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Moral Education and Mystery

Abstract

Martin Buber's position on moral education, that which denies the validity of moral education based upon invariant stages of moral development (Kohlberg), values clarification (Simon), commitment to ultimate life goals (Beck) or on one's ability to reason, presents a clear and serious challenge. The essence of Buber's position is that there are "eternal norms"; that the eternal norms emerge from the "mystery"; that one becomes aware of, is struck by, these norms as a consequence of openness to the world; that what one is left with is not a moral principle that is possible to articulate such as justice, nor a set of norms to be articulated, but rather with an overpowering sense of personal responsibility and confidence.

Buber's position can be usefully compared and contrasted with that of Jean-Paul Sartre, each of whom can explain the persisting yet enigmatic quality of morality in human affairs. The former embodies the hopes of man for meaning; the latter embodies man's fear of futility. Buber's position can stand with or without its religious underpinnings; it stresses awareness over intellect, not faith over intellect.

Implications of certain approaches to moral education in the classroom are examined.

Current approaches to moral education include programs

based on the Values Clarification approach (Raths, 1978; Simon, 1972), on the Reflective Ethics approach (Beck, 1972), on Kohlberg's claim that one attains higher forms of morality by attaining higher levels of reasoning (Kohlberg, 1981), and on direct instruction in virtue. In each case, clarity and precision about morality is either assumed (most forms of direct instruction) or deliberately and carefully pursued (the remaining approaches). Kohlberg, who currently dominates the field, and Beck both emphasize that reason is the necessary springboard to morality. Many forms of direct moral instruction are openly based on clear doctrine founded ultimately upon faith and revelation.

The position of Martin Buber on morality and moral education poses a serious challenge to all the above approaches: morality is founded neither upon reason nor faith, and precision is in principle ruled out. In this paper I attempt to explicate Buber's position and use Jean-Paul Sartre as a foil since I am convinced that humankind's deepest hopes and fears find expression in these two philosophies, and that the similarities and contrasts therein are highly illuminating for all concerned with morality and the moral education of our young.

The mystery of morality

From time immemorial man has wrestled with the question of "the good". Is the good knowable fact, or is it opinion? Is morality merely a serious social fashion, varying over time and space, at heart a social device to shape an individual's behavioural garb? Is it pathetic to be seriously moral since we thus declare ourselves fashioned by others? Or is morality man at his best? If this latter, what scale of values is it that registers "best"? If the history of philosophy proves anything, it proves that morality is elusive, is enigmatic. We have been unable to demonstrate what exactly is good. Furthermore, we are not even exactly sure what is being claimed when something is held to be good. These conspicuous failures may simply mark current ignorance; but it may be that the good emanates from beyond reason, from mystery.

Mystery, as here conceived, refers to that which lies just beyond clear sensibility and rationality; that which cannot be clearly seen, heard or touched, nor probed, nor fully exposed by means of rational argument and/or experimentation. Our society's disregard of mystery is palpable; the knowable and achievable dominate the social consciousness. If mystery was a product of faith, then in respecting the decision of many not to take the step of faith we would fully accept their disregard of mystery. But mystery is not a matter of faith, rather it is a matter of fact clearly articulated by reason able to plot its own limits. In physics, our most advanced science, the uncertainty principle, much of general relativity where maths has taken man far beyond

his ability to conceive, and the inescapable use of paradigms, all conspire to overawe the intellect, and to remind man of his limitations.   There is no need, however, to appeal to modern science in order to establish mystery.

"Why is there something rather than nothing?" is a venerable question that leaves reason helpless.   Beyond reason and clear sensibility lies mystery; beyond clarity lies the dimly felt; beyond explanation lies the inexplicable.   Modern versions of moral education stress clarity and precision.   The enterprise is not haunted by a sense of ignorance, nor does it speak of mystery. In Martin Buber's conception of morality and moral education, mystery dominates and certainty is balanced by uncertainty.   I would like to briefly expound his view.

