

REVIEW ARTICLE

Teaching Right and Wrong: A Somewhat Irritating Expression

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Moral Education: Beyond the Teaching of Right and Wrong

Colin A. Wringer, Dordrecht, Kluwer, 2006, pp. 196, Hbk. £64.00, \$119.00.

This article critically reviews Colin Wringer's Moral Education: Beyond the Teaching of Right and Wrong. The book has three broad aims. The first is to illustrate the philosophical deficiencies of the conceptualisation of moral education underlying two recently published UK government documents on values education. The second is to develop a pluralistic prescriptive account of mature moral judgement, putatively as a point of reference for the educational promotion of moral development. Finally, Wringer presents his views on how certain perennially contested themes such as sexuality, the family and citizenship should be handled in moral education. In laying out its central claim about the rational contestability of moral judgements and, on the basis of this claim, in building its case against traditionalist conceptions of moral education and in favour of Wringer's own particular brand of discussion-centred progressivist moral education, there is a problem in that the book fails to position itself clearly vis-à-vis the vigorous contemporary debates on the proper role of character, virtue and habituation in moral education. If this is its main weakness, however, the book's strength is its unflinching persistence in keeping social control and moral education conceptually distinct, as they should be.

'We have recently heard a lot', Mary Warnock once wrote, 'about the necessity for children at school to be taught the difference between right and wrong. This is a highly ambiguous and somewhat irritating expression' (Warnock, 1996, p. 45). Colin Wringer's sensible *Moral Education* is an extended elaboration of this very thought and, at least ostensibly, his reasons for rejecting the received idea that the point and purpose of moral education is to get children on the straight and narrow mirror Warnock's. For one thing, the expression seems to assimilate moral

education to curricular instruction. It misrepresents moral education as a subject area like any other, comprised of a body of canonical material that can be straightforwardly taught, learned and retained. For another thing, it glosses over the fact that moral education is a *practical* enterprise; any concern in moral education with knowledge and understanding is upstream from its *non plus ultra* concern with being and acting.

If Wringe avoids direct confrontation with moral motivation as an educational problem, which he does, it is because his colours are pinned to the mast of progressivism. The publication in the 1920's of Hartshorne and May's rather convincing case that moral character, traditionally moral education's central concept, is a folk belief unable to withstand empirical scrutiny,¹ and the political upheaval and violence in central Europe in the 1930's and 1940s, widely perceived as caused in part by the devastating failure, among other failures, of traditional approaches to moral education, were two developments that made reason and habit in moral education seem difficult to balance if not altogether mutually incompatible. Interpreting the primary problem of moral education as being that of how to initiate young people into a life of moral virtue requires one, at the very least, to suspend addressing the fact that reasonable people disagree about the meaning of moral excellence as it is applied in specific circumstances. Moral education as habituation, in other words, appears to threaten moral progress by stifling the emergence of post-conventional moral thinking, the ability to view social norms from a critical distance. This is the cardinal weakness of traditionalism. However, interpreting the primary problem of moral education as being how to promote the development of skills in critical moral reasoning risks neglecting the equally serious problem that knowing virtue and conforming the will to it—as clear-sighted commentators from Aristotle (1955) to Hume (1751/1957) to Peters (1981) have pointed out—are two separate things entirely. Avoiding the problem of moral responsibility or why some people some of the time act in accordance with their best moral judgement and others do not by claiming that it is an empirical question that social psychologists are best equipped to handle might hold a certain amount of water in moral *philosophy* (cf. Habermas, 1993, and Vetlesen, 1994). But any account of moral *education* that lacks a full-blooded appreciation that being moral does not just follow trivially from knowing what it *means to be* moral possesses the cardinal weakness of progressivism.² Faced with a world where 'the precise application of moral values is subject to interpretation' (p. 5) and in light of the fact that 'many of the explicit maxims of prudent or virtuous conduct will greatly vary from context to context' (p. 9), Wringe casts the central preoccupation of moral education as moral development—which, in his conception, means the growth of skills in justifying a position vis-à-vis moral problems by appealing to a plurality of all the 'good and valid reasons that may be given for doing and expecting others to do some things rather than others' (p. 10).

The fact that Wringe's central thesis that 'developing moral reasoning may form a significant element in moral education' (p. 43) is not particularly original, hardly detracts from the book's value. One could

fault him with failing to engage at all with what Terence McLaughlin and Mark Halstead (1999) helpfully refer to as the ‘expansive’ varieties of character education. Some of David Carr’s work, for instance, stands out as being a particularly sensitive attempt to show how one can not just acknowledge but actually embrace the problem of reasonable disagreement over the application of virtue and value terms, and in the process retain virtue and character as central concepts in moral education (see especially Carr, 1996).³ We get in the book only the most cursory treatment of the vast and increasingly sophisticated character education movement in the United States, a movement that has in recent years expanded outwards from the likes of politically conservative organisations like Thomas Lickona’s ‘Character Counts Coalition’ to become a central preoccupation of some very serious moral psychologists.⁴ No matter, because Wringer clearly has other and arguably bigger fish to fry.

