THE ROLE OF DISCUSSION IN THE MORAL EDUCATION OF CHILDREN

What role should discussions of morality play in the moral education of children? There seem to be good reasons to believe that they should play a very minor role at best. Engaging children in philosophical dialogue about values is useless, it may be contended, because children are not truly rational. Also we cannot, for example, convince someone to be caring. Such discussion might even be dangerous, it may be claimed, because it will lead children to despair or to skepticism. On this view, what children need, rather, is something more akin to training or habituation. We should show them what is right and what is wrong.

This essay is an attempt to come to a clearer understanding of this problem. Before proceeding, however, we will need at least a working definition of "discussions with children." What I mean by this is talking, typically in a classroom setting, about such questions as "Should we always repay evil with evil?" and "What rights do children have?", that is, questions of "traditional" normative ethics. Additionally, metaethical questions about the nature of goodness, what it means to have a duty, and so forth, might be discussed. [Philosophy for Children is the sort of program I have in mind here: the teacher would not be looking for a particular answer, but would be more concerned with the process itself: Are the children giving reasons to support their views? Are they good reasons? How are the children interacting with the others who are giving different answers?]

My argument is that while such discussions alone would not constitute a sound moral education, they can be an important component of such a program. I will defend this position by considering the following objections:

A. Discussing morality with children has no effect on their moral development because children are too young to benefit from such discussion.
B. Discussing morality with anyone has no effect because philosophical dialogue is too abstract to provide any benefit.
C. Discussing morality is destructive of the moral foundation of the children, and because it is value-neutral, the discussion cannot replace this foundation. Children then become skeptics, amoralists, etc.
D. Even if these discussions are not value-neutral, the values they do foster are bad ones.

In each of the following sections, I will explain the objection more thoroughly, and then respond to it.

A. This first objection is actually a family of objections which are related by the claim that discussing morality with children has no effect on their moral development. Plato was perhaps the first philosopher to make this claim. Plato stressed the need for the development of good habits before reason can make any difference in a person's character. In The Republic, Socrates and Glaucon agree that "children . . . are full of spirit as soon as they're born; but some never seem to acquire any degree of reason and most of them only at a late stage." [1] Thus we might give children a moral education by helping to mold their spirits, but reasoned discussion must wait until later in life. Aristotle, like, Plato, says that young people cannot really profit from any discussion of morality. Children need to learn the basic truths of ethics before they discuss them. Discussing morality first becomes important after a person is already in a sense on the road of virtue. If a child has not been brought up well, then rational dialogue will not make him a virtuous man:

> For he who lives as passion directs will not hear argument that dissuades him, nor understand it if he does; and how can we persuade one in such a state to change his ways? And in general passion seems to yield not to argument but to force. The character, then, must somehow be there already with a kinship to virtue, loving what is noble and hating what is base. [2]

Both Aristotle and Plato seem to be arguing against instilling children with the sort of skepticism that Socrates encouraged. The best way to bring up virtuous children, they insist, is by giving them practice at being virtuous, allowing them to see and imitate virtuous behavior, and so forth. Having a philosophical discussion about courage, on the other hand, is not going to make someone courageous. This argument seems to make good sense; we rarely succeed, if we even bother to try, in convincing someone to change her life in this way. Ethical philosophy, then, is not appropriate for children. They are too young to derive any benefit from it.

This portion has been supported as well by modern psychologists, philosophers, and educators. According to Jean Piaget, for example, it is not a question of whether we should or should not engage children in discussions of morality. Rather, we simply cannot, because young children are not capable of participating in this kind of dialogue. Children are not truly rational, in the sense that they cannot grasp the concept of logical necessity. Children are also unable to consider the intentions and perspectives of others. [3] This inability leads a child to judge actions solely on the basis of consequences. If someone breaks a toy, that person is bad, whether she did it intentionally or not. For the child does not yet understand the distinction between good and bad intentions. If a child cannot understand such basic concepts crucial to dialogue about values, then it would be foolish to include him in the discussion.

