

EDUCATION'S SEARCH FOR THE ETHICAL

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"The only way out of our current nadir of morality is to utilize education to 'bring more ethics into the world.'"

A new renaissance must come, perhaps a greater one than brought us forth from the Middle Ages: the great renaissance in which mankind discovers that ethical action is the supreme truth and the supreme utilitarianism.

Our age must achieve spiritual renewal. It can do so only in one way; the masses of the people must reflect upon the nature of true goodness.—ALBERT SCHWEITZER

HUMANITARIAN and Nobel Peace Prize winner Albert Schweitzer has written that the underlying cause for the severe crisis of twentieth century civilization is the lack of true ethics.¹ While many historians have believed that such a single-factor analysis concerning the continuing crises confronting civilization is a gross oversimplification, recent events would tend to vindicate the judgment of the man Churchill once called "Genius of Humanity."

The continual barrage of contemporary actions in unethical behavior by persons who

are in responsible positions certainly suggests that we are ethically apathetic and negligent. It is indeed alarming that persons who hold key positions in the business, military, educational, and political worlds are bright, competent, efficient, and articulate, but at the same time are ethically lax. As all reasonably well-informed citizens know, recent examples abound and range from misuse of public funds to spying and blackmail. It is equally alarming that large numbers of our citizens are (a) relatively undisturbed by the apparent wrong-doing of persons in important positions of power, (b) shell-shocked by the numerous and flagrant unethical actions of otherwise respected persons, and (c) confused and bewildered by the questionable behavior of their heretofore trusted leaders.

In spite of the fact that it appears that unethical lunacy is overly abundant in contemporary society, it should not be altogether surprising. While all of the factors contributing to the current wave of unethical actions are difficult to identify, it is the judgment of the authors that the conspicuous

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¹C. T. Campion, translator. In: Albert Schweitzer. *The Philosophy of Civilization*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1964. pp. 85-93.

absence of a study of ethics in elementary and high school curricula is at least partially responsible for such occurrences. Of course, such a statement presupposes that formal education *can* and *does* count for something in the lives of developing persons and that the inclusion of a study of ethics in school curricula would result in improved behavioral dividends. Although the validity of these two assumptions may be debatable, the gravity of the almost daily bombshells in unethical behavior necessitates action that might reverse our present ethical collapse.

For some time now, contemporary writers, teachers, preachers, and critics at large have been urging that our educational system give careful attention to the study of right conduct.² Yet, our schools have either failed altogether to heed such advice or, at best, have responded too slowly. Abraham Maslow telescopes the situation with accuracy when he states that "the schools should be helping children to look within themselves, and from this self-knowledge derive a set of values. Yet values are not taught in our schools today."³ Experience as students, teachers, administrators, and observers in our schools leads the writers, unfortunately but realistically, to agree with Maslow.

To Be Ethically Illiterate

Recent events have dramatized the fact that it is neither wise nor practical to remain ethically illiterate. As Schweitzer warned us several years ago, to remain so is to hasten the decline of civilization. Certainly, education can never legitimately be the same after two world wars, unethical events in Southeast Asia, Watergate, and the spying activities conducted by governmental agencies against the very citizens which they were designed to protect. Like the studies which have developed around ethnic relations and environ-

mental literacy, education must necessarily include a meaningful study of ethics. By the study of ethics, it is meant an investigation of right human conduct and what is ultimately good or desirable for people.

Not only are the study and practice of ethics necessary for survival but also for achieving what Maslow calls the "axiological life" or "metallife."⁴ According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the "spiritual life is . . . part of the human essence"⁵ and if the human need to experience the spiritual or axiological life is met, then life is expanded and enhanced. If this "metaneed" is thwarted, then life is hindered and retarded. More specifically and primary to Maslow's work is his belief in the importance of the "B-Values"⁶ (values essential to being and becoming), one of which is "goodness."⁷ Viewed from a negative posture, when human beings are not engaged in doing good, a basic B-Value is blocked, hence there exists a potentiality for apathy and neurosis. Considered from the positive perspective, when human beings are engaged in doing good, the B-Value of goodness is being practiced so that they are living the "higher" or "transcendent" life as actualized persons. In short, full humanhood cannot be achieved unless a culture and its institutions encourage goodness.⁸ Parenthetically, it may be said that the essence of goodness here means the ability to practice functional honesty, empathy, unselfishness, and love toward our fellow human beings.

Needless to say, it behooves education to do all that is within its power to provide its learners with knowledge concerning ethics and with opportunities to apply such knowledge. Indeed, an educational system which ignores the responsibility of instructing its youth in ethics is not only self-defeating in particular but also life-negating in general.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 326.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 325.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 318.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Note: Maslow is not alone in his development of this theme. The same motif appears in the writings of Buber, Frankl, Fromm, and Schweitzer.

