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Incoherence and Contradiction in the Values Clarification Movement

Abstract

From the beginning the Values Clarification movement of Raths, Harmin, and Kirchenbaum was characterized as amoral, subjectivist, inconsistent, and relativist. Later, attempts have been made to modify the movement to make it a nonjudgmental, nondogmatic, and nonindoctrinative substitute for moral education. The claim that the correct use of the process of Values Clarification could result in certain general, positive virtues and attitudes has not been validated, nor has the approach become more coherent or less relativistic. Ad hoc attempts to compensate for the original confusion have not proved to be successful.

Résumé

Dès le début, le mouvement d'éclaircissement des valeurs de Raths, Harmin et Kirchenbaum a été taxé d'amoral, subjectif, incohérent et relativiste. Par la suite, on a plusieurs fois tenté de transformer le mouvement en ersatz exempt de jugement, de dogme et de tout caractère endoctrinant de l'enseignement de la morale. L'argument voulant que l'utilisation judicieuse du processus d'éclaircissement des valeurs permette d'acquérir des attitudes et des vertus positives n'a pas été validé pas plus que cette méthode a gagné en cohérence et a perdu en relativisme. Les tentatives officielles visant à pallier la confusion d'origine se sont toutes soldées par un échec.

Values Clarification Movement

Those who have fostered the Values Clarification movement have, along with Kohlberg, been in the vanguard of the post-60s concern for some kind of values education in the schools. They have stepped boldly into the vacuum created by a scientifically inspired fear of value judgments, by a liberal concern for the indoctrination of one set of values, and by the Christian rejection of the catechism in the post-Vatican II period. Values Clarification was seen by many to offer a new democratic system which would still somehow provide values education. Moreover, they provided the teachers with the security of a handbook of classroom exercises which specified how teachers were to conduct their classes, what could be expected in the way of student response, and even how these responses were to be treated. Educators, in droves, jumped on the bandwagon, all too often without a critical examination of just what were the purposes and possible consequences of using such an approach.

However, there were those philosophers and educators (Kazepides, 1977; Lockwood, 1977; Ryan, 1978) who, after looking closely at the nature of the movement, were dubious from the very beginning. As early as 1975 Anne Colby criticized the movement for its lack of distinction between moral and nonmoral values, its lack of "prescriptive considerations" and its refusal to allow students to ask "why" questions concerning each other's choices (p. 135-143).

In this paper the major concern is that of looking more closely at the attempted justification given by the original formulators of the movement and by some others who have since attempted to modify and/or justify the approach. In other words, how coherent was the movement from the very beginning, and has any reinterpretation been successful in salvaging the Values Clarification position?

Why values clarification?

Some might think that the supporters of Values Clarification were defining one side of a pedagogical issue regarding the **teaching** of moral values. Perhaps they are defining the necessity for an **indirect** teaching of values, which would be a methodological question. If this were so, the question would be one of **means** rather than content or philosophy. Yet, like Dewey, they do not really distinguish between the means or process and the content, but tend to reduce everything to process (Dewey, 1961, 1966, 1971; Frankena, 1965). The fact that they reject the direct teaching of values does not mean that they are concerned solely with pedagogy and therefore are willing to accept the existence of objective moral values if they are taught indirectly.

Some might offer the defense that since the values clarifiers did not distinguish explicitly between values in general, and moral values in particular, they had no intention of presenting a substitute for moral education as such. However, this defense is invalid. Those who support Values Clarification defended a position that refuses to accept the distinction between the moral and the nonmoral. Moreover, these educators defended their position as a substitute for traditional "moralizing" or direct teaching of moral and religious values.