R. S. Peters also offers support for the claim that it is habituation which is crucial to moral development. Modern studies in child development have confirmed that Plato and Aristotle first suggested:

> Given that it is desirable to develop people who conduct themselves rationally, intelligently and with a fair degree of spontaneity, the brute facts of child development reveal that at the most formative years of a child's development he is incapable of this form of life and is impervious to the proper manner of passing it on. [4]

Indeed, when we look at contemporary studies on moral development and socialization, we see that there is little evidence that ability to reason well has much of an impact on behavior. [5] On the other hand, one's abilities to perceive how others are feeling and to empathize, which are not developed through discussion but by practice, seem to have a great influence on the behavior children take on.

This family of objections presents a challenge to those who propose that children be engaged in philosophical dialogue about morality. If talking with children about questions of right and wrong will not help them, then we obviously should not implement any such program of moral education.

RESPONSE

It would be foolish, in the face of this evidence, to suppose that discussion alone would provide children with an adequate moral education. I would therefore like to preface this response by acknowleging that in terms of method, activities other than philosophical discussion are likely to have the most significant impact on the moral development of children. For example, music or dance activities would give them practice at, among other things, cooperation and learning to consider relationships with others. [6]

But it also seems to be a mistake to suppose that we are faced with a choice between telling children what is right and letting them figure it out for themselves through guided discussions. What reasons are there to suppose that dialogue can play even a minor role in a child's development? What reply can be given to the objections we have discussed so far?

The Philosophy for Children program offers an answer to the claim that children are not truly rational. We can only foster positive learning experiences if we do respect children's reasoning. If we treat children as being at a lower stage of morality, we limit the educational project:

> If the children are deemed incapable of principled moral behavior, incapable of having reasons for what they do, incapable of rational dialogue about their conduct, incapable of employing patterns of logical inference, then they must be treated as no different from the lower animals, or even as mere things. [7]

Of course, a true thesis may, if followed, have awful consequences. Philosophy for Children's claim seems to be that our definition of rationality should be subordinate to the purpose of the whole educational endeavor: Our aim is to understand children and to help them develop, and for this it is best to treat them as rational.

Is this a sufficient answer to the objection? In a sense, it is not. I have not put together arguments which show that children are capable of rational dialogue. My purpose here is not so much to knock down the objection as to see just how relevant it is. In other words, given that children have (perhaps) a different way of reasoning, does this do away with the possibility of fruitful discussions with them? The answer to this seems to be "no." It limits us perhaps, but does not eliminate the possibility altogether. The objection asks us to be wary of assigning too much weight to the importance of discussion, and this is also well taken. As Gregory Vlastos points out, a person's courage may have very little correspondence to her ability to give a thorough definition of it. [8] Nevertheless, she may profit from a discussion about courage, because she may come to better understand that aspect of her character.

B. The objection that such inquiry will yield only abstract results which will not be helpful likewise has both ancient and modern supporters. It should be noted that this objection also applies to programs of directive moral education as well. Whether one tells children what to do, or whether they are engaged in dialectic, they are likely to be faced with an abstract principle which is either difficult to apply, or which would be unwise to apply.

We see an example of this in Laches. Socarates and Laches are discussing bravery, and Socrates asks Laches for a definition. Laches gives the answer that it is "to stand in the ranks, face up to the enemy and not run away." [9] Socrates rejects this definition, and in this rejection we see the paradoxical nature of the situation. Laches' definition is useless, and yet in another sense helpful. It is useless because, as Socrates points out, there are cases when the brave thing to do might be to retreat, as the Spartans did in the battle of Plataea. Armed with maxims such as "When in battle, do not run away!" a person is actually defenseless. Abstract principles are thus not very helpful, because in particular cases courage might be to stand and fight, but in others to do something different. Sound education would somehow prepare generals to know just what to do in those unique situations where maxims are of no help.