² See the writings of Felix Adler, Martin Buber, Albert Camus, John Childs, John Dewey, Erich Fromm, Aldous Huxley, J. Krishnamurti, and Albert Schweitzer.

³ Abraham H. Maslow. *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*. New York: The Viking Press, 1971. p. 185.

Not only would the study of ethics help our developing youth to arrive at what constitutes good conduct but it would also offer them considerable knowledge of general philosophy, history, economics, and political science. It would also enable our students to better interpret such disciplines from new and numerous perspectives. In studying ethics students would necessarily be introduced to theology, psychology, sociology, and even law. The sweep of general knowledge to be encountered in the study of ethics would be very broad yet quite integrated. Schweitzer makes a good point when he asserts that traditional education has made "political and

economic questions"⁹ its major study while pushing ethics completely aside.¹⁰ As a result, Schweitzer argues, education must accept much of the blame for the present moral slump.¹¹

To Be Awakened to the Ethical

Unlike many of the subject matter courses currently being taught in our schools which stress disconnected fact-finding and mere information stockpiling, a study of ethics would demand reflective thinking and

⁹ Schweitzer, *op. cit.*, p. xiv.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

"True ethics begins where the use of words ceases."—

Albert Schweitzer



unification of knowledge. Again Schweitzer writes that the teaching and learning of ethics must be grounded in reflective thought about the accumulated knowledge of ethics.¹² In the jungle doctor's own words, "There is . . . no such thing as a scientific system of ethics; there can only be a thinking one."¹³ As to what is proper or improper conduct, "no one can speak to his neighbor as an expert."¹⁴ The essential matter is that the student be awakened to the ethical spirit. This can best be accomplished by a sharing of ethical ideas and critical discussion of ethical questions currently presenting themselves to us.¹⁵

Another advantage accruing from the study of ethics would be that learners would be introduced to the thought of the Great Ethical Teachers: Lao-Tse, Confucius, Buddha, Zarathustra, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Jesus, Erasmus, Spinoza, Kant, Buber, Gandhi, Schweitzer, Tagore, and Tolstoy.¹⁶ From these and other persons, students would not only be exposed to what is right but would also get the opportunity to see how great minds function.

A study of ethics would serve yet another important purpose for our youth. In addition to helping students gain a sense of right conduct, ethics would assist the young to arrive at worthy ideals to which they could aspire and toward which they could strive. The proper study of ethics would not only inform youth of the high ideals of the great teachers, but it would also be motivational and inspirational to them in achieving their own lofty ideals. The study of ethics should encourage the Socratic attitude of "The unexamined life is not worth living" and its counterpart, "The un-lived life is not worth examining." Very few fields of knowledge offer the learner such obvious insights into the relationship between subject matter

studied and life to be lived. A study of ethics would be relevant, inspirational, and practical for both the present and future.

The teaching of ethics is uniquely timely as society in general and professional educators in particular are confused about: (a) what values are pivotal, (b) how to teach values, and (c) the best ways to give education an increased valuational dimension. In a time characterized by the "New Morality," and more recently, "No Morality," it seems as if all—students, teachers, and society at large—could improve by a study of ethics. As Schweitzer puts it, even if education and teachers "can do nothing more than bring ethical thinking to the fore, they have nevertheless done something valuable."¹⁷

In committing to living example what he taught, Schweitzer correctly suggests that, "True ethics begins where the use of words ceases."¹⁸ Let us cease to talk and begin to act now by inserting the study of ethics into our curricula. In teaching at all levels, the authors have found that younger and older students alike are fascinated by, enthusiastic about, and eager for opportunities to discuss ethics; that is, what is good for humankind and, of late, all "lifekind." In all fairness to our youth, the curricula of our schools *must* make room for a study of ethics. In the words of one of our greatest teachers, the only way out of our current nadir of morality is to utilize education to "bring more ethics into the world."¹⁹ There is no other way because education is the only institution which commands the overall resources to "pass through the whole experience of mankind in its search for the ethical."²⁰ In particular, education can serve ethics by exposing the young to the best ethical principles of the past²¹ and by giving them opportunities for exchanging ethical ideas.²² □

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 103.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ A. A. Roback, editor. In: *Albert Schweitzer's Realms*. Cambridge: Sci-Art Publishers, 1962. p. 387.

¹⁶ Schweitzer, *op. cit.*, pp. 103-265.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

¹⁸ Richard and Clara Winston, translators. *The Teaching of Reverence for Life*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965. p. 34.

¹⁹ Schweitzer, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 327.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 103.

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