Simon's handbook: Justification of Values Clarification

When the actual defense of Values Clarification in the works of Raths, Harmin, and Simon(1978) and Simon, Howe, and Kirchenbaum (1972) is examined, one is shocked by the extreme and contradictory positions taken, the unwarranted assumptions, the lack of clarity, the blind acceptance of dubious positions, and the inability to make critical distinctions. In part one of the book *Values Clarification*, the authors (Simon, Howe, & Kirchenbaum, 1972) begin by making the point that present-day students are faced by a variety of value questions (pp. 13-14). Here, questions like, "Should Bill and I live together before marriage?" and "Does religion have some meaning in my life, or is it nothing more than a series of outmoded traditions and customs?" are mixed with factual questions like, "How do I know whether marijuana is really harmful to me or not?" and with questions of social custom or personal preference like, "Should I let my hair grow longer?" There is no attempt to differentiate the kinds of questions nor to categorize them as being empirical, philosophical, social, or religious. One cannot help but notice that certain questions imply morality, for example, "What can I do to improve race relations these days?" (Simon *et al.*, 1972). Such a question implies the moral obligation that race relations **should** or **ought** to be improved. Following the above questions in Simon *et al.*'s book is a list of areas where one may experience "confusion and conflict in values." Here again, matters of personal taste and culture are placed side-by-side with matters like war and peace. The least that one might expect is that such distinctions might have been clarified in the original publication by Louis Raths, who founded the movement; but such is not the case, as will be noted later.

In the handbook authored by Simon *et al.* (1972), and in the book authored by Raths *et al.* (1978), the case is made that young people today experience a greater difficulty in making value decisions since they are faced with a barrage of differing values and attributes from a variety of sources.(1) To the extent that this is true it is certainly a social and educational problem that must be addressed. One might naturally expect that because such a problem exists, an educator would see the necessity for the teaching of certain basic moral values regarding life, honesty, peace, democracy, and

duty to others. But no, in the name of democracy, freedom, tolerance, and individuality the supporters of Values Clarification do not draw this conclusion.

They see the problem in terms of the students making "their own responsible choices" which they cannot do if they are taught by "moralizing adults" (Simon *et al.*, 1972, p. 15). They view the assumption behind "moralizing" as representing the following kind of thinking:

My experience has taught me a certain set of values which I believe would be right for you. Therefore, to save you the pain of coming to these values on your own and to avoid the risk of your choosing less desirable values, I will effectively transfer my own values to you. (p. 16)

Here again, by implication, the "long-hair" type of value is placed on the same footing as basic moral values dealing with justice, honesty, and life. Moreover, any values needed to preserve society are also ignored since they are assumed to be no more vital, nor more objectively valid than any other values. Note, too, that the implied explanation and model for "moralizing" involves one individual "imposing" (a favourite bogey for the advocates of Values Clarification) his or her values upon another. The authors also declare that "moralizing" is less effective today because there is no consensus about what values should be taught (Simon *et al.*, 1972, pp. 18-19).

In regard to this viewpoint one might ask, since the behaviour of citizens in a society depends on their values how can one hope to preserve any society if no consensus on values is possible? Moreover, if the teaching of values is a great social and educational need, as the values clarifiers admit, then how can the answer to this need possibly be to reduce all values to the lowest common denominator of personal preference?

Hall and moral values education

At this point, the advocates of Values Clarification would reply that they are not just encouraging young students to **choose** their own personal preferences but are actively providing the students with help by guiding them into a process that will aid them by answering some of their questions, and enable them to "build their own values system" (Simon *et al.*, 1972, pp. 18-19). This emphasis on "his, hers, and their" own values is a recurring and basic theme in Values Clarification. Robert Hall (1979) maintains that Values Clarification (which, unlike Simon *et al.*, he explicitly labels "Moral Education") tries to avoid what he calls both the "soft line" of unwillingness to take a stand on values and the "hard line" of

direct values teaching (Part 1). Yet, the emphasis in Hall's view, as in the view of the early promoters, is against any direct teaching of values, which Hall classifies with the "banking system" rejected by Paola Freire (p. 12). He opts instead for helping students to "make better decisions, decisions which reflect knowledge and consideration of the importance of moral values" (p. 17). Does this desire for subjective free choice then represent merely a pedagogical issue or a more fundamental difference in moral philosophy in keeping with "the importance of moral values"?