Buber: morality and responsibility

In order to grasp Buber's portrayal of morality, its nature and how it "takes hold" of a person (i.e., how one is morally educated), one must understand his notion of responsibility. Morality and responsibility are, for Buber, inextricably interwoven.

Buber's notion of responsibility has four essential features:

1. The decision to respond this way or that to this or that other comes from deep within.   That is, there is full consciousness that the decision does not merely reflect what is popular, or unpopular, but that it is genuinely, deeply, my own decision; it does not strike me as arbitrary or careless but rather is a response of my "whole being".

2. The decision to respond genuinely, deeply, is born of the sort of experience referred to by Buber as dialogue or communion, wherein I have a heightened awareness of the other that is in some sense lyrical, moving and meaningful.   In being open to the world, as opposed to using it, I am addressed by it.   I experience "that spark of the soul".

> The kindling of the response in that "spark" of the soul, the blazing up of the response, which occurs time and again to the unexpectedly approaching speech, we term responsibility. (Buber, 1961, p.119)

3.   In making my response, I am dominated by a sense of having been entrusted with the other.   The other must receive from me an honest, genuine response since the other is "in my care".   I cannot let the other down; I could not harm the other.

> I cannot be answerable without being at the same time answerable for the other as one who is entrusted to me.   But thereby a man has decisively entered into

relation with otherness; and the basic structure of
otherness, in many ways uncanny but never quite
unholy or incapable of being hallowed, in which I and
the others who meet me in my life are inwoven, is the
body politic. (Buber, 1961, p.83)

4.   My deep, genuine response to that other with whom I
am entrusted is the response of doing what is right, what is good.
Faced, for example, with the reality of Billy in the classroom,
and having been open to him, and fleetingly, but dramatically, felt
his presence, I have to do the right thing. What I do is what I
believe, to the very best of my knowledge and intuition, to be
right. I am not able to know intellectually that I am right, but
I know I am right. The rightness of my response is, for me,
"uncertain certainty".

I point to the unknown conscience in the ground of
being, which needs to be discovered ever anew, the
conscience of the "spark", for the genuine spark is
effective also in the single composure of each genuine
decision. The certainty produced by this conscience is
of course only a personal certainty; it is uncertain
certainty... (Buber, 1961, p.93)

... the human, uncertain and certain truth which is
brought forward by his deep conscience... (p.94)

You cannot devour the truth, it is not served up
anywhere in the world; you cannot even gape at it, for
it is not an object. And yet there does exist a
participation in the being of inaccessible truth - for
the man who stands its test. There exists a real
relation of the whole human person to the unpossessed,
unpossessable truth, and it is completed only in
standing its test. (p.67)

Thus, in encountering the world in the lyrical, disturbing manner
of dialogue, I encounter an unpossessable truth, the eternal values.
I experience them as opposed to learn them; I "sense" them. I
cannot doubt them for they are truth. But intellectually I must
doubt the whole experience; intellectually I am certain of nothing:
I cannot prove or provide clear evidence for what I have
"learned".

Morality, then, for Buber, is not an upshot of intellectual
training or capability or an act of faith, but of openness to the
world where within the spark of dialogue moral truths are "felt".

The life of dialogue is no privilege of intellectual
activity like dialectic. It does not begin in the upper
story of humanity. It begins no higher than where
humanity begins. There are no gifted and ungifted

here, but only those who give themselves and those
who withhold themselves. And he who gives himself
tomorrow is not noted today, even he himself does not
know that he has it within himself, that we have it
within ourselves, he will just find it, "and finding be
amazed". (Buber, 1961, p.54)

Emerging from strange, lyrical, amazing, fleeting relations with
the other, person or thing, morality intermittently flashes on to
the world scene in concrete, particular experiences. Morality is
not an opinion or social convention. Morality is an unpossessable
truth which eludes man's attempt to freeze it into language as a
statable, analysable, possessed moral principle; morality eludes
reason. Values and mystery are inseparable. This is Buber's
position.