Under a different interpretation, however, Laches' answer might be the right kind of response. The citing of examples might be of some help, provided one takes care to also cite examples of when not standing and fighting was the brave thing to do. A general who has been shown many such examples will have a much clearer notion of

bravery, and is more likely to be the sort of person who will come up with that unique answer for the unique situation.

Martha Nussbaum notes a similar point in discussing Alcibiades' speech in the Symposium. [10] In telling about love, the other speakers have given the sort of broad, universal description that Socrates (like most philosophers in the Western tradition) looks for throughout the dialogues. But, Nussbaum points out, Alcibiades' rambling account of a particular love is perhaps more educational than the analyses of the other symposiasts. Rational discourse is sometimes woefully inadequate, and it would not prepare children very well for the many peculiar situations in which they might find themselves.

Consider the following discussion, which took place in a sixth-grade philosophy class. The class was reading Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery, which raises questions of the use of force and violence in Chapter Eight. The students were asked to distinguish between force and violence, think about whether the use of force or violence "is always bad," etc.:

Teacher: Are there any times when the use of force or violence is good?

Mark: Yeah--like suppose some kid was messing with you, and they wouldn't stop. If you hit 'em, they'll stop bothering you. If you wimp out, though, they'll never leave you alone. So you won't have that problem anymore if you just hit 'em as soon as they start bugging you.

Teacher: What do the rest of you think? Would someone have more problems or less problems if he decided to hit the person who's bothering him?

Bill: I think more, because if say they're fighting at recess or something, then they'll probably get in trouble, maybe get detention.

Joanna: Or if you try to beat up the other person, you might get beat up yourself.

Betsy: I don't know, I kind of think Mark's right 'cause even if something goes wrong, if that person knows you're not going to just sit there and take it it, they probably won't bother you.

Why would such a conversation present problems? It seems that the difficulty is this: This discussion, because it deals with abstract notions, will not be fruitful for children. They are speaking of "messing with people" as though all bullies had the same personality and intimidated others in exactly the same way. What is much more likely, however, is that in particular situations, one bully might best be dealt with by non-resistance, another by getting some help from an adult, and perhaps others by other means. But the children in this discussion will come away from it with very general ideas about this kind of conflict (confused ideas, moreover, because they were probably derived from their experiences with particular people) and this will be of no help to them at all.

RESPONSE

We might respond again by saying that it was never presumed that discussion would solve everyone's problems. It is only one aspect of moral education. But this response seems to miss the real point of the objection: Such discussion not only is poor practice for the actual experiences children might have in the future; it also positively misleads them. By speaking in generalities, we give them the notion that the best way to deal with moral problems is to think about them in very sweeping terms. In other words, the "hidden curriculum" of such a program is dangerous.

What this objection demands of us, then, is that we take a closer look at what actually happens in our discussions with children. What progress do the children make? Short-term progress is made when the children understand more about how the social world functions. For example, children discussing the question, "Do we need rules?" will come to appreciate that rights and responsibilities are not built on thin air. In addition, it seems that progress is made with respect to the less specific results which are being criticized here. We can, however, make a more positive case for these abstract results as well. Indeed, despite the disparaging remarks above, one of the goals of moral education is surely to help children get at least a vague grasp of these universal principles.

C. In this section, I will consider the third objection: that ethical inquiry for children is dangerous, because it leads children to skepticism. Once children start to investigate questions of morality, they will see that even beliefs of which they felt most certain can be called into question. What then? They will consequently lose all confidence in those values which are fundamental to the moral life. Like desperate cartoon characters, they will be so intent on sawing down the tree limb that they will not see that it is just that limb which supports them.

