Perspectives for Moral Education in Higher Education

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Much of the literature on moral education is of a psychological nature with an emphasis on the individual's responsibility to the challenges of the social environment. The valuable is perceived in terms of (1) the development of the person as (2) a member of society. These publications fail to identify perspectives according to which living and growing become meaningful. Paul Kurtz recognizes this shortcoming.

Many people in post-modern society — young and old — lack direction in their lives, a meaning or purpose. Often it is the "liberated" individuals who seem most vulnerable to a confusion of values and to every temptation and desire. ("Why Moral Education?" in The Humanist, November/December, 1972, p. 5)

In the past, life's destiny and destination were taught as part of religious traditions and their specific interpretations of meaning. Our democratic society does not permit one particular religion to impose its doctrines upon all citizens. With the separation of church and state, education seems to avoid moral education as a specific part of the curriculum. Because psychology and sociology are rather harmless in regard to a metaphysical and universal interpretation of reality, moral education chooses to operate by these vehicles rather than become involved in decisively considering ultimate meaning.

Celebrated spokesmen of developmental theories (e.g. Piaget and Kohlberg) make it evident that there can be psychological and moral growth only if the person is able to identify with visionary dimensions by which one's environment receives greater understanding. The moral aspect in people develops significantly when the search for universal aspects transcends the individual's private needs for survival and self-gratification. It is important to note that a person's moral responsibility evolves with the increase of the universal character of personal values. Thus, moral education should concen-
trate on what can be communicated to students for the sake of helping them identify aspects of universal meaning and purpose.

In the following paragraphs I will attempt to describe a number of aspects by which humanity and our personal lives become morally valuable, aspects which should be taught in higher education.

The first aspect worthy of identification is culture as the dynamic which contains a promise for future expectations. Cultures intend to maintain the survival of the group as a group, and some have been quite effective. What does that signify? Psycho-social and anthropological studies expose the modern mind to various information concerning our search for the meaning of cultures and their dynamic energy. Perhaps Carl G. Jung’s exploration of the “collective unconscious” may help us identify relevant understandings of the deeper perspectives which characterize cultural energy. The collective unconsciousness refers to underlying and creative levels, which are forces greater than the individual — transpersonal. They are often projected in religious myth and symbols as well as in dreams and legends.

The adjective “unconscious” has a quality of mystery when applied to the behavior and drives of the individual. A good example in the context of moral education is the concept of “self”. Its transpersonal (universal) dimension can be seen in the fact that each form of existence holds itself together with an urgent desire to become and be a particular expression (a self) of the underlying (archetypal) idea of the “Self”. All true processes of growth are expressions of this primordial dynamic of the “Self,” and even the universe as a totality symbolizes such an expression. As a unifying energy the archetypal Self has influenced cultures in their search for self-maintenance and growth.

One way to trace cultural development is to study the enrichment of their respective languages, e.g. in etymology, word stories, and idioms. Cultures tend to create an amazing variety of words for the sake of interpreting and evaluating various phenomena. Thus there are not just numerous objects in the world but rather numerous understandings which yield particular names. These names differentiate certain perspectives. Not only the wealth of verbs, nouns, and adjectives, but also their unlimited combinations for different sentences signify that cultural developments have reached a stage where always newer and more complex aspects can be created. This creativity does not just exist on the speculative level, but also in the world of action and enterprise. Teachers who wish to be introduced to this type of insight may find these sources helpful: P.D. Ouspensky’s Tertium Organum (The Third Canon of Thought and A Key to the Engimas of the World), Jung’s Man and His Symbols, William I. Thompson’s Passages About Earth. Significant material can be found in The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology where Jungian Psychology is being interpreted in educational terms of personal development. Other sources are Lancelot L. Whyte’s The Universe of Experience and Peter Berger’s description of “Signals of Transcendence” in his Rumor of Angels. Readings which interpret the transcultural perspectives of the major myths in ancient cultures definitely will help students to identify primordial psycho-dynamics by which human life is permeated.