Buber and Sartre contrasted

I would like, very briefly, to compare and contrast Buber's
notion of responsibility with that of Jean-Paul Sartre. The
differences are startling, and betoken, for me, man's deepest
dilemma.

For Sartre (1966), to be is to choose; man is not a mere
puppet of biology or environment. Thus man is responsible for his
actions since his actions reflect his own choices. Thus Sartre
could appreciate Buber's notion of a decision that was genuinely
and deeply one's own.

For Sartre, man is also responsible for all men in the sense
that we do influence others by our words and actions, and in the
sense that when we declare something to be morally good we in
fact legislate for all men (Sartre, 1948, pp.28-32). "Honesty is
good" means, "All ought to be honest." Thus Sartre could
appreciate Buber's notion of responsibility to others.

But Sartre's notions of responsibility stem from awareness of
his own freedom-to-choose and from intellectual understanding of
a moral claim. This is in stark contrast to Buber whose sense of
responsibilty stems from a vivid awareness of a specific other,
and is not translatable into any sort of moral principle applying
to all; the response Buber makes is one **he must** make in that
situation, not one **all ought** to make in similar situations. It is
highly significant that Sartre has no concept of lyrical relation
with the world. His entire thesis rests on the assertion that
consciousness is a severance from the world (Sartre, 1966). To
be conscious of a tree is to be aware that I am not the tree.
My subjectivity is radically severed from your subjectivity; hell
is other people who have no option but to objectify me. This
radical distance between me and the other is in stark contrast to
Buber's dialogue wherein, he claims, all distance collapses and I

know the other wholly, as subject, but in a non-intellectual, awareness-type way of knowing. (I can intellectually know I am mortal, but stricken by cancer I "really" know I am mortal, i.e., my awareness is pervaded by the reality of death. The knowledge gained in dialogue is of this latter sort.)

Moreover, morality for Sartre is a human creation. He likens it to a work of art (Sartre, 1948, pp.48-50). Like a picture, morality is neither true nor false, rather it appeals to us or it does not; we either hang the picture up, as it were, or reject it as unattractive. Arguments over morality, over what is really good, must therefore always be futile in the way arguments over what is appealing are futile. There may be scientific truths giving man a measure of certainty in life, but there are no moral truths on which he can rely. Man is on his own, faced with making his own moral choices. Moralities will vary over time and space, and will often conflict. The upshot, scrupulously traced out by Sartre, is conflict, anguish, despair and abandonment (pp.30 ff.). All of which stands in stark contrast to Buber's lyrical relation with the other (dialogue), moral truths, and the meaning and certainty those truths furnish.

Finally, Sartre maintains that consciousness is desire (Sartre, 1966, pp.133 ff.). Consciousness is necessarily haunted by the desire for being, for completeness, for fulfillment, because consciousness is the lack of being (most easily thought of as consciousness being pure process, unable to self-subsist: if no world, then no consciousness). All historical moralities betoken this ontological questing of consciousness for perfection, completeness, for lacking nothing. Yet the quest of consciousness for being-perfection is futile - if it attained being it would cease to be consciousness. Thus morality is a haunting ideal that is in principle unattainable; morality is a tangible reminder that man is a futile passion, is hopeless desire for an impossible fulfillment/perfection/wholeness. Thus Sartre's morality is pervaded by arbitrariness and futility, whereas Buber's morality embraces moral truths, meaning and mystery. Sartre's morality is born of futile desire, whereas Buber's morality emerges from the complete absence of desire, from pure openness to the world.

Thus Sartre does not feel entrusted with particular others who blaze up in his world in the mystery of relation, in the lyricism of the aesthetic, rather he intellectually acknowledges that others in general will be influenced by him and therefore he ought to feel the weight of responsibility when making his moral choices. Sartre does, however, agree with Buber's notion of "uncertain certainty": "We heard whole blocks screaming, and we understood that 'evil', fruit of a free and sovereign will, is like 'good', absolute" (Sartre, 1948, p.248). Sartre's certainty is an index of the depth of his moral commitment, a commitment fuelled by an impossible perfection haunting consciousness; his uncertainty derives from his conviction that morality is merely a

personal choice, a created picture.   Buber's certainty, on the other hand, derives from moral truths which deep conscience flashes forth in dialogue; his uncertainty derives from the mystery of dialogue, the inability to prove anything.

