



Grappling *with* *the* Good

Talking about Religion and Morality
in Public Schools

Robert Kunzman

Grappling with the Good

SUNY series, The Philosophy of Education

Philip L. Smith, editor

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Morality in Public Schools

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Dedicated to the memory of

Jenny B. Farnham

*grandmother
and
public school teacher*

1915–1979

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Foreword

Americans have become accustomed to hearing that public education is in a state of crisis. Unfortunately, agreement about the nature of the crisis is in short supply. On the left of the political spectrum, chronic under-funding for schools, especially the schools of the urban poor, is the prime grievance, with the failures of desegregation coming in a distant second. On the right, public education is condemned for its insulation from the discipline of the market and its alleged hostility to Christian values. If we cannot even agree on the nature of the problem, no one should be surprised that real dialogue on solutions is rare.

Rob Kunzman's superb book also addresses a crisis in American education, though the crisis he identifies cuts across the stale polarities of current educational debate. The crisis Kunzman discerns has to do with a failure of mutual understanding and respect in a nation that is increasingly pluralistic and where the dialogue necessary to secure understanding and respect is an urgent but largely unrecognized educational task. Like educational critics on the left, Kunzman argues for an education that embodies ideals of equality at the core of America's democratic tradition. Like critics on the right, he acknowledges that merely by evading deep ethical diversity public education cannot respect the divergent creeds and traditions that students bring to the public school.

Kunzman's interpretation of pluralism carries him far into questions at the cutting edge of contemporary political philosophy. These are questions about how we can find a basis for morally stable social cooperation when so many of our differences prove to have no rational resolution. He rejects the tempting route that so many take who claim that once we neatly sunder religion from ethics we can find terms of cooperation easily enough. Kunzman is acutely sensitive to the depth of religious faith in citizens' lives and to the pervasive ways in which it conditions our ethical perceptions and beliefs. A public education which accepts that truth must

find new ways of educating students for citizenship in a pluralistic society. Perhaps the principal merit of Kunzman's book is that he describes such ways through rich examples of classroom dialogue that would acknowledge our pluralism without compromising the necessity of common educational ends. This is one of those very rare books from which both teachers and scholars would profit.

EAMONN CALLAN
STANFORD UNIVERSITY

Acknowledgments

What I have to say in this book has emerged in part from my ongoing experiences teaching in public schools, nowhere more importantly than Champlain Valley Union High School in Vermont. I will always be indebted to my friends and colleagues there. Even now, the best part of my day is often the time I spend teaching in the local high school, and for that opportunity I remain indebted to Rachel Nichols, a gifted teacher and generous classroom partner. Many thanks as well to my colleagues in the Indiana University School of Education for their support of my writing and teaching about these issues in the university context, but also for encouraging my ongoing teaching in the K–12 setting.

Many people have read versions of this book over the past several years, providing valuable insight and suggestions. These friends and colleagues have included Morva McDonald, Ira Lit, Jon Levisohn, and Marlissa Hughes. Rob Reich deserves special thanks for his helpful guidance and support at multiple stages of the writing process. Sam Intrator, a brilliant writer and teacher who understands the classroom as well as anyone I know, spent many hours helping me organize, reframe, and clarify. I also enjoyed many conversations about these issues with my late colleague and friend Kipchoge Kirkland. I will miss Choge's warm encouragement and deep insight; he had so much more to say and teach us.

I am also grateful for the numerous mentors who have nurtured my thinking and writing over the years. Larry Cuban, Denis Phillips, David Tyack, and Lee Yearley have all lent their wisdom and encouragement to my endeavors; they are teachers in the best sense of the word. I must also single out Eamonn Callan, who gave the great gift of helping me become a better thinker. His unfailing support and keen analytical mind have helped shape this book, even while he graciously disagrees with some of what I have to say.

I have no doubt that with everyone mentioned, had I listened better to their suggestions, I would have here a stronger book. I hope they will excuse me for the times I somehow ignored their good advice. I also appreciate the opportunity to share my emerging thinking in various publications; portions of this book have appeared in earlier forms in the *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, *Journal of Moral Education*, *Religious Education*, *Theory and Research in Social Education*, *Philosophy of Education* 2003, and *Philosophy of Education* 2005.