Plato seems to have set the stage for the treatment of this question as it relates to education. In The Republic, Socrates says that the state will not allow people to study dialectic until the age of thirty. [11] He warns Glaucon of the dangers of carelessly teaching dialectic:

> And there's one great precaution you can take, which is to stop their getting a taste of it too young. You must have noticed how young men, after their first taste of argument, are always contradicting people just for the fun of it; they imitate those whom they hear cross-examining each other, and themselves cross-examine other people, like puppies who love to pull and tear at anyone within reach. [12]

Ironically it is of course Socrates himself who seems guilty of their discussions with him, people become confused by Socrates' giving people too much of a taste of elenchus. In the course of relentless rational analysis of their views. Whatever confidence they might have had is lost, since no matter what position they take, Socrates can find flaws in it. It seems that often Socrates' interlocutors come away from the discussion with the feeling that no real conclusions regarding values can be reached. Socrates is thus an example of how discussions of morality with young people can be dangerous.

Several modern philosophers and educators have, like Plato, been critical of approaches which concentrate on, for instance, developing a person's moral decision-making process instead of some kind of directive inculcation of values. Joseph Flay claims that encouraging children to be critical thinkers before they "naturally" would be leads them to:

> the ultimate in fragmentation--a fragmentation that threatens, in the name of freedom, to break that centrifugal force that makes freedom an actual and meaninful quality of life--a cynicism and subsequent boredom and alienation that follow and accompany it. [13]

Children who still believe in the authority of the adult world should be allowed to question, but not encouraged to question. For Flay, this distinction is crucial, for it means the difference between reason being used to attack and destroy the only value system the child has, and reason being used to gradually build the child's autonomous system as the system with which she has been inculcated slowly shows its weaknesses. Like Piaget, Flay claims that the acceptance of authority is a stage which is natural and

necessary to go through.

Perhaps this can be made clearer if we look at a specific example. Let us look again to the dialogue in section B about violence and how to deal with it. It seems the difficulty is this: On the one hand it appears that the teacher's role in the discussion should not be to tell the students the "right" answer, but rather simply to require them to give reasons for their views. But then there might be any number of views which can be supported by one reason or another. Thus, Mark and Joanna are, for the moment on equal, but uncertain ground. Both arguments are acceptable because reasons have been given. Because the dialogue has begun this way, the teachers is faced with various possible courses of action, all of them undesirable.

If the teacher allows the arguments to stand as they are, she gives children the message that just about anything is all right, as long as you can come up with a reason for doing it. There are, though, some reasons that can be given for killing people, being dishonest, etc., and these hardly seem like actions that should be condoned. If, however, the teacher tries to pursue the argument (perhaps in an effort to push it beyond questions of self-interest), there are many other problems which arise.

For example, consider the complexity that would be involved in a thorough discussion of the topic of justified use of force: Should we always help others achieve their goals, even when those goals appear to be bad ones, e.g., to harm us? A person's desire to harm us would seem to be a clear instance of a goal we do not need to help the person with. But what exactly will be our criteria for determining when another person's goals are unworthy, and when they are all right?

The problem with pursuing such arguments is that, first of all, fifth graders may not be able to understand the distinctions made. Even if they can be made comprehensible, though, they will not benefit the children. Because of the difficulty of the questions, the children will likely be frustrated at the inability to resolve the problem. And so again they reach the conclusion that it does not really matter, this time because it is so difficult to justify either action. The children will be bewildered and, some would argue, led to skepticism.

It seems vital that educators at least recognize that if valid, this objection would mean they should undoubtedly refrain from using discussion as a method of moral education. Matthew Lipman notes:

> How better to guarantee the amorality of the adult than by teaching the child that any belief is as defensible as any other, and that what right there is must be the product of argumentative might? If that is how philosophy is to be made available to children, Plato may be supposed to have been saying, then it is far better that they have none at all. [14]

RESPONSE

What can we make of this objection? Are we unknowingly doing more harm than good by engaging children in philosophical dialogue? The most reasonable response to this problem, I think, is that discussing morality can be a kind of habituation in itself, when we take into account the personality of the educator, and the way the dialogue is conducted.

