

Should Public Schools Teach Virtue?

What role should public schools play in moral education? One answer is none: schools should leave character development and training in moral reasoning to families and voluntary associations (such as churches). As one popular authority put it, "Personally, Miss Manners thinks that the parents of America should offer the school systems a bargain: You teach them English, history, mathematics, and science, and we [their parents] will . . . look after their souls." An apparent attraction of this solution is that public schools would thereby rid themselves of all the political controversies now surrounding moral education and get on with the task of teaching cognitive skills and factual knowledge.

But children don't leave their souls behind when they go to school, and schools cannot escape looking after children's souls in many significant and subtle ways. Even if schools avoid all courses that deal explicitly with morality or civic education, they still engage in moral education by virtue of their "hidden curriculum," non-curricular policies that serve to develop moral attitudes and character in students.

Schools develop moral character at the same time as they try to teach basic cognitive skills, by insisting that students sit in their seats, raise their hands before speaking, hand in their homework on time, not loiter in the halls, be good sports on the playing field, and abide by the many other rules that help define a school's character. We become aware of some of the many ways in which schools shape moral character when we consider alternative school practices. Consider some common practices in Japanese elementary schools. Teachers routinely expect students who have mastered the day's lesson to help teach those who have yet to finish. Every member of the school, including the principal, shares in the chores necessary to keep the school building clean (schools have no specialized janitorial staff). These practices are lessons in egalitarianism that may never need to be taught in the curriculum if they are consistently practiced in the classroom. Most elementary schools in the United States teach different moral lessons, but they too engage in moral education simply by not doing what the Japanese schools do. The political choice facing us therefore is not whether schools should engage in moral education, but what sort of moral education they should engage in.

Nor would it be desirable for schools to forswear moral education, even if it were possible for them to

do so. Public schools in a democracy should serve our interests as citizens in the moral education of future citizens. Our parental interests are to some extent independent of our role as democratic citizens, and hence the emphasis of moral education within the family is likely to be quite different from that within schools. Parents acting individually and citizens acting collectively both have valuable and largely complementary roles to play in the moral education of children: the former in teaching children what it means to be committed to particular people and one way of life among many; the latter in teaching responsibilities and rights within a more heterogeneous community.

Liberal Neutrality

How can public schools in a democracy best perform these functions of moral education? A popular position — which I call *liberal neutrality* — is that schools should teach the capacity for moral reasoning and choice without predisposing children toward any given conception of the good life. Just as a liberal state must leave its adult citizens free to choose their own good life, so must its schools leave children free to choose their own values. If public schools predisposed citizens by educating them as children, the professed neutrality of the liberal state would be a cover for the bias of its educational system. Liberal neutrality supports the educational method of "values clarification," which enjoys widespread use in schools throughout the United States. Proponents of values clarification identify two major purposes of moral education within public schools. The first is to help students understand and develop their own values. The second is to teach them tolerance and respect for the values of others. Values clarification is based on the premise that no teacher has the "right" set of values to pass on to other people's children.

Treating every moral opinion as equally worthy, however, encourages children in the false notion that "I have my opinion and you have yours and who's to say who's right?" This is not to take the demands of democratic justice seriously. The toleration that values clarification teaches is too indiscriminate for even the most ardent democrat to embrace. If children come to school believing that "Blacks, Jews, Catholics, and/or homosexuals are inferior beings who shouldn't have the same rights as the rest of us," then it is criticism, not just clarification, of children's values that is needed.

From STUART LITTLE by E. B. White



Moralist Positions

What I call *moralist* positions on moral education begin where this critique of liberal neutrality leaves off, with a conception of moral education whose explicit purpose is to inculcate character. Proponents of moralist positions, both liberal and conservative, seek to shape a particular kind of moral character through their educational methods, rather than trying only to facilitate free and informed choice. They recognize that public schools are appropriate institutions of moral education because good moral character is a social, not just an individual or familial, good.

