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Preliminary thoughts on the creation of an international curriculum in ethical education

by Professor Jonathan Levy

In early April 2005, the International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) held a seminar at Babson College, near Boston USA. It was the first of a projected series of yearly seminars established to consider the question, “What should a well, internationally educated student know in 2015 that he or she does not know now?” The Boston seminar was titled “Toward a curriculum in ethical education”. The question it addressed was, “How can we best strengthen and refine the way ethics are taught across the curriculum in IB schools?”

What follows is not a summary of the proceedings of the seminar. It is, rather, a few preliminary thoughts of mine on the possibilities and problems we may encounter turning the *idea* of a curriculum in ethical education into an actual working curriculum.

1

Defining our terms I see two possible problems at the outset. Both are rooted in language. The first problem is to agree on what the word “ethics” means. “Ethics” has two distinct meanings. It means both the discipline of studying systems of moral behaviour and the personal code of conduct by which each individual chooses to live. (1)

I see two potential dangers in the double meaning of the word. The first is that we will conflate the two meanings and thereby blur both the content and the purpose of our curriculum. The second is that we may be lulled into believing that a course of “ethics,” in its first meaning—academic study—will somehow naturally lead to the practice of good “ethics” in its second meaning. That is, that somehow rigorous academic study will lead to good action. It doesn’t, or doesn’t necessarily. As George Walker, in opening the seminar, reminded those of us present, most of the Nazi defendants at Nuremberg were well educated, and that some had PhDs.

I think we should agree that the chief purpose of our curriculum is to teach our students to *act* ethically, by which I mean fairly, honourably and ideally altruistically. It may turn out that we can accomplish that through an imaginatively conceived course of academic study. It may turn out that we can’t. But in either case, I think we must agree, and remember that we have agreed, that our aim is to not to produce students who are merely learned in ethics, but students who will act honourably as adults.

Our second problem also begins in language. It is to agree on what precisely it means to *teach* ethics. “Teach,” in the sense we are used to using it, is probably not the most accurate verb to describe the way ethics are best transmitted. “Convey,” “instill,” “impart,” or “infuse,” each in its own way probably comes closer to the truth.

This is because ethical education is not like any other subject. Indeed, it is not a subject at all. It is system of conduct, a code for living, and there is no proven way to teach it. If there were, the peoples of the world would not be at each other’s throats, often, ironically, over “ethical” questions.

This means that we cannot count on our expertise. We must think afresh and anew—“ab initio,” to use a familiar IB expression—about what we are doing and how we should do it. We must guard particularly against false analogies. We will not be able to *write* a curriculum in ethics the way we write a curriculum in

Latin or biology. And we will not be able to *teach* (or instill or infuse) a curriculum in ethics the way we teach physics or physical education.

It is hard to give up what is familiar, especially if one is good at it. It will require considerable resolve to keep our intuitions fresh and our minds open.

But the end is worth the effort. For, if we can devise an effective curriculum in ethics and learn to teach it so that it is truly learned, it will surely be the most important teaching any of us will ever have the privilege of doing.

2

If the first potential pitfall we face is that of false analogy, the second is that of over simplification, or false simplicity.

By false simplicity I mean unthinkingly accepting the assumption that all systems of ethics are basically alike and that, despite our separate heritages, cultures and religions, all human beings really believe essentially the same thing, and that is something very close to being the golden rule. (2)

The truth is, I believe, more complex, more subtle and much more interesting.

A parable in point. Two thousand years ago, there lived two great rabbis, Shammai and Hillel. Shammai was an engineer by trade and, perhaps predictably, a strict constructionist. Hillel was born into wealthy family but lived in poverty, supporting himself as a woodcutter, and he was known for his kindness. One day, a gentile came to Shammai and said that he would convert to Judaism if Shammai could teach him the whole Torah in the time that he could stand on one foot. Shammai drove him off with a builder's level. The gentile then went to Hillel and asked him the same thing. Hillel said: "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour.

