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**MORAL EDUCATION AND 'EQUAL FREEDOM'**

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## MORAL EDUCATION AND 'EQUAL FREEDOM'

### ABSTRACT

For there to be any point in speaking about "moral education" there must be understanding of what it is to make moral decisions; for moral education is concerned with providing the machinery for decision-making in moral contexts.

The decision-procedure which a person adopts allows him to make consistent and appropriate decisions by providing reasons which justify his moral judgement.

In the first part of this thesis the argument is put forward that as morality is essentially a social phenomenon concerned with the way in which people act towards each other it must indicate what desirable behaviour is. Moral judgements, which determine what desirable behaviour is, are guided by the fact that rational men show some respect for each other as persons and have the capacity to universalise the consequences of their actions or appreciate what would occur if others acted as they do. A reasonable assumption to make in considering basic moral principles seems to be that men prefer not to be interfered with. From this assumption the Principle of Equal Freedom is derived - Each person should attribute equal value to the freedom of others as he does to his own freedom. Now in order to avoid interference where this is possible, there have to be means of establishing what other people might want or how they might act in situations where what one person does could affect what someone else can do. Sometimes we can identify ourselves with others and thus appreciate how they feel about a situation but this is not always possible nor appropriate: We therefore attempt to gauge how another is interpreting a situation, in order to gain knowledge of his thoughts and feelings concerning the situation he finds himself in. To have some knowledge of another's feelings and thoughts about a situation involving conflict of interests is essential to the understanding of the principle of equal freedom, however the principle in itself is insufficient, because people's wants and needs vary according to other values. To operate the principle we have to take cognizance of various other principles which might be derived from it. How each person relates particular values to the principle determines his moral code, which outlines how he justifies moral decisions he makes.

The second part of the thesis begins by establishing that formal education is a process which is concerned with passing on skills, ideas and values which society thinks are worthwhile. The passing on of values and how they can be interpreted as functional in guiding behaviour is the concern of moral education. Procedures to be adopted in moral education must relate to what would be considered as the criteria for success in this kind of teaching for there must be some idea of what is hoped to be achieved. The principle of equal freedom encourages understanding of others and offers a base for the establishment of a consistent decision-procedure for making moral judgements. By introducing material which aids pupils to think about and gain understanding of the life-styles of others it is possible to help to develop the means for justifying the moral judgements which have to be made. The thesis concludes with suggestions as to how the educator might encourage understanding of others without in any way interfering with the notions of moral autonomy and freedom of choice.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Considerable publicity is currently being given to the need for some form of moral education. Some social groups view the subject with a certain amount of suspicion, arguing that “moral education” is merely a formal justification for advancing the cause of the “permissive society”, others see its function as something completely different, perhaps arguing that in fact it has, in varying degrees, been part and parcel of formal education systems in Western countries ever since the inception of public education. Before relevant discussion on this subject can take place however there must be some notion of what “morality” is about.

Essentially morality is a social phenomenon - it is concerned with relationships people have with one another in a variety of contexts: It enables a person to decide for himself how he should act in real or imagined situations where his own interests and those of others are involved, by providing him with reasons for justifying a particular choice of action. Where a person is unsure of how he might go about justifying decisions of a moral nature which he is forced to make, his uncertainty will likely be expressed by confusion, or inconsistency in his choice of action.

It is understandable that where confusion exists in morals, decision-making is hardest. It would be logical for a society which operated a formal education system and where there seemed to exist confusion over the interpretation of some situations involving moral judgements, to feel it pertinent to consider how it might go about incorporating within the formal education system, teaching designed to contribute towards providing machinery for decision-making in moral contexts.

Recognition of a need for some kind of moral education however raises the paradoxical problem of the desired acceptability of actions - in terms of society - and the freedom of the individual; for while it might be considered desirable to teach children moral rules and principles it must also be desirable to teach moral autonomy and freedom of choice if education is to be viewed as a learning process which respects each individual's capacity for rational thought.

Last Century and during the early years of the Twentieth Century moral instruction in Western countries was generally based around the acceptance of Christian ethics and the subsequent indisputability of basic principles entailed by such a position. The desired result was the inculcation of certain moral principles and rules, expressed with clarity and expected to be adhered to in all situations, which provided the means for consistent and appropriate decision-making. In the context of formal education the child's acceptance of a moral code

ultimately based on a religious commitment was generally acknowledged to be the responsibility of institutions outside the school. The expressed secular nature of public education precluded the need for moral instruction to be seen as a formal function of the school except in cases where there might be conflict between accepted Christian morality, and values which that form of morality was not interpreted as implying.

It is a fact of course that today many aspects of Christian ethics remain as guidelines for determining appropriate and acceptable moral behaviour, but their acceptance need not be based on particular religious beliefs nor inconsistent with moral autonomy. Moral education is not synonymous with religious education and thus a secular system of education can be maintained which involves the former. (One might also argue that secular education need not be inconsistent with learning about religious beliefs and ideas as opposed to actually participating in activities of a religious nature). It seems likely that moral education, or at least "instruction"<sup>1</sup> in some form or another is an essential ingredient of formal education for the very nature of the activity implies acceptance of a social order which has pursuits considered worthwhile passing on, and that there are acceptable ways of going about the task of attempting to ensure that appropriate learning takes place.

Currently it seems that educators and society alike are prepared to accept, at least to some extent, that schools should engage in some kind of moral education which helps children to understand the nature of moral decision-making, without getting involved with issues of a sectarian or dogmatic nature. Whether or not this is because Western societies appear to be placing less emphasis on the influence of religious ideals is largely a matter of opinion and as such not directly relevant to the case of moral education. Clearly however, in the more affluent societies, higher standards of living and greater sophistication have led to some changes in attitudes and values and a consequence of this does appear to have been (on the part of some at least) the expression of a certain amount of confusion regarding situations which we might consider to be appropriately termed "moral" (because of the manner in which they involve other people) and about which decisions have to be made: confusion perhaps best being regarded as actions based on judgements where immediate satisfaction is the sole criterion for the choice of action.

If there is to be argument for including moral education within a school curriculum as an intentional activity, a clearly defined basis must be established for enabling relevant material to be introduced: Further, such a basis must surely be of the least contentious nature possible and attempt to define a procedure which will allow consistent and appropriate decision-making and

yet at the same time not exclude the concepts of autonomy and freedom of choice as they relate to each individual. (It is hoped that arguments developed in the first part of this thesis will provide a possible base for moral education, and that arguments put forward in the second part will indicate how such a base can (and does) relate to the realisation of a comprehensive programme for moral education.)

Some writers in the field of educational theory have drawn distinctions between the terms “education” and “instruction” - the latter term usually referring to the development of a particular skill or skills which are necessary for performing a particular operation successfully, while the former refers to a process which involves relating a variety of ideas and skills to a range of tasks which may be practical or theoretical in nature. The distinction is acknowledged and will generally be adhered to throughout this thesis, although it is felt that the terms can be used to express similar sentiments.

## PART ONE