Conservative moralists emphasize teaching children to respect authority. They defend educational programs which liberals often criticize as indoctrination or at least as unduly restrictive of individual freedom: patriotic rituals, dress codes, strict discipline within the classroom, and deference to teachers' opinions. Liberal moralists, on the other hand, generally identify autonomy as the goal of moral education: education should produce in children the desire and capacity to make conscious moral choices based on generalizable principles. They endorse non-directive methods of teaching similar to those practiced by proponents of liberal neutrality. I want to suggest that the most promising position lies between these two extremes.

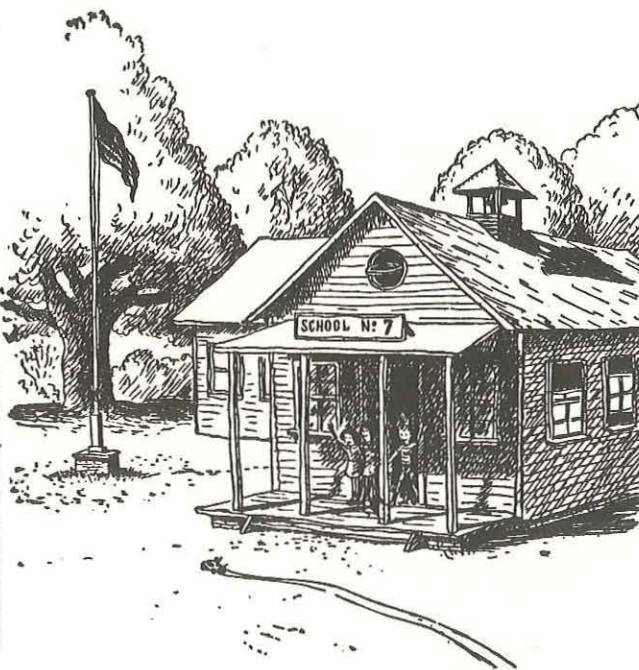
Guided by Piaget's work on moral development, John Rawls outlines a three-stage theory of liberal moral education that culminates in autonomy. Children begin to learn morality by following rules because their parents and other authorities issue them. Learning the "morality of authority" is an improvement over anarchy of desire. The second stage of moral development, the "morality of association," is characterized by an acceptance of rules because they are appropriate to fulfilling the roles that individuals play within various cooperative associations. Children learn that students, friends, and citizens obey moral rules because they thereby benefit the association of which they are a part, and are benefitted in turn. The final stage of moral development is the "morality of principle," a direct attachment to moral principles themselves.

Nobody, however, has yet discovered a way that schools can succeed in teaching the morality of principle. The most extensive research, conducted by Kohlberg and his associates, demonstrates that the best

schools (by Kohlberg's standards and using his own set of six stages) are most successful in moving children from the morality of authority to the morality of association. But very few sixteen-year-olds reach the morality of principle, and there is no evidence to credit schools with this rare accomplishment. Although it is possible that there is a way that schools can teach autonomy, we have yet to find it.

But from a democratic perspective, success in teaching the morality of association marks great moral progress over the morality of authority. Children who learn the morality of association can distinguish between fair and unfair, trustworthy and untrustworthy authorities. They learn to judge the commands of professional and political authorities, along with their own actions, according to whether they live up to the cooperative virtues of democratic association. Schools that teach children these virtues — fulfilling one's obligations, respecting and making good use of the rights of citizenship, criticizing unjust and untrustworthy authorities — are uncommonly successful. Such success may be compatible with the use (at least in early stages of schooling) of many of the pedagogical practices that advocates of liberal neutrality regard as indoctrination and that Kohlberg criticizes as the "Boy Scout approach to moral education." Just as children learn filial independence after they learn to love and respect their parents, so they may learn political independence after they become patriotic toward their country. The standards of patriotism and loyalty, like those of love and respect for parents, change as children learn to think critically about politics and to recognize that their civic duties extend far beyond voting and obedience to laws. Moral education begins by winning the battle against amoralism and egoism. And ends — if it ends at all — by struggling against uncritical ac-

From STUART LITTLE by E. B. White
Illustrations © 1973 by Garth Williams



Reprinted by permission of Harper & Row, Publishers

ceptance of moral habits and opinions that were the spoils of the first victory.