At this point it might be worthwhile to look at Socrates' personality. What makes the dialectic of Socrates "healthy" (as opposed to, perhaps, the technique of the Sophists)? The Socratic method is simply the vigorous questioning of another person while claiming to pursue the truth. There is more to at least the original Socratic method, and that is, of course, the force of Socrates' character. Socrates' devotion to the pursuit of virtue, his sincerity, and his sense of humor are arguably as vital to the effect of the dialogue on the interlocutor as is the reasoned argument. Socrates also shows us as a role-model that

dialectic need not lead to cynicism or amoralism. In fact, it has led to an incredibly passionate desire for goodness and for the understanding of goodness. So while in one case the continued questioning might lead people to discouragement or cynicism, in another case it might not, if the teacher is Socratic in personality and style, and not just method.

It might be objected here that if we consider the lives of those who spent time with Socrates, we see that Socrates was in fact a failure as an educator. Critias, Charmides, and Alcibiades all turned into not model citizens but traitors and vicious people. What are we to make of this failure? Gregory Vlastos contends that Socrates' failure was a failure of love:

> (Socrates) does care for the souls of his fellows. But the care is limited and conditional. If men's souls are to be saved, they must be saved this way. And when he sees they cannot, he watches them go down the road to perdition. Jesus wept for Jerusalem. Socrates warns Athens, scolds, exhorts it, condemns it. But he has no tears for it. [15]

So not only the positive, but also the negative aspects of the Socratic method can be traced to the personality of Socrates. But is there more to this problem? Socrates has failed as a moral educator, but does this doom philosophy? Is there something in the nature of the inquiry that eliminates, or decreases the possibility of love?

Throughout Philosophy and the Young Child, Matthews recounts several exchanges with his son. [16] One would think that if anyone is to be affected negatively by the force of dialectic, it is a young child. But in fact the discussions seem quite positive, and not simply because they are rationally rigorous. Rather, the child is given the role-model of someone who can become engaged in philosophical discussion in a gentle, humorous and generally positive way. It is in this spirit that I think it makes sense to say that the Socratic method is not dangerous. This aspect of personality also brings up an important point about the so-called "content-free" or value-neutral nature of dialogue. It seems that content and method are not separate options, but interrelated aspects of education. With Socrates, and perhaps more so with Matthews, the substance is supplied by the spirit in which the dialogue is conducted.

The discussion itself, in other words, is also an activity which gives people practice being virtuous. Philosophical discussions are not only examples of rational dialogue but also a kind of habituation. The children (through observation, imitation, etc.) learn to listen to others, to respect others, to cooperate in a shared interest, to have the courage to suggest different ideas, and so forth. This line of defense is reflected in the "etiquette for dialogue" described by Ann Sharp:

> -try to offer good reasons for one's view
> -don't hesitate to ask one's peers for help
> -be willing to accept criticism from one's peers and revise one's views to take into account the criticism if valid. [17]

Moreover, since the students see how important the topic is to the teacher, they are even less likely to come to the conclusion that "nothing matters."

D. I will now consider a different sort of objection to discussing ethical questions with children. One might grant that engaging children in philosophical dialogue does not necessarily encourage them to be amoralists, and that it in fact encourages children to respect others, to be tolerant of others' views, and so forth. But this is not the end of the matter. While many people might agree that it would be good for children to be brought up in this way, a person might reasonably raise the question, "Why should we teach our

children these values?" In other words, given that such discussions are not value-neutral, what justification can be given for the values they impart?

Why might someone object to, for example, encouraging children to respect the views of others? We can imagine a group of parents arguing, on the one hand, "We are trying to teach our children what enlightened people realize--that violence is no way to resolve interpersonal conflicts. Moreover, children who rely on violence to take care of their problems will probably carry this tendency over into adulthood. The school should be helping us to discourage violence, not letting children know that violence is a possible alternative."

Or another group, on the other hand, might say, "Our children need to learn to stick up for themselves. If they are going to have any self-respect, then they need to fight back when someone bullies them. That's the way we're teaching them to act, and we don't need anyone teaching them to second-guess that."

