

Dimensions of Moral Education (Robert Carter)

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Book Reviews

Robert Carter, *Dimensions of Moral Education* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984).

Moral education has become a kind of growth industry. Philosophers, psychologists, politicians, and parents are all actively vying with one another to tell educators how to make the young virtuous. I would not be surprised to see the computer wizards have a go at this too, perhaps with a new software package called "Be Perfect" which would correct faulty moral reasoning on the spot and produce morally upright individuals. Before we throw our lot in with these self-professed experts on moral education, we would do well to reflect upon some of the lessons to be learned from Plato's *Meno*.

When faced with the question of whether virtue can be taught, Socrates replies by considering several alternatives: virtue is teachable because it is a kind of knowledge; or it comes from practice and positive reinforcement because it is a habitual way of behaviour; or it comes simply as a gift of the gods because it is a natural disposition that some are born with and others not. Underlying these alternatives is the more fundamental question: what do we mean by "virtue"? The dialogue ends with the apparent inability to identify any teachers of virtue and the disconcerting realization that although we cannot clearly specify what virtue is, we can recognize what it is not.

Robert Carter's new book, *Dimensions of Moral Education*, is a welcome addition to the literature on this topic. He skilfully picks up the thread of Plato's argument and incorporates into it the insights of such diverse thinkers as Lawrence Kohlberg, Albert Camus, and Robert Hartman. Carter urges moral educators to eschew the ready answer and the fixed conclusion and respond directly to the scepticism, confusion, and pain of their students by engaging them in meaningful dialogue on moral matters. Rather than preach to our students about morals, we should treat them as "democratically free and potentially insightful partners in an adventure of searching inquiry" (p. 41).

This is not an endorsement of the ethical relativism that seems endemic to various values clarification programmes. It is not the case that *any* answer to a moral problem will do so long as it is sincerely felt, nor is it true that originality is a sufficient condition for sound moral judgment. Carter suggests that we pay heed to the "methodological non-relativism" of Lawrence Kohlberg whereby certain criteria of moral reasoning, such as reversibility and universalizability, are seen as universally relevant. Just as Piaget claims

that there were distinct stages of cognitive development, so Kohlberg says there are six qualitatively different stages of moral apprehension and judgment. In a sequence that is invariant and universal, each stage arises out of the lower one according to the inner logical order of the moral concepts involved, culminating in a sixth stage in which one shows the capacity to derive moral decisions consistently from the generalized principle of justice.

According to Carter, Kohlberg's "incredible insight" is that there is something to measure empirically in moral deliberations, some way to collect data about how people think they should act in certain moral situations (p. 71). For more than twenty years, Kohlberg tested the moral reasoning of individuals from a wide sample of cultures on three continents. By recording an individual's responses to a series of hypothetical moral dilemmas (e.g. should Heinz steal the expensive drug from the greedy pharmacist in order to save his wife's life?), Kohlberg claims to be able to rank that person's present stage of moral development and to indicate the next higher stage. Starting from a Platonic faith in the power of the rational good, he proposes a Socratic model of teaching to help each child reach the highest stage of moral reasoning that it can.

Carter objects to Kohlberg's assumption of a particular meta-ethical stance "as though it were obvious, or even necessary for his theory to be 'complete' " (p. 77). Stage Six, with its Rawlsian formalistic emphasis on justice as the key principle in moral decision-making, is rather arbitrarily defined as "higher" or more adequate than the utilitarian thinking that occurs at Stage Five. Kohlberg admits that very few individuals ever reach Stage Six (less than five percent by his own estimate). This may have more to do with the inappropriateness of his definitions than it does with any moral shortcomings in the public at large. Carter rightly criticizes him for ignoring the complexities of modern moral philosophy and for not appreciating the fact that "an adequate philosophic basis for the understanding, justification, and application of basic moral concepts is not yet in hand" (p. 77). This is the very same conclusion that Socrates comes to in the *Meno*, I might add.

I am also troubled by Kohlberg's assumption that there is a significant amount of transferability from his test results to real-life situations. I do not see that my feelings about the moral dilemma faced by the hypothetical Heinz are a reliable indicator of how I will treat the people I come in contact with day by day. This strikes me as another instance of what Whitehead called the "fallacy of misplaced concreteness" whereby an abstract notion is mistaken for the concrete reality under investigation. Just as I.Q. scores have come to be used as kind of shorthand for "intelligence", with little acknowledgement of the cultural context of the tests nor of the the creative aspects of human thinking not captured by abstract problem-

solving, so too there is a danger that Kohlberg's stages might convey a precise, scientific rendering of what is actually a highly idiosyncratic type of reasoning. One's M.Q. (morality quotient) should not blind us to the concrete details of the specific moral situation, nor to the individuality of the people involved.

Carter also charges Kohlberg with leaving out of moral education important dimensions such as imagination, sympathy, and care. "Reason is not the sole constituent of decision making and human character," (p. 107) he reminds us. Albert Camus is presented in support of the view that an awareness of absurdity and disunity can be a platform for moral growth. Robert Hartman's distinction of different kinds of valuational stances is used to make the case for promoting in the young a sense of intrinsic value, an enriched self-consciousness that could serve as the basis for respecting and caring for others. Carter picks up Kohlberg's suggestion that there may well be a Stage Seven where we go beyond justice to a level of agapistic loving based on an empathetic identification of the moral agent with others and with the cosmos as a whole. This intrinsic, empathetic dimension, says Carter, is "the most underemphasized and least apparent aspect of North American education" (p. 198).

What, then, does this book have to tell us in answer to Plato's questions? Can virtue be taught? Carter says that it can, if we treat our students in an empathetic, caring manner while teaching them how to reason better about moral matters. Who are the teachers of virtue? Those of us willing to admit our intellectual myopia and to invite our students to join us in an open-ended search for greater moral understanding. How is this to be accomplished? We start from an awareness of our own ignorance and move on to a fuller grasp of the complexities and responsibilities of moral behaviour. What do we mean by "virtue"? Some of the elements in Carter's definition would be an appreciation of one's own intrinsic value and the value of other human beings worthy of our respect, based ultimately on a sense of one's place in the cosmic scheme of things. This requires a harmonious integration of intellect, emotions, and will into a self that is morally good.

Moral education is a topic that has challenged thinkers from Plato's day to our own. It is full of difficulties because it involves basic questions about human nature, our social responsibilities, the meaning and value of life. There are no easy answers, no quick fixes, no unquestioned experts. It is to Carter's credit that he has faced these difficult issues head-on and written a book with the depth, breadth, and critical clarity to stimulate us to continue to think about them.

Reviewed by Brian Hendley, University of Waterloo