That schools are not terribly effective in teaching autonomy should not surprise us. Since moral autonomy means doing what is right because it is right and not because any authority or law requires it, some of the most effective lessons in moral autonomy may result from the opportunity to disobey commands that are neither perfectly just nor repressive. At least we cannot assume — nor does empirical evidence suggest — that autonomy is best taught by lessons that are planned to develop autonomy by those who teach them. Even if the morality of association is (as Rawls suggests) a subordinate philosophical ideal, it still may be a primary political ideal for democratic moral education within schools.

Moral education begins by winning the battle against amoralism and egoism. And ends—if it ends at all—by struggling against uncritical acceptance of moral habits and opinions that were the spoils of the first victory.

If by virtue we mean moral autonomy, then the role of schools in moral education is necessarily a limited one. We know of no way that schools (or anyone else)

can teach virtue in this sense. But democratic virtue can be taught in many ways — by teaching black and white students together in the same classrooms, by bringing all children up to a high minimum standard of learning, by respecting religious differences, by teaching American history not just as a series of elections, laws, treaties, and battles, but as lessons in the practice (sometimes successful, sometimes not) of political virtue. In these and other ways, schools can teach respect among races, religious toleration, patriotism, and political judgment — lessons which hold out the promise of bringing us closer to a more just democratic society.

— Amy Gutmann

Amy Gutmann is Associate Professor of Politics at Princeton University and was recently a Rockefeller Resident Fellow at the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy. This article is part of her forthcoming book entitled *Democratic Education*. The Miss Manners column quoted appeared in the *Washington Post* on October 21, 1984; the information on practices in Japanese schools is taken from William K. Cummings, *Education and Equality in Japan* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980); John Rawls's three-stage theory of liberal moralist education is outlined in *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971); Kohlberg's studies are reported in Moshe M. Blatt and Lawrence Kohlberg, "The Effects of Classroom Moral Discussion Upon Children's Level of Moral Judgment," *Journal of Moral Education*, vol. 4 (1975) and Kohlberg and E. Turiel, "Moral Development and Moral Education," in G. Lesser, ed., *Psychology and Educational Practice* (Chicago: Scott, Foresman, 1971).

Why Life Is Disappointing

Everyone knows that life is disappointing. We learn this early and remember it long. Or as one cheerful pundit observed: "We are born crying, live complaining, and die disappointed." Why this should be is somewhat of a puzzle, however. Any explanation must focus, not on why things generally turn out badly, but why they generally turn out so much worse than we expected. Disappointment is the gap between expectations and reality, between hope, the thing with feathers that perches in the soul, and the egg that, more often than not, it lays.

The Bible seems to suggest that a routine confounding of expectations (the first shall be last, the last first, and so on) is useful in cutting man down to size, keeping him on his toes. The book of Job, which should have something to say about disappointment if anything does, pronounces that men are disappointed "because they were confident" (Job 6:20). Jehovah looks on Job's dashed hopes with a lofty satisfaction: "Behold, the

hope of a man is disappointed" (Job 41:9). The guiding principle seems to be that man appoints, God disappoints, a perpetual reminder of our place in the scheme of things. The New Testament allows human hopes, properly directed, a somewhat brighter outlook ("... and hope does not disappoint us" — Romans 5:5). But "hope against hope," that is to say, hope of the most apparently perverse sort, is the favored variety.

Enjoying a more worldly perspective, contemporary economists approach our question in a different framework. Why is it, they ask, that when we assess the projected costs and benefits of some undertaking, we end up overestimating the benefits so much more often than we end up overestimating the costs? Why do our cost-benefit analyses, measured against the subsequent unfolding of events, so often err on the side of optimism?

Harvard economists Richard Zeckhauser and