In his emphasis on the moral, as well as in his attempt to find a middle way between indoctrination and freedom, Hall (1979) goes beyond the others, who seem unconcerned about the moral values inherent in the cultural tradition; yet, in his fear of indoctrinating a definite moral context, Hall too fails to clarify the nature of values education. He too stresses the process of clarification over any actual context or behaviour. His stated purpose is to "help students to develop their decision-making skills, build value concepts useful in decision-making and expand their competence in social interaction" (p. 18). Like all approaches which stress the process over the context, no basis is provided for students to comprehend differing norms of morality which could help provide some criteria for their choices. Moreover, there is no emphasis on the objectivity of any values. All values are treated with an exaggerated stress on individual, subjective choice. Hence, no antidote is provided for a thorough-going relativism, nor is there any realization that all persons from infancy develop within the aegis of a definite moral system of family and social values. One gets the impression on reading Hall and the others that they really believe they can make intellectuals out of most students who, even though they are unaware of competing, philosophically-based moral norms, will somehow be able to make significant and valid moral choices based simply on the process of weighing consequences and making "authentic" free choices.

It seems that Hall, Simon, Raths, and others are more beguiled by the notion that democracy encompasses a variety of viewpoints which must be tolerated and protected than they are by the need for objective moral, social, and political values. Their arguments are those of subjectivism, scepticism, and relativism, even though they try vainly to avoid the charge.

C.S. Lewis, in his defense of objectively based moral values needed to perfect human nature and provide principles for all, concludes:

.... There never has been, and never will be, a radically new judgment of value in the history of the world. What purports to be new systems or (as they now call them) 'ideologies,' all consist... of fragments of the Tao

itself. . . . If my duty to my parents is a superstition then so is my duty to posterity. If justice is a superstition then so is my duty to my country or my race. If the pursuit of scientific knowledge is baseless, then so is conjugal fidelity. The rebellion of new ideologies against the Tao is a rebellion of the branches against the tree; if the rebels could succeed they would find that they had destroyed themselves. The human mind has no more power of inventing a new value than of imagining a new primary colour or, indeed, of creating a new sun and a new sky for it to move in. (Lewis, 1978, pp. 29-30)

In contrast to C.S. Lewis' view, the creators and leading defenders of Values Clarification stress subjective choice and the process of valuing, and, for the most part, ignore even the possible existence of basic moral values. Yet, even they themselves find it impossible to completely avoid some reference to basic moral values, e.g. honesty. Consequently, the actual philosophy which they imply or attempt to defend is inconsistent and extremely confused.

Raths' justification for his movement

In the introduction and preface to *Values and Teaching* (Raths *et al.*, 1978), the point is made that there was "much corruption involved in dividing the nation during the Viet Nam war" (p.vii). One would naturally presume from this statement that the authors were making a moral judgment in this matter and that "corruption" was not just an arbitrary product of word analysis and values clarification. Moreover, they also declare that "young people" should "reconstruct their attitudes towards drug use" and note that there is a tendency for young people today to be destructive – if they don't immediately get what they want (p.viii). For such "serious problems" they believe that the young need to see the consequences of alternatives (p. viii).

Following these statements, Raths *et al.* (1978) (a) defend the fact that they are not value free, (b) assert that they do not believe that every belief, purpose or attitude is as good as another, (c) note that all views should be open for discussion as long as they are "within the laws of the country," and (d) assert that no views, i.e. values, should be made universal (p. ix). This last point, of course, runs completely counter to the generally accepted Kantian view that one of the necessary aspects of a moral principle is that it be universalizable. Thus, the authors are committed to the view that there is no true religion or morality in the world (p. ix).

However, in another place, the authors stress the need for acceptance, stating that "we need to accept other positions nonjudgmentally" (p. 48). By

accepting this Rogerian view they appear to abandon the notion of educating for critical thinking, since no student is permitted to be judgmental about even the consequences of alternatives. Here the social-psychological considerations take precedence over the moral-philosophical. The only other alternative would be to demand tolerance for all the views which the students accept, but that, in effect, would amount to the indoctrination of "tolerance" as an absolute virtue. This psychological perspective becomes most evident when Raths *et al.* state:

We do not necessarily communicate approval of whatever someone may say or do. Rather value-clarifying requires that we communicate acceptance of a person's total being as it is. This acceptance is meant to assist others in accepting themselves and in being honest with themselves and each other. (p. 4)

On reading this passage, one might wonder if they are again implying that negative consequences will result when one uses an improper pedagogical approach.

