* Jesus. Not just the kind, compassionate, understanding friend, but the one who was famous in his lifetime for hard sayings and uncompromising honesty. The New Testament portrays Jesus warning, time and again, that our use of freedom has enormous consequences for good or ill. Selective reading of the gospels blunts the hard edge of Jesus' moral message and reduces him to a sentimental counsellor who offers nothing but affirmation. The image of Jesus as friend is a powerful and attractive one for the young, and is a staple of youth retreat talks. But a real friend is one who cares enough to tell us occasionally what we do not want to hear. Our children are growing up in a world where they will need more than pious generalities to survive as persons of moral insight and integrity.

To close on a positive note, we do well to remember a caution stated above, that moral agents are more than thinking persons. Many of the confused young people we have met are much better than their ideas. Their instincts and feelings are on the side of the angels and enable them to make good decisions in spite of their fuzzy thinking. Maybe the best antidote to the popular nonsense dumped on the young by older but not wiser adults is common sense, and youth has its share of that.

Many level-headed young people, blessed with idealism and discretion, will walk through the minefield that is today's moral landscape and emerge more or less unscathed. But without a clearer understanding of moral issues and principles, they may not be of much help to others. Like Voltaire's *Candide*, they may just give up on society and tend their own garden. Several years ago one of my students read an article by the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin in which he offered this suggestion for sex education:

Educate them in such things as family values, a healthy and integrated acceptance of sexuality, stability in marital relationships, a sense of obligation toward other persons, and willingness to accept the consequences of one's actions.⁸

The student replied:

This is impossible. The society in which we live is centered around two ideals: sex and money. Sex is used to make money, and money is used to get sex. If our world had more respect for sex, then Bernardin's plan would be great. In fact, I like his plan, but I don't think it can decrease teen-age pregnancies. I find it unfortunate that the world is as it is, but we should try to correct the problem, not run from it with an idea of great moral values.

Many of this boy's peers agree with him. They know what is right and want to do it, but do not aspire to anything more than a privatized pragmatism. Maybe their diagnosis is correct, but it is disappointing to those of us who remember when the young were the last ones to give up. The challenge that faces those who minister to the young is not only to help them achieve moral discretion and courage, but to inspire and enlist them in the effort to create a more responsible and caring society.

NOTES

¹ *Vision and character* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), pp 7-11.

² *Stages of faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), p 20.

³ Margaret Betz, *Making life choices* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), p 60.

⁴ Jean Kilbourne, *Still killing us softly* (Cambridge Documentary Films).

⁵ Cited in Film Guide, *The 30-second dream* (Mass Media Ministries).

⁶ 'A daunting task', *America* (18 January 1997), p 16.

⁷ William J. Bennett, 'Sex and the education of our children', *America* (14 February 1987), pp 5-6.

⁸ 'Abortion and teenage pregnancy', *New York Times* (22 January 1978).

God just is . . .

WHO AND WHERE GOD IS for me is an awkward question to answer. God just *is* and I could use an infinite number of phrases and descriptions in an attempt to explain the many beings and virtues that God encompasses. I suppose the most vital way for me to view God is as an existence of love. This love is displayed in the essence of the Trinity and the relationship between the three persons in one God. This love is also shown for humankind throughout history as recorded in the Bible.

If God is love then God is the joy of friendship, the beauty of a tree, the warmth of the summer sun, the embrace of my parents and all the loving experiences I have ever known. But love is more than this. Love is about faithfulness, a commitment, an overcoming of hardships, of a unity so strong it can never be broken. For love to grow and expand it must endure both the good and the bad times. Therefore God must be in the bitter sting of rejection, in the pain of ill health, in wrongs that need to be righted and in people I find it hard to warm to. God proved that he was also in suffering by his passion and crucifixion.

The challenge is to keep my heart and eyes awake so that I may see the existence of a loving God during times of loneliness, insecurity and pain. Also, to be able to recognize God in all whom I meet, love that person with respect and acceptance. Finally I must strive to see God in the easy, happy times, to thank God for a relationship with him and rejoice in the gifts I've been given.

*Lucy
Great Britain*