While this book has benefited greatly from the advice of many reviewers, I have also relied on other people who don't know much about it beyond the general topic. They support my work, but more importantly, they support me. Gene and Lucy Kunzman, my first and best teachers, have given steady love and encouragement since literally day one. Bill and Katy White remain devoted friends who care for my family beyond human measure. I have read many acknowledgements in which the author apologizes to his children for the ways in which his scholarly efforts have shortchanged their time together. Hannah and Kira, my hope is that you have not felt this too often, and that you have gained something from watching your father work hard on a project about which he cares deeply. Regardless, your smiles always put academia in perspective. Finally, the person taking care of those girls—even in the midst of her own career—deserves my greatest gratitude. Audra, your patience and support have made this project possible; your love has made our walk together rich with joy.

Central to democratic thought as I understand it is the idea of a body of citizens who reason with one another about the ethical issues that divide them, especially when deliberating on the justice or decency of political arrangements. It follows that one thing a democratic people had better have in common is a form of ethical discourse, a way of exchanging reasons about ethical and political topics. The democratic practice of giving and asking for ethical reasons, I argue, is where the life of democracy principally resides. Democracy isn't all talk. Now and then there is also a lot of marching involved, for example. But there is no form of ethical life that generates more talk on the part of more people than does modern democracy. It is in democratic discourse that the claims and reasons of marching protestors get expressed. Protestors rarely just march. They also carry signs that say something. They chant slogans that mean something. They sing songs that convey a message. And they march to or from a place where speeches are given.

—Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*

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Introduction

It was early in my high school teaching career, in the middle of a discussion about human cloning. Cheryl had been arguing for limits on scientific research, and her hand shot up again from the back of the classroom. “We shouldn’t play God,” she insisted.

Maybe not, but can we talk about God? Or at least about the ways in which religious beliefs influence our lives together in a diverse society? Cheryl made her comment in the midst of an eleventh-grade English class discussion of Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*. The chilling images of the Hatchery, where embryos on conveyor belts were genetically modified, had struck a chord with my students.

Truth be told, I wasn’t really sure where to go with Cheryl’s assertion. I knew that her religious faith played a major role in her life, and she was responding to some classmates who were advocating nearly unbridled genetic manipulation in the pursuit of disease-free, physiologically superior humans. Asking Cheryl a follow-up question would likely spark a vast array of student opinions about religious belief and its role in society and public policy. Should I really open *that* can of worms?

I should have, but I didn’t. Instead, I maneuvered around the comment and sought to refocus attention on the story: “OK, some people do see religious belief as important in discussing an issue like gene manipulation—but what’s the larger point Huxley might be trying to make here about society and technology and the pursuit of perfection?”

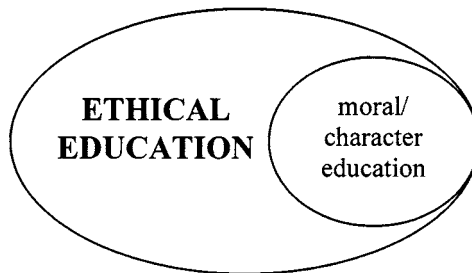
It seemed to me at the time that if we pursued Cheryl’s comment, the likelihood of arriving at some sort of respectful conclusion to the

controversy was pretty remote. In my defense, any experienced teacher could probably add a few more reasons to steer clear of the issue. If an administrator had been observing my class, she probably would have complimented my deft handling of a potentially volatile topic.¹

But it didn't feel like a fine pedagogical moment. Instead, my evasion left me with some profound questions: How do we help students engage thoughtfully with ethical disagreement, even when religion is involved? And how do we make decisions about how to live together respectfully—in spite of our disagreement—in this diverse society? This book argues that we can and should help students learn how to talk about religion and morality, learn how to discuss disagreements that are influenced by religious and other ethical perspectives—not because we can “solve” them, but because this grappling is the responsibility of informed, respectful citizenship.

