

Marking Off Roads to Nowhere

The search for a framework of moral education for the 'growth of Scotch boys', with particular consideration of their path to manhood.

Presenter: David Assender, Scotch College, Melbourne

"Morality is by no means self-evident – except in a powerful and deeply compelling system of culture." Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*; Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*; Hunter, *The Death of Character*

"When the English actually believe that they know 'intuitively' what is good and evil, when they therefore suppose that they no longer require Christianity as the guarantee of morality, we merely witness the effects of the dominion of the Christian value judgment and an expression of the strength and depth of this dominion: such that the origin of English morality has been forgotten, such that the very conditional character of its right to existence is no longer felt. For the English, morality is not yet a problem." (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 1889)

Big questions:

1. Why do many staff want to keep at arm's length the direct ownership and responsibility for the explicit moral formation of our boys?
2. Why would we outsource something as important as the explicit moral formation of our boys to external programmes, providers, and their curriculum?

Moral education: how did we get here?

"Twentieth-century social Darwinism and in the increasing emphasis on the scientific method gradually led to a break with earlier moral and philosophical traditions. Morals and values, formerly a staple in the American public-school curriculum, were drawn into the private realm. And virtue, both in the classical and Christian sense, began losing ground in public education.

The anti-establishment movement and the sexual revolution of the 1960s intensified the segregation of objective moral values from schooling. Morality and traditional ideals were questioned, and perhaps rightly so. Growing consciousness of racism, segregation and unequal opportunity for women, followed by spirited disagreement over the war in Vietnam, gave rise to the gradual erosion of what had previously been regarded as a consensus on traditional and shared American ideals.

Moral authority, once vested firmly in both schools and teachers, receded dramatically. Teachers distanced themselves from students' moral development and attempted to become neutral facilitators, leaving students free to arrive at their own values and to figure out some of life's toughest questions without guidance. They

were encouraged to view society's traditions of civility and ideals with scepticism and even scorn. As a result, civic and moral education were severed from one another – a severance that largely continues to the present day.” (Karen E Bohlin in Preface of James Arthur, *Education with Character*, xiii)

Yeah, but does it work?

James Davison Hunter, *The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age Without Good or Evil*, 2000.

“In nuce, these studies present conclusions that are as unambiguous and indisputable as any body of social scientific analysis can provide. The nub of it is this: there is little or no association, causal or otherwise, between psychological well-being and moral conduct, and psychologically orientated moral education programs have little or no positive effect upon moral behaviour, achievement, or anything else. Even analysts who are sympathetic to this overall strategy have come to the same judgment.

The same applies to specific drug- or sex-education programs operating within this broad strategy.” p152

“Perhaps the enduring subtext in the evolution of moral education in America, and its continuing story to the present, has been a quest for inclusiveness. While the need to provide moral instruction to young people has never been questioned, neither has the impulse to accommodate the ever-widening diversity of moral cultures. Clearly inclusion is a strategy for dealing with the problem of expanding pluralism. In the face of potentially contentious and disrupting differences, this strategy neutralizes the possibility of conflict for, in the most practical sense, inclusion means that no one's interests are neglected, no one is left out and, therefore, no one is slighted, snubbed, or offended. William Glasser captured the sum and substance of the quest for our own day as early as 1969 when he stated that “certain moral values can be taught in school *if the teaching is restricted to principles about which there is essentially no disagreement in our society.*” This provision has become the unspoken imperative of all moral education— psychological, neoclassical, and communitarian.” p205

“It is through a strategy of inclusion, which includes a denial of all particularity, that one guarantees the death of all god-terms capable of rendering morality authoritative within communities and binding on conscience. The problem is that character cannot develop out of values “nominated” for promotion, “consciously chosen” by a committee, negotiated by a group of diverse professionals, or enacted into law by legislators. Such values have, by their very nature, lost the quality of sacredness, their commanding character, and thus their power to inspire and shame.

Of good intentions there is no end. The commitment to do well by our children is serious and unflagging. In the end, however, while we desperately want the flower

of morality to bloom and multiply, we have, at the same time, pulled the plant up out from the soil that sustains it. We so urgently desire the cultivation of moral qualities, but under conditions (we insist upon) that finally render those qualities unattainable. (here he has a footnote: As C S Lewis put it, "We castrate, and bid the little geldings be fruitful." from *The Abolition of Man*, 1947, p35) p226

In summary:

"As it is currently institutionalized, moral education does just the opposite of what it intends. In its present forms, it *undermines* the capacity to form the convictions upon which character must be based if it is to exist at all.

We say we want a renewal of character in our day but we don't really know what we ask for. To have a renewal of character is to have a renewal of creedal order that constrains, limits, binds, obligates, and compels. This price is too high for us to pay. We want character but without unyielding conviction; we want strong morality but without the emotional burden of guilt or shame; we want virtue but without particular moral justifications that invariably offend; we want good without having to name evil; we want decency without the authority to insist upon it; we want moral community without any limitations to personal freedom. In short, we want what we cannot possibly have on the terms that we want it." (Hunter, *The Death of Character* p.xv)

A moral ecology:

- meta-narrative
- cosmology
- source-book
- role-modelling

"There is a body of evidence that shows that moral education has its most enduring effects on young people when they inhabit a social world that coherently incarnates a moral culture defined by a clear intelligible understanding of public and private good. In a milieu where the school, youth organizations, and the larger community share a moral culture that is integrated and mutually reinforcing; where the social networks of adult authority are strong, unified and consistent in articulating moral ideals and their attending virtues; and where adults maintain a "caring watchfulness" over all aspects of a young person's maturation, moral education can be effective. These are environments where intellectual and moral virtues are not only naturally interwoven in a distinctive moral ethos but embedded within a structure of communities." (Hunter, *The Death of Character*, p155)

A liberal education:

‘One of the greatest ironies is that although American liberalism is founded on the fundamental principal that individuals and groups should be allowed to pursue their own comprehensive visions of the good, current law requires most low-income parents to send their children to schools where their comprehensive vision of the good is not taught. A system of school choice could rectify this solution while also fostering the moral autonomy necessary for successful character education within the public system.’

School choice also demonstrates the potential for showing respect for a diversity of moral cultures... In this sense, allowing parents to choose their children’s moral culture is essential to true diversity... such a system would allow students to be educated in the types of comprehensive moral cultures that Hunter claims are necessary for successful and lasting moral education. Students could be formed by a narrative that gives a consistent message about their identity and purpose, as well as clear guidance about virtues, vices, principles and moral models. Overall, this structural solution would support the autonomy and diversity valued within liberal democracies while providing the social conditions necessary for coherent character formation.” (Perry L Glanzer, *Did the Moral Education Establishment Kill Character? An autopsy of the Death of Character*, p303-304)

Threats to a moral ecology:

1. Indoctrination
2. Hypocrisy

“Children never have been very good at listening to their elders but they have never failed to imitate them.” James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows my Name*