That is the whole of the Torah, the rest is commentary. Go and study.” (The Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a)

What Hillel said is *something* like the golden rule, but there are two crucial differences between it and the golden rule.

The first is obvious. The golden rule—“Do unto others as you would have others do unto you” (Matthew 7:12)—enjoins us to be good. Hillel enjoins us *not to be bad*. (3) These are different things and may well have to be taught differently. Hillel requires substantially less of us than Jesus does. I myself think that, given the heterodoxy of our world—the IB is taught in 122 countries, to Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, and so on—we should set out to teach Hillel’s rule first; that is, educate young people *not to be bad*. In the truce that follows, we can try, painstakingly, to make them good.

The second difference between what Hillel said and the golden rule is that, when this passage is quoted, Hillel’s last three words are usually omitted, and his last three words alter his meaning profoundly. They are “go and study”. In Hillel’s formulation, virtuous behaviour is a beginning, not an end. Hillel is suggesting a developmental distinction here, one that can be of fundamental importance to prospective teachers of ethics. It is the distinction between acceptable behaviour, which can be taught, and the development of an informed conscience, which must be learned.

And, according to Hillel, once we have stopped doing our neighbour harm, we must take a next step: we must “go and study”. The question is, “study what?” This was an easy question for Hillel to answer: study Torah, in which all truth lay and from which it could, with work, be extracted.

The question is a harder one for us and is a question in two parts: First, what should we require our students to study—and by “study” I mean much more than academic study; I mean “do,” “perform,” “experience,” and so on—to become ethically educated men and women? That is, in practical terms, what will be the substance

of our curriculum. And second, what should we *the writers* of the curriculum study (again “study” in the broadest sense of the word) to prepare us to devise an effective curriculum in ethical education? Where should we begin to look?

Here are a few possibilities.

4

Psychology. Psychology is probably the first discipline we think to consult when we are looking for new ideas in education. Psychology, after all, is “the science of...the human mind...” including the developing human mind. It is therefore is a natural place to look for guidance in any project in educational innovation. But there are other disciplines, which may be equally useful to us, though in less obvious ways.

Biography and autobiography. Biography and autobiography have always been used to teach the young how the good got to be good and the wicked got to be wicked. Saints’ lives are exempla. Tyrants’ and traitors’ are cautionary tales. But biography and autobiography can teach us a great deal more than that. They can, for example, teach us a great deal about the machinery of self-deception, which surely must be a major component of any curriculum in ethical education. Jean Renoir said that even the villains have their reasons and it is most useful to understand how they arrived at their reasons. Or they can teach us how decent people like Primo Levi and Alexander Solzynitsin survived—or, like Anne Frank, did not survive—man’s worst brutality. They can also remind us of just how brutal man is capable of being.

Biology. The useful word “bioethics,” was coined in 1971 to describe “the discipline dealing with ethical questions which arise out of advances in biological and medical research”—cloning, cell stem research, and so on. However, the same word could equally well describe another basic discipline: the study of how, in what ways and to what degree, our ethics are rooted in our biology. Here are some of the questions this discipline might consider: “What, if anything, in our physical nature disposes us toward what we call decency, even goodness?” “Why do some species seem predisposed to act altruistically toward one another?”—while

other species seem predisposed to act “brutally” toward one another, by what we have come to call “the law of the jungle”? And, most importantly for those of us charged with writing a curriculum in ethical education, where does man fit in?

Genetics. By “genetics” I mean the qualities inherent in the individual, not the species. The central question for us I see here is this: what evidence do we have for assuming that all members of our species are equally talented, or (to use Howard Gardner’s word) intelligent, ethically. And if we are not all equally talented (or intelligent) *then what?* Especially, then what, when our aim is to write a uniform curriculum in ethical education?