Honesty, in the above quotation, is presented, in effect, as a moral absolute necessary for psychological growth. The nonjudgmental approach, which they advocate, implies, in itself, a moral "ought"; but Raths *et al.* do not really defend any "ought," even a psychological one.

The message of values clarification is not meant to be insistent, however. We do not wish to imply that everyone **should** be more thoughtful about values issues or lead a more integrated life. Rather we recognize that there are many people who are not up to it, or who prefer not to, or whose circumstances make it too painful. We do not want to communicate that a person is defective because his or her life remains confused, inconsistent or fractured. We simply wish to offer space, time, encouragement, support and guidance to those who are ready to change, to those who are ready to work at organizing their lives around a set of values. (p. 4)

How is one to interpret such a statement or reconcile it with opposing statements in the same text? To be "an integrated person," to be "self-directed" as well as to learn the one, true correct process for the clarification of values is, according to Raths *et al.*, not really necessary or objectively valuable. They refuse to admit that they have been unable to escape the moral-immoral framework of human living. They imply very moral "oughts" or "shoulds" but conclude by denying even the necessity of psychological integration. In this way they attempt to escape the charge

themselves of "moralizing" but at the cost of reducing their position to an invitation to organize one's life around a preferential set of values – any set of values.

The Process of Valuing

Raths *et al.* (1978) stress that they are concerned to encourage: 1) more informed choices; 2) more awareness of what it is that a person prizes or cherishes; 3) better integration of choices and prizings into day-to-day behavior (p.4).

The confusion only deepens when criteria like the above are illustrated by reference to a student doing a better job of planning what he should do on the weekend. We might even grant that it could be possible to help students become more skilled at choosing alternative values in life, but the supporters of Values Clarification do not seem to be content to rest their position on the development of arbitrary choice skills only. They too are concerned about what most people would consider "the moral issues," such as corruption, war, honesty, and destructive behaviour. Certainly, any criminal would be content with what they themselves "prize" or "cherish." They would, in fact, receive the highest marks if evaluated by the criteria of Values Clarification.

Yet, surprisingly, Simon *et al.* and Raths *et al.* make it quite clear that they are not concerned with **what** values are adopted. They are concerned solely with the **process** of valuing. They are concerned that students who do develop as a result of the process would not be apathetic, flighty, uncertain, inconsistent, drifting, overconforming, overdissenting, or be a role player (Raths *et al.*, 1978, pp. 6-8). Hence, clarity, awareness, and psychological integration are the real objectives of this process – regardless of any protestations to the contrary.

Raths *et al.* (1978) have built into the process the choosing of alternative values based on the weighing of consequences. In fact, this is an essential part of their very definition of a value (p. 47). However, does one choose alternatives which have better consequences for oneself or for others, or for society, or for the future? No answer is forthcoming. Are the values clarificators being consistent and realistic at all when they maintain that the **what** does not matter as long as one has been made aware of alternatives and their consequences, which are not always easily knowable, and which might be chosen randomly by the student anyway?

The vital question then should be: Why is it necessary at all to examine alternatives and their consequences unless some consequences of

some alternatives are better than others, as the authors have already admitted in their attempt to escape the charge of relativism? How can my choice be informed if I do not have a criterion which will enable me to make judgments from among alternatives and consequences? Of course, they would then respond that learning the process and how to apply it was the real objective. One critic (Stewart, 1978) notes, in this regard, that these advocates of the new values education place "awesome" emphasis on the process (p. 6).

Values Clarification, Relativism, Moralizing

If Raths, Simon *et al.* are concerned merely with values of any kind without distinction, such as preferences about how to spend one's weekend, it is difficult to understand many of their statements of concern for questions which are usually considered to be moral questions. In their attempt to avoid both relativism as well as the charge of moralizing, they make statements like:

This is not to say that we are unsure of everything and not sure of anything. But along with our confidence in some of our convictions we do leave open a tiny hole of possibility that we may be wrong. (Raths *et al.*, 1978, p. 226)

At this point it might be asked: Are they suggesting the possibility of being wrong about a specific value or wrong about their whole philosophy of Values Clarification, including the total emphasis on process? Their viewpoint amounts to a refusal to allow society, through its schools, to be certain of any values which just might be essential elements to be transmitted to the young of that society. It seems that in this system the cultural tradition of society must give way in every instance to "his, hers, and their own values."