A DEFINITION OF “ETHICAL EDUCATION”: MORE THAN MORALS

While the subtitle of this book mentions “talking about religion and morality,” some greater precision is necessary as we move forward. Throughout this book, I will use the key term *ethical education* to represent a much broader realm than is usually meant by the more familiar labels of moral, civic, or character education. This is a crucial distinction with particularly significant implications for the role of religion. Bernard Williams reminds us that—unlike our modern conception—the ancient notion of ethics included not only a focus on moral obligation, but also a concern for what makes a full and meaningful life.² Ultimately, ethics are concerned with the question, “How should one live?” So whereas much



modern civic and character education is concerned primarily with our responsibilities toward others, ethical education also involves broader questions about the good life and human flourishing.

Why is it important to focus on the broader question of “the good life” instead of just on “right and wrong”? The simple answer (which I will explain more fully in chapter 3) is that for many people, determinations of what is right and wrong are made in light of their understanding of what makes a full and meaningful life. This is often the case when religious belief is involved—Cheryl’s strong resistance to genetic manipulation, for example, emerged from her ethical conception of God as a creator whose designs should not be altered.

Ethical education seeks to explore questions as wide-ranging yet potentially interrelated as:

- What kind of life should I lead? What kind of person should I try to become?
- How can I live a full and meaningful life?
- What and whom can I trust?
- How can I tell right from wrong? What are my obligations toward others?
- Do my obligations vary according to the nature of my relationships with others?
- How do I deal with suffering, my own and that of people around me?
- How do I weigh my needs and desires against those of the larger community?
- How should I respond to disagreement about issues of vital importance to me?
- When am I justified in criticizing others? When are they justified in criticizing me?
- Does human life have transcendent meaning?

Even within moral psychology, a field long dominated by narrower Kohlbergian notions of justice and obligation, some are calling for greater attention to these broader ethical concerns. Lawrence Walker, for example, criticizes the overemphasis on moral rationality and obligations toward others. “Morality is also an intrapersonal exercise,” he points out, “because it is integral to the how-shall-we-then-live existential question—it involves basic values, lifestyle, and identity.” Because of this link between moral obligation and broader ethical concerns, it is oftentimes misguided to discuss questions of right and wrong without also discussing beliefs about human flourishing, what some psychologists are now calling one’s broader “moral identity.”³

One way in which this link manifests in our lives together as citizens is the degree to which many Americans draw on their religious convictions when taking positions on public policy: same-sex marriage, genetic engineering, private school vouchers, the Pledge of Allegiance, and abortion are just a few prominent examples. The growing religious diversity of Americans only adds to the array of ethical perspectives represented. As a result, our public discourse is infused with ethical arguments based on religious beliefs, often with competing visions of “the good life.” This has powerful implications for a model of citizenship that includes participation in such discourse—it requires citizens who can thoughtfully and respectfully “grapple with the good” as it is envisioned by a range of religious and other ethical perspectives. If we believe that public schools play a vital role in fostering thoughtful citizenship, then it seems vital that they help students learn how to talk about these ethical differences.

The students in my English class missed out on this important element of citizenship, and they aren’t alone. A few years ago, students across the nation studied civics while wearing bracelets adorned with the letters WWJD—“What Would Jesus Do?” But it’s quite likely neither they nor their non-Christian classmates ever discussed how deeply held religious beliefs should most appropriately relate to laws and policies that affect all citizens. “If someone believes life begins at conception, how should this influence her position on stem cell research?” “Should my tax dollars support schools based on ethical beliefs I reject?” “Can we compromise on public policies when competing religious views are at stake?” The bracelets have mostly disappeared, but the challenge of religiously-informed citizenship remains largely ignored in our public schools.

Why is an ethical education that grapples with these tough issues, and helps students learn to talk together respectfully about them, so important? Some may recall what happened in the summer of 2002, when the University of North Carolina assigned students, for summer reading, a book called *Approaching the Qur’an*, an annotated set of excerpts from the Koran. What followed were lawsuits in federal court, legislative threats to cut the university budget, and comments that compared it to the teaching of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*. Many students criticized the assignment as well. One remarked, “I don’t really care about [Muslims] right now. I’m not in an enlightened state of mind. If anything, I want to worry about ourselves, and turn to our own religion.”⁴ What strikes me most powerfully about this incident is the unwillingness or inability of many observers and students to engage thoughtfully with ethical diversity, in