The second aspect can be found in the realm of scientific knowledge. Cultures in general have promoted knowledge as that which is specifically interested in making life more understandable and manageable. The word knowledge represents a comprehension of interrelationships among different parts to such an extent that a form of predictability about these relations can be assured. Thus knowledge becomes scientific and helps the human understand some aspects of reality. The order of nature reveals itself to the degree
that one can make use of these insights and manipulate resources in the name of progress. The scientific enterprise, in its discovery of physical order, can begin to reveal deeper unifying dimensions which are being conceptualized in scientific theory. Thus, science as a cultural product has notably enriched culture by discovering directions which affect the history of nature. A most important part of scientific knowledge tells us that the cosmic natural order is not as stable and static (Newton) as it may appear at short range. Evolution as a scientific model for a meaningful interpretation of the emergence of various forms in reality places the natural order in the dynamic dimension of the future. The unifying order shows additional perspectives and an openness for opportunities under the aspect of unseen horizons, i.e., the discovery of what is as yet unknown.

The moral mentality which results from a personal identification with evolution and the significance of science and technology can be found in the writings of R. Buckminster Fuller. A course or series of classes on the life and work of Fuller would be extremely beneficial for presenting students with an example of a cosmic responsibility. Similarly promising would be course work on Jacob Bronowski’s The Ascent of Man. This is an excellent source book for an introduction to perceiving dimensions from which a sense of moral integrity may emerge. Definitely important is Ralph W. Burhoe’s Science and Human Values in the 21st Century. His insights are complemented by many articles in Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science. In this context it is proper to refer to Theodosius Dobzhansky’s Mankind Evolving and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s The Future of Man.

The third aspect of concentration can be found in the inviting openness of the future. It is understood that humanity emerged out of evolutionary processes. Moreover, people project themselves as intelligent forms of energy. As such they may have a decisive bearing on the future of the universe. Man, as an intelligent form of life who is produced by the cosmic forces, gives unexpected openness to the future of events. Especially, scientific man as the product of cultural man gives birth to possibilities which are not intended at the outset of scientific endeavors, e.g., space exploration, genetic engineering, and their implication for human dignity. Particularly informative in these matters and easily readable is Earl Hubbard’s The Creative Intention. Stimulating are the books by Ernst Bloch, who fathered the philosophy of hope. More specialized material appears in Evolution in Perspective (edited by George N. Shuster and Ralph E. Thomson) which evaluates Finalism. Finalism proposes that the evolutionary dynamics in the universe indicate that there is something great effectively producing a development of more interdependency and greater complexity within the cosmos. This proposal implies that some form of essential fulfillment is possible.

These three aspects suggest that the presentation of ultimate meaning is not the exclusive territory of traditional religions. Indeed, religions preach that the ultimate will come upon us in due time. But the modern disbelief in religious apocalyptic stories does not permit us to disqualify ultimate meaning altogether. On the contrary, ultimate meaning is a possibility within the perspectives of evolution and in the challenge of a dynamic future. Within the context of the readings mentioned the three aspects could coordinate a challenge for students to envision meaning and become creative accordingly in an ever remaining openness toward greater possibilities. There is no heaven and no utopia as an answer for those who question the final significance of human life. In fact, questioning this significance could shape a methodology for moral education. The requested responses, however, should point at an ever
ongoing creativity within unknown opportunities. Modern students are called not to wait for the future to happen, but to bring it about by their own creative actions.

Conclusion

Moral education should not solely promote the growth of the person according to societal givens. The moral dimension calls people to the search for transparent meaning and ultimate importance. Moral education could benefit tremendously by promoting the vision that cultural man and woman propel themselves beyond the previous stages of existence. Intelligent life can produce new dimensions which seemed impossible in the past. Contemporary depression and desperation in our day are understandable only from the viewpoint of immediate aspirations which become frustrated. Identifying with dynamic evolutionary forces, however, and committing oneself to creative participation in them, opens life and its future to moral responsibility. The remarkable aspect is that culture itself helped create this openness. Students should feel invited to accept continually the challenge of an active involvement with such creativity which is rooted in the evolutionary energy of the cosmos and expresses itself in human cultures. These dimensions form the foundation for a moral response. The teacher and educator have to decide the level of intellectual and psychological development among the students to determine how the insights presented here can be made understandable enough to promote a personal integration. If a successful identification with these aspects becomes effective, then a major aspect of moral education has been completed.

The approach proposed herein is known as Value Inquiry, which is different from Value Clarification. The latter stresses a process of psychological individuation; the former is concerned with content that draws the student to identify with wider horizons of existence.