

A Note From The Book Review Editor:

This will be the last review section written totally by the editor. I accepted the offer to be Book Review Editor because I enjoy reviewing books, but also realize that the task of an editor is to edit and therefore the task of a Book Review Editor is to edit book reviews. A problem therefore presents itself. If I am editor, I ought not be a reviewer, and there will be no book review section without an editor.

My solution is to invent a new type of book review section. The plan is to review three or four related books. The books will be reviewed by persons other than the review editor, however, the Book Review Editor will write an integrative piece which relates each of the works to the others and to the subject of analytic teaching and/or philosophy for children. The advantage of this process is that persons from outside the readership of *Analytic Teaching* might review works in a critical manner from the perspective of their own disciplines (philosophy, psychology, education, anthropology, or linguistics). The relevance to *Analytic Teaching* will come from the nature of the works selected for review as well as the integration and application provided by the Book Review Editor.

This is a noble experiment, please bear with me. I think it is a worthwhile project.

The Moral Life of Children

Robert Coles
The Atlantic Monthly Press
Boston
1986
280 pp., \$19.95

The Political Life of Children

Robert Coles
The Atlantic Monthly Press
Boston
1986
310 pp., \$19.95

Albert Camus has a collection of short stories called *Exile and the Kingdom*. These two works together might be called by the same title. "Camus noted that each of the six stories dealt with the theme of exile, ... (a)s for the kingdom of the title:

it coincides with a certain kind of free and naked life that we must rediscover, to be born again. Exile, in its way, shows us the way, on the sole condition that we are able to refuse at one and the same time servitude and possession. (Lottman, 1980, p. 594)

The Political Life of Children and *The Moral Life of Children* work together in much the same manner. *The Political Life* shows us much about how children think about politics, learn to understand their political world and function in it, while *The Moral Life* points to ways of avoiding

both "servitude and possession." *The Moral Life of Children*, much like some works of fiction, is about moral lives, not moral reasoning, values clarification or critical thinking. It is moral lives as told to a psychiatrist who is deeply influenced by Anna Freud and Erik Erikson. Coles is also influenced by novelists and poets, specifically Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy and William Carlos Williams - all of whom he has written books about. Coles is also affected by and knowledgeable about Charles Dickens and George Orwell to mention several other obvious sources of his questions, understanding, and insight.

After providing a personal introduction to his interest in the political lives of children, Coles presents two very helpful opening chapters, "The Political Authority and the Young" and "The Homeland: Psychoanalysis and the Political Thoughts of Children". These two chapters, in this reviewer's opinion, should also be read again while reading *The Moral Life of Children*. In discussing political authority, that is, the how and why of the influence of the state on the young child, Coles draws on Simone Weil's essay "The Beast" to make the point that the state does now, as it always has at least since the time of Virgil, provided a framework for parents, teachers and others to pass along the image of their country. Children do not, however, swallow these images whole. They make those images their own based on observation in the family, in the neighborhood and in school. "I am the one born here, in this city of this country at this time, and you were born over there in that city at that time — nationality is a means of self-definition." (p. 310) This interrelationship between the self and the world is the working definition for politics as used throughout the book. Nationalism, therefore, is common to all political lives of children but the manner in which nationalism manifests itself differs from country to country. It is politics in its most general definition: political metaphor used to understand daily life and metaphors from daily life used to understand local, national and international politics.

Each chapter heading provides a framework for this working definition of politics as it fits into the specifics of a time and place, for examples, Religion and Nationalism, Ideology and Nationalism, Language, Culture and Nationalism, Class and Nationalism, and Exile and Nationalism. To peak the interest of the readers of this review, my comments of the *The Political Life of Children* will be restricted to the second country in the chapter entitled "Class and Nationalism: Brazil and the United States".

Most of us do not think about *class* as being the most salient issue for understanding politics in children and/or adults. Coles states that it is. "Though I have of course always been aware that there are rich people in the United States, and poor people, and people between, it took me many years to think of using 'class' as a means of analyzing what I was hearing from children about their country" (1986, p. 246). Coles goes on to talk about his struggle and reluctance to see class as a major issue around which children organize their political thinking. He is reluctant to believe it, though he finally comes to accept this view, though not dogmatically. This reviewer affirms Coles' analysis based on personal observations as well as close reading of Coles' record of the conversations with children. The reader of *The*

Political Life of Children is invited to an open minded examination of Coles' view of the role of class in shaping the political lives of children in the United States.

Listen to a boy from Boston: "You ask whose orders? (I had asked.) Well, don't you know? . . . (T)he orders of people who give orders - I mean, that judge, and the people he knows, and the people *they* know, and that's the big shots, we call them around here, the big shot guys: the governor and the mayor and the senators and the guys who own the banks and the electric company and the gas company and the department stores and the newspapers."

The Political Life of Children presents a challenging picture for us as teachers. We are asked to see ourselves, our country, our world from a larger perspective. Coles provides, in the words of children, a global view of politics, not to "grind an ax" but merely to allow children to speak for themselves. It is a liberating experience.