Literature. Literature has historically been assumed to have a strong moral influence, especially on the young. Indeed, the value of a work of literature—fiction, poetry and drama—has often been thought to depend on the value of the “moral,” or “message” it contained. (Dr. Johnson criticized Shakespeare for not drawing a clearer moral from “As You Like It”). The question for us is whether that assumption is true. Does moral literature do anyone any actual moral good?

I have done a good deal of thinking about one branch of moral literature, and that is the “edifying” or “improving” drama. The question is whether this kind of drama really edifies and improves. My reluctant conclusion is that it does not. Though certain forms of didactic drama can teach certain solid things—myths or the rudiments of history, for example—I’ve come to believe that consciously moral drama does no one any long-term moral good, except perhaps its producers. On the contrary, I believe that insisting on a play’s “message” tends to neuter the play; to suck what Henry James called “the felt life” out of it.

This, of course, does not mean that a play or a book or a poem cannot change a young person’s life, change it entirely, and change it for the better. It only means that anticipating *which* play or book or poem will change his life, and *how* it will, is almost certainly hopeless.

Behaviour modification. That is, regular drill in ethical behaviour. Basic training without live ammunition. Frequent repetition, until it—whatever “it” is—really sinks in.

Introspection and retrospection. That is, the habit of looking backward and inward in order to discover what formed our own moral characters and our own code of ethics; the habit of using our own lives as text; “self-study” in its profoundest sense. Surely this is what the familiar IB phrase; “life-long learning” must chiefly mean.

Directed discussion, or Socratic dialogue on ethical subjects. This sounds very much like theory of knowledge, or a theory of knowledge-like seminar exclusively concerned with ethical and moral problems. This is tempting because it is such a *school-like* solution and because it is comforting to discover that one has been doing more or less the right thing for years.

A personal caveat about mere talk. I went to an ethical culture school where formal classes in “ethics” were part of the curriculum. After 50 years, what I remember that we approached “ethics” just as we did our other classes: we tried to show how much we knew and how clever we were. In Dr. Johnson’s phrase, we “talked for victory.” Ethics was, after all, one class in series of classes. It was perhaps too much to ask that we change our mindset so rapidly from one class to another. School after all, was school and it had been clear since kindergarten how one was supposed to behave in school. One was supposed to shine.

In retrospect, I have come to believe that our formal ethics classes had very little effect on our, or at least on my, future behaviour. They did, I admit, exercise the lawyerly parts of our minds and sharpen our powers of debate, and that is something. Unfortunately, it is not what I and I hope my colleagues mean by ethical education.

Theology, of course. But, of course, whose?

“Let he who is without sin set the first exam.”

There is a third and last problem, which is, what credentials a person should have to teach a course in ethics. Mere learning, as we’ve seen, is not enough. Transparent goodness—goodness plain enough to speak for itself—is all too rare. And Gandhi is dead.

The same question, in a slightly different form, must be asked of those who set about to write a curriculum in ethical education. The question to them—to us—is who is competent to presume to teach other people—generations of other people from all corners of the globe and their children—how to live?.

Clearly, the answer to both questions is “no one.” But that answer will not do. If we expect our children and grandchildren to survive in this savage century, we need a widely accepted, international code of ethical behaviour, and we need it soon. Teaching such a code to a broad cross-section of the world’s young is the most promising way to promulgate and instill it. IB students represent a unique cross section of the world’s young. If we don’t try, who will?

Notes

1. The Oxford English Dictionary, “Ethics.” [1a] “The science of morals; the department of study concerned with the principles of human duty”... [3b] “Moral principles by which a person is guided.”
2. Cf., for example, “The Christopher Newsletter.”
3. Matt. VII 12. The full quotation reads, “Whatever therefore you wish men to do to you, do the same to them, *for this is the meaning of the Law and the prophets* (my italics) “The Anchor Bible”. According to the notes, Hillel’s version came “shortly before the time of Jesus.” And see “The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible” (p.438) for a short historical discussion of the injunction in the Old Testament and the differences between the Christian and the Jewish versions.