John Dewey, one major influence on Values Clarification, defended the view that some experiences are educative while others are not (Dewey, 1963, pp. 25-31). For Dewey, all experiences must be judged in terms of the consequences which in turn can be measured in terms of the scientific-democratic process. Raths *et al.* (1978), in contrast to Dewey – although they maintain a better-best value measure for themselves – are as relativist and subjective as any existentialist or Rogerian about the actual content of one's values (Rogers, 1968). The nature of Dewey's process cannot be equated with that of Values Clarification even though its advocates maintain, as did Dewey, the absoluteness of the process itself. Their notion of "informed choice" is empty, if the range of choices is unlimited, for one may make choices of any kind as long as the consequences have appeal. No objective basis exists in such a system to discriminate intelligently, and hence relativism is a necessary result.

Moreover, if persons are happy with a value and the resulting behaviour, then why should they search for alternative values and consequences at all? Will these other consequences make individuals happier? It is evident that unless there is some reason for the clarification of values as such, then, in effect, there is no philosophical, moral, pedagogical, or psychological reason for it at all. The values clarifiers are forced at least to maintain that the person who clarifies is more rational, better educated, clearer in their choices, and more psychologically "integrated" than those who do not clarify or weigh consequences, in spite of any disclaimer they might make. But even if this should be the only criterion for Values Clarification, there would still be no support for the notion that such an approach will help solve the serious moral problems facing society and the individual. Raths *et al.*, as noted, refuse to consider anything as a value which does not meet their criterion of being chosen, from alternatives, with weighed consequences. If they fall back on their arbitrary definition of what constitutes a value they will be providing an arbitrary criterion without reference to any context.

Brummer and Values Clarification

Brummer (1984) defends Values Clarification by providing an extended and modified version of the original version of Simon *et al.* and Raths *et al.* He attempts to defend the movement from the attack that it is "little more than an outdated form of ethical relativism seeking fashionable attire in the settling phases of modern humanistic psychology" (p. 263). He admits that the values clarifiers have made statements which make them sound like relativists but he claims that the reason for this was that they wished to avoid "moralizing." Brummer notes, "perhaps a theory of values education cannot have it both ways. The more it escapes the change of relativism, the more likely it runs headlong into the accusation of moralizing" (p. 264). He contrasts the Values Clarification movement with the values indoctrination approach in this way:

Values Clarification theorists contend that they are not concerned to push any particular set of values in the classroom. They are far more interested in encouraging students to be critical in their value choices, whatever values are chosen.

This theory also differs from value indoctrination in its assumptions about human nature. This theory holds that persons can be trusted to choose wisely in most situations of value conflict, as long as they are encouraged to be reflective about their values. . . .

Lastly, the methods of value education are as much to stimulate self-discovery as they are to foster the discernment of values. . . . Values Clarification theorists design the method of instruction with an eye to furthering the skills involved in valuing. (p. 265)

Brummer maintains that these theorists are concerned with "only those values which ground the investigative process itself, rather than push those values that are likely to emerge from it" (p. 265). He further maintains that they reject the view that there are "universally valid values. . . . authoritative for all persons" (p. 265). Such a view is very uncertain, they claim, and hence no one can be a moral authority in the classroom. Someone might wonder at this point how the human race has survived so far throughout the ages if all our moral and social values are so arbitrary and uncertain. Duncan (1970) quotes Kant with regard to this presumption of denying the existence of definite moral values:

Kant. . . . poured scorn on a critic 'who had complained that his book contained no new principal of morality. 'Who would think', Kant wrote, 'of introducing a new principle of all morality, and making himself as it were the first discoverer of it, just as if all the world before him were ignorant of what duty was or had been in thoroughgoing error.' (p. 7)