Both groups, then, are arguing that there are certain views which should not be respected. But both groups seem to be making a mistake. First of all, if a child is simply told how to act and is not able to think through and consider reasons supporting that position, he or she will not hold that view with much conviction. So it is doubtful that the parents above will be very successful if they want their children to act uncritically in a certain way. Secondly, as Clyde Evans points out, parents do not want simply for their children to act in a certain way, but to act in that way by their own choice:

> What adults truly wish is that in a given situation boys and girls will do the right thing, not because they were programmed to do so but because they believe it to be right and because they choose to do it . . . And since it is this truly human behavior that adults really wish of children, then parents, teachers, and all adults must allow this opportunity to be free, morally autonomous beings. Adults must, that is, allow boys and girls to ask questions and to choose for themselves. [18]

If we want children to sincerely believe that certain actions are right and others are wrong, we will thus instill in them a healthy dose of open-mindedness. Moreover, as we saw in section A, this openness to different possibilities may allow for creative moral responses to unique situations. For the general to make the choice that is truly courageous, he must have some doubt that bravery always means not retreating.

It might now be argued that we have missed the point by concentrating on the consequences of the discussion. It is not that respecting the views of other is not a good means to the end that parents propose for their sons and daughters. Rather, we are begging the question in the following way. The parents claim that certain views are not worthy of consideration. Our answer to them has been, "Well, let's have them consider them and see." But this course is to assume that it's worthy of consideration in the first place.

This objection is not so simple to counter. One possible answer is suggested by Hare. We may indeed be implicitly rejecting the parents' opinion by respecting the possibility that the opposing view is all right. But, says Hare,

> This does not prevent us from attending to whatever arguments might be advanced in favour of that view. Our practice does not show that we do not take the view seriously, only that we do not accept it. Open-mindedness demands that we be fair to a view, but we are not bound to support a view in order to be fair to it. [19]

We can add to this answer, I think, by turning the question back to the parent. The parent is asking that we respect his/her contention that one should not respect the

contentions of others in such cases. I am not saying that the parent cannot be consistent; it is possible that the parents could hold that no one need respect the views of others, including their own. But this does not seem to be what they are trying to say.

CONCLUSIONS

What conclusions can we draw from all of this? What can we now make of the criticism of "ethics for children?" First of all, it is important to concede that critics of such programs are correct to a certain extent. It does seem unreasonable to hold that philosophical discussion alone would constitute a solid moral education. The relationships children have with their peers, and of course the sorts of role-models they encounter within the family, almost certainly have a more powerful influence on children. It is possible that even a very well-run and intensive philosophy program would be less a factor in a child's life than the kinds of television shows he watches every day.

Beyond this, however, the criticisms seem much weaker. There is a considerable jump from the point that philosophical discussion plays a role to saying that it is unimportant or even dangerous. To say that such discussions are empty and lead to skepticism is to ignore not only the role of the teacher but the nature of the discussion itself as well.

And yet, there is a remaining difficulty. Our answer to Plato's claim that dialectic is dangerous is, more or less, that philosophy is more than just what Plato had in mind by "dialectic." The natural response to this would seem to be "Well, then, if philosophy is not dialectic, what is it?" The answer to "What is philosophy?" is, of course, one which is not simple, and which has been severely disputed. A possibility, however, at least with respect o moral education, has been hinted at. As Nussbaum suggests, there may be more to the love of wisdom than what we would call analysis. It may be that philosophy involves several possibilities--poetical meanderings such as that of Alcibiades, music, and so forth.

What picture of moral education would this paint for us? It is that of a society which, recognizing that its children's moral growth and development is not a simple matter, calls on many resources. Children are given exposure not only to games, stories, and other activities which allow them to interact with others ("practicing moral behavior," if you will), but are also given the chance to talk about their world. This discussion, however, is not just a compliment to those activities. It is itself a way of practicing an important part of our morality; a group of poeple gathering to come to a better understanding of what it means to lead a good life.

James Heinegg

ENDNOTES

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[11] Plato. (1986). The Republic (537b). Translated by Desmond Lee. Middlesex: Penguin. p. 350.

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