Thus each attests in his own way to the persistence and vitality of morality in human affairs, and each attests to its elusive, enigmatic quality.   The one gives hope that morality betokens a higher, purer order, that morality betokens deep meaning in human affairs.   The other insists that life is without meaning, that all is absurd and futile.   Thus are encapsulated man's deepest hopes and fears.

Can we intellectualize morality?

If we accept Buber, then engaging in moral education by posing dilemmas, discussing value issues and laying out alternatives, becoming clear about ultimate life goals and conflicting values, getting young people to move from one developmental stage to the next, all miss the mark.   Morality is not intellectual (though social norms are).   I am morally educated, according to Buber, to the extent that I meet a great character and meet the other in dialogue.   A great character is one who is unified deep down, who is open, responsive, responsible.   Meeting a great character will give me courage to be likewise.

> This is where the educator can begin and should begin...   He can awaken in young people the courage to shoulder life again.   He can bring before his pupils the image of a great character who denies no answer to life and the world, but accepts responsibility for everything essential that he meets.   (Buber, 1961, p. 145)

And to be open and to encounter the other in dialogue will create in me the sense of entrustedness, of having to do the right thing; and will cause me to sense moral truth, the eternal norms.

> Genuine education of character is genuine education for community.   In a generation which has had this kind of upbringing the desire will also be kindled to behold again the eternal values, to hear again the language of the eternal norm.   He who knows inner unity, the innermost life of which is mystery, learns to honour the mystery in all its forms...   A generation which honours the mystery in all its forms will no longer be deserted by eternity. (p.146)

On this count, then, it is not moral teaching that we need, not curricular strategies, but rather teachers willing to be open, to dare to go with what emerges from the mysterious dimension

of life, to respect mystery. We need teachers who are great characters, able to hold their ground because of some deep personal unity in some way grounded upon moral truth, and willing to genuinely, ingenuously, respond to children with the right response and thus satisfy the felt claim of entrustedness.

This is not to say that direct moral instruction is wrong, that Kohlberg has said nothing useful, or that discussing and reflecting upon values is a waste of time. Similarly, courses in moral education for prospective teachers should not be done away with. Treating morality seriously is always better than acting as if it were of no significance. But just as reason, in maths and science, has become aware of its limitations, and just as philosophers acknowledge philosophy to be a quest rather than a conclusion (Carter, 1984), so the enterprise of moral education needs to be sharply reminded that mystery is at its core, that at the heart of morality lie relationships rather than learnable principles, and that example is the supreme "teacher". Current moral education must recognise the must, the mystery and the flash, not merely dwell on the ought, clarity, and teaching strategies.

But why believe Buber? Perhaps he is just another sentimentalist who can't face up to the absurdity of existence and the need in society for moral laws in order to give the police less to do. Perhaps he abandoned a clearly articulated religion but couldn't quite let go. I can only offer a personal answer. I am convinced that the "certain uncertainty" attested to by both Sartre and Buber is phenomenologically accurate, which is to say that you feel it too. Having taught the philosophy of Buber for the last twelve years, I am always struck by the impact he has, as if he spoke of deeply felt truths. And it is certainly true that if I have been moved by the beauty of a river, I cannot throw trash into it; moved by the presence of a person, I cannot deceive him or her. It is not at all that I ought not, it is that I **must** not; it is not a matter of obedience to a general principle, but rather a feel of the right and good.

> And if one still asks if one may be certain of finding what is right on this steep path, once again the answer is NO; there is no certainty. There is only a chance; but there is no other. The risk [of openness and genuine, ingenuous responding] does not ensure the truth for us; but it, and it alone, leads to where the breath of truth is felt. (Buber, 1961, p.94)

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