Moral lives are more difficult to write about, to think about, even to "read" about than either political lives or moral reasoning. Moral reasoning is about a cognitive process and to some degree much closer to the surface, more straight forward, easier to get a handle on. (Although, anyone who has struggled to place a student response into a Kohlberg category knows the difficulty of listening or attending to the complexity of language and its meanings.) Moral lives are found deep within a person, multi-dimensional and illusive. At first one wonders about the value of a psychiatrist, a psychoanalyst moving into a new area, an area often reserved for philosophers. However, in addition to Coles' long history of observing children within morally provocative situations for more than twenty years, one begins to see several themes emerge which are developed in the special light of his training as a psychoanalyst and without that training might remain undeveloped. (This also means that other themes are also left undeveloped or underdeveloped, but let us first look at the strengths.) First, his awareness of alternate explanations of stories and behaviors allows him to constantly be on the watch for morality masking itself as self-serving public relations behavior. Second, and closely related, is Coles' ability as a listener. Behaviors and conversations relating to morality or moral issues are always difficult. Carol Gilligan taught us that there are several ways of listening which yield different understandings as they are stated in "different voices" (Gilligan, 1982). The question of hearing the voices of children is central to Coles' task in this and many of his works. Coles listens, and he hears.

Questions about observation and listening (a form of observation) are important to this work as well as for *The Political Life of Children*. How does one listen, observe morality in a child's life? Can similar acts by different children (as well as adults) be moral or self-serving based on motivation? How is one to understand moral or self-serving motivation? These are among the important "methodological" issues Coles addresses, though in discussing methodology in the introduction Coles refers more specifically to the method of long term in-depth interviews. "Addresses", therefore, is a strange word to explain Coles' presentation of his approach.

One important clue to the way Coles approaches his subject is found in the chapter called "Young Idealism" In reporting a conversation with a young man who spent some time working with Dorothy Day at the Catholic Worker, Coles allows us to hear him saying that after working with the poor for a considerable time (about six months), he began to see his relationship to those he was helping differently. First, he started thinking that idealism meant being rewarded, being elevated by others. "I was angry, and I was depressed - because I wasn't getting my due from those 'street people,' those 'city hoboes' and 'drunks' who were getting this high-class waitress service out of me . . ." (p. 192). She later comes to see that "You can't deny yourself, but you don't have to keep patting yourself on the back! The point is to feed others here, not feed yourself on their dependency upon you and your friends who are working here." (p. 193) Coles goes on to state that this type of self-awareness is one of the sign of robust idealism - "evidence that a given egoism has managed to see beyond itself, to appreciate its stake in the dignity of others" (p. 193). This weaving together of comments by different people represents one of the ways in which Coles defines issues, brings patterns into focus and paints a picture of moral life for us.

Coles is very narrative in his approach and tentative in his conclusions; contextual in his approach to theory and method. One is brought into Coles' world and the world of the children whom he interviews, that is, befriended, talked with and gotten to know over a period of time. It is within the context of these narratives that questions of methodology, theory and conclusion are presented. One will not find definitions, tables or charts. This is obviously a strength of Coles' work but it also places a burden on the "reader" (a burden worth the effort) of drawing conclusions, evaluating assumptions and finding applications. This is a hard book to "read", but a book not to be ignored. The book is difficult, but not in the usual sense. The stories are largely children's stories, more or less in their own words, so what can be difficult about children's stories? Each of the stories, the pieces of narrative have a clear message, a well developed plot, the meanings of the individual stories are clear. What is not clear, or perhaps more accurately what is imbedded in the text is the larger meaning of the work. It is as though there is a chapter missing, the last chapter, the summary. In fact there is no summary chapter in *The Moral Life of Children*.

This is both a strength and a weakness of the work. To understand this paradox, a conversation between a British Coal Miner and the reviewer is presented. He was injured in a mining accident eight (8) years ago. He has a neck brace and a leg brace. He talked about his fight with the British Coal Board. He is suing the Coal Board for the injury which happened in the mine. One very interesting part of his conversation had to do with socialized vs private medicine. He waited several months for his first examination and operation. He said he could have paid about 50 pounds for a private examination and because of that private examination, jumped the que and received his operation earlier. What he said next was interesting and relates to Robert

Coles' *The Moral Life of Children*. The miner stated that he could have jumped the que — he had the money but he could not do so for two reasons: 1) he had paid for public medicine all his working life and didn't believe in paying for things twice, and 2) he did not think it was fair for him to pay the money for the operation and get the operation in front of some "bloke" who couldn't afford the private examination. But he quickly stated that he was not against private medicine (implying what he did not like was using private medicine to gain access to public medicine). I think what he was saying was that if one uses the private system, it's ok but one should not use the private system for personal gains in the public system - this even though he was in considerable pain during this period. He went on to talk about his trip to New Jersey. His brother is paying for his trip (plane fare on People Express) but he was reluctant to accept the gift of the fare from him. He was convinced to accept when his brother stated that the fare was partial payment for his (the miner's) care of their mother.

This narrative is clearly about moral issues. One could define morality, show how and where this case is or is not a model case of morality. This has obvious strengths. It also has some perhaps less obvious weaknesses. For example, criteria may draw the reader away from the words or invite too quick a conclusion about the meaning of the case. It might invite judgment over analysis. With repeated cases showing similarities and differences in style and in content, the reader draws his/her own picture and listen more closely to the word of the speakers. (The two works also present 34 children's drawings.)

In summary, Coles presents much material for us to examine. He presents it in a manner which may help us to listen more carefully to the students in our classrooms, as well as others we encounter. Coles as listener is perhaps the greatest strength of these works, and as a good listener points toward, but does not show us directly, an approach to good listening.

Are there direct lessons for the classroom? Maybe not, however, our awareness will be raised, we may be able to see new patterns. Those teaching *Lisa* may have a greater appreciation for the insights, concerns and conversation of the children in the story. The "real" children in Coles' books address many of the same issues.

Richard Morehouse