Moreover, there is the question of how one can "choose wisely" if choosing wisely can refer only to the clarity resulting from examining a variety of consequences. The vital normative question still remains. What criterion does one have in human nature, human knowledge, or reality which can provide some normative ground for anyone's choice? As Wilson and Cowell (1985) note with regard to educational slogans, "nobody seems to know (or even discuss) what ground these titles are supposed to cover" (p. 3). Another point raised by Wilson and Cowell strikes at the very heart of Values Clarification:

. . . we do need to believe and demonstrate to our pupils, that some reasons for moral behavior are good and others are not. If we do not believe this we're not in business at all, since we shall allow anyone to act for any reason they choose. (p.3)

Yet, in spite of all this, Brummer, the educational philosopher, attempts to save Values Clarification educators from their errors by maintaining that value-neutrality and normative-relativism are not tenets of the Values Clarification movement (p. 266). To do this he attempts to

justify certain values which are universal and necessary for the valuing process itself (p. 266). He quotes Kirchenbaum to the effect that these values would be freedom, justice, equality, and rationality (p. 266).

However, it seems that neither the concept of freedom nor of rationality, considered as ends-in-themselves can provide any objective basis for values necessary to ground and justify morality and social justice. We are forced to ask the question, Does a rational consideration of values by itself provide an objective basis for morality or can rationality just as easily be reduced to a subjective logical use of thought? If there is an objective norm of morality, then, what is it? Can moral values be reduced to the same guiding principles as value questions concerned with preferences about where one should go on the weekend?

If justice is the virtue which guides the giving to others what is their due, then justice must be grounded on some moral norm other than consequences. As Mortimer Adler (1981) has demonstrated, the extent of freedom and equality is governed by justice (Part III). Too much freedom militates against equality and vice versa (Part III). But Adler is an Aristotelian who accepts justice in objective terms as one of the four cardinal virtues. For justice to be a moral principle it must be part of a system of objective morality. If there is some basis for objective morality, then these same aspects of morality can be, and should be, specified and taught. If justice can be accepted as an objective principle then it does not make much sense to restrict questions of justice and moral right to utilitarian or pragmatic considerations, nor does it make much sense to reduce moral values education to the pedagogical or psychological question of either moralizing or not moralizing.

Boyd and Bogdon (1984) maintain that Raths *et al.* (1978), in their second edition, try to cover up the complete relativism of the first edition with nothing more than rhetoric (p. 293). In the final analysis neither Raths, Simon, Kirchenbaum, or any others are able to integrate principles like justice, equality, rationality (a logical principle), and freedom as part of a scheme which would ground moral values and, at the same time, provide a basis for personally chosen preferences. Without a coherent moral philosophy and a defensible, explicit epistemology they are unable to specify the nature of justice nor distinguish one kind of justice or priority of rights over another. They are also unable to specify the nature, extent, and limitations of freedom nor to elaborate what constitutes rationality. It seems that, at this point, all the proponents of Values Clarification can do is to rest their case on an interpretation of Dewey – that if the process of clarification is followed, the indirect end results will be an increase of rationality, freedom, and concern for justice.

Consequences: Confusion and Relativism

The advocates of Values Clarification cannot avoid the basic problem which remains. Are they advocating a nonmoralizing pedagogical-psychological process which will somehow result in a student's definite moral development, such as helping him to understand justice better or to actually behave more justly? Or, on the other hand, are they defending the individualistic thesis that all values are subjective preferences which, when freely chosen, after rationally examining the consequences, will provide the individual person with some sort of thoughtful satisfaction? It seems that they are trying to defend both positions, though the stress on being nonjudgmental about the values of others would certainly lean towards the subjective view, and hence towards relativism. The former position only surfaces when it is time for them to avoid the stain of relativism. However, their position is untenable since it is both philosophically and pedagogically incoherent, as well as being clearly relativistic in its consequences.

NOTE

1. In the explanatory section to Simon, Howe, and Kirchenbaum's handbook and in the preface and conclusion to the book by Rath, Harmin, and Simon, *Values and Teaching*, 2nd edition.

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