The first of these concerns are the inculcatory assumptions of two documents recently published in Britain by the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority and various supportive surrounding commentaries (esp. Talbot and Tate, 1997). *Education for Adult Life: The Spiritual and Moral Development of Young People* (1996a) reports on a conference that brought together delegates who apparently not only shared all-too-familiar concerns about the moral degradation of youth in general but also subscribed to the view, often advanced with airs of sophistication, that this degradation was the result of the influence of ‘relativism’. This document’s promise to execute a consultation process aimed at drafting a statement of values that could in turn be adopted and promoted in schools with confidence and authority was made good in a second document, *Consultation on Values in Education and the Community* (1996b). The fact that no basically sane human being could conceivably disagree with the forum’s ‘four statements of values’ is scarcely the point, Wringer says. What he takes issue with instead is the coherence of the very idea that society’s values can in any meaningful sense be codified and passed on the next generation in a straightforward didactic way (see especially pp. 4–5). Second, and relatedly, the fact that the documents take as an operative principle that the proper role of moral education is to transmit community values—‘our’ values—demonstrates a lack of recognition that this idea *itself* wears one of the masks of relativism. Social relativism, no less than individual moral relativism, is positively at odds with critical moral reflection. As Wringer puts it, ‘the assumption is that the values of our society are what they are and that is all there is to be said. Moral reflection becomes a matter of matching our actions or intended actions to what our society’s values are supposed to be and acting accordingly. There is no possibility of standing outside the supposed value system of our society or attempting to criticise that system itself’ (p. 18).

Wringer’s other central critical preoccupation is no less than to sketch out his own pluralistic account of normative ethics. The case is built in Part 2 with a series of chapters that provide an accessible, informed and skilled critical presentation of each of the standard philosophical accounts of normative justification. Consequentialism, duty theory, virtue ethics,

communitarianism and care ethics are all necessary, Wringe argues, but none alone is sufficient to capture the rich variety of grounds that may be legitimately appealed to in justifying moral claims. He dedicates a separate preceding chapter to the explicit rejection of theology as an acceptable source of moral appraisal in contemporary society, apparently in order to justify its exclusion from his roster of legitimate sources of justification. He also rejects, in the preliminary chapters, socio-moral absolutism and subjectivism, which he identifies as the two inadequate alternatives that have emerged in popular intellectual culture to replace theology. Any form of moral education that is both conceptually sound and responsive to the moral-educational needs of young people facing a world of moral uncertainty, Wringe concludes, will involve initiation into an understanding of the fact that ‘sound and defensible grounds of moral appraisal’ (p. 32) are available to them but that they are multiple, overlapping and not infrequently mutually contradictory. The result reflects the Berlinian insight that from the viewpoint of moral maturity there is tragedy in the complexity of moral life:

The reasons at our disposal for living and acting thus and not otherwise are many and varied. It is also part of our predicament that they may sometimes clash and that the situations to which they apply cannot be specified in detail in advance. Moral responsibility is partly a matter of being aware of this and accepting it in our lives and in appraising the lives and actions of others (p. 32).

Wringe does not take seriously the plausible suggestion that children may have moral-educational needs that are very different from those of adolescents and young adults and that these needs—to be precise, getting a firm footing in a particular moral worldview (Peters, 1981) and learning to be concerned with other people’s pains, pleasures and wishes as well as their own (Warnock, 1996)—are only tangentially related to the development skills in moral reasoning. His case against the ‘inculcatory approach to moral education’ (p. 5) and in favour of his own brand of progressivism—one that centralises the discussion of moral problems as being favourable to the development of skills in moral reasoning but free from progressivism’s old vices of teacher neutrality and subjectivism (see especially Chapter 5 and Chapter 17, pp. 172–73)—rests on a repeated assertion: the application of any criteria of moral justification is subject to interpretation to an extent that rules out, for educational purposes at any rate, certainty about what to do and how to behave. Here, the man doth protest too much, methinks. Notwithstanding, many share the intuition that the endless philosophical haggling over the relative merits of the various theories of normative ethics overlooks the fact that the criteria of moral justification are inescapably plural and probably incommensurable. Wringe’s success in constructing a sustained argument to the effect that each of these stances has a unique contribution to make in moral assessment is itself a significant contribution.

There is a weak chapter in this second section of the book. It is the one on care ethics. The refreshingly thorough discussion of Gilligan’s (1982)

famous objections to Kohlberg's (1978) theory of moral development is overshadowed by the fact that it is not for lack of trying that no moral psychologist has ever satisfactorily reproduced Gilligan's empirical results supporting her basic hypothesis that girls and boys speak in different moral 'voices', that girls are more caring- and boys more justice-oriented in their moral thinking (cf. Walker, 1984 and 1986). This accounts for, in part at least, the tendency towards brief and perfunctory discussions of her ideas elsewhere. Wringer's treatment of Noddings is generous to a fault. Thankfully, he does, here and there, take her to task for being something of a purveyor of—there is a word for it in German—*Edelkitsch*, kitsch for the educated classes.⁵ But overlooked entirely is the apparently obvious objection that Noddings' version of care ethics is perhaps the most sustained deployment of the naturalistic fallacy in recent moral-philosophical memory (an objection that she rather cavalierly dismisses [see 1984, 1992, 1998]). Because, from the perspective of Noddings' own ontological analysis (in 1984), intentional human activity can be interpreted as caring of one kind or another, it follows, on her view, that people should be carers and that social institutions should be modelled on caring relationships. At the same time, there is no mention of what is surely Noddings' most original contribution to contemporary moral philosophy: namely, her postulate that moral goodness is neither primarily a quality of acts (as deontology and consequentialism have it) nor of persons or character (as in virtue ethics) but of *relationships*. Noddings is the natural choice as a representative of care ethics, but if one is after a philosophically muscular argument for the relevance of concern for others in moral appraisal and as a source of value, material is readily available in the writings of Max Scheler (1954), Larry Blum (1980), Arne Johan Vetlesen (1994) and Christine Korsgaard (1996).

In the third and final part of the book Wringer turns his attention to what he describes in the introduction as 'a number of issues of particular relevance to the moral education of the young in the modern world' (p. xi). In light of the centrality of the claim that there are no general or universal answers to moral questions in the argument developed in the first two parts of the book, the relevance of Wringer's defence of his own substantive views on such topics as homosexual parents, faithfulness in romantic relationships, and the obligations attending citizenship may seem questionable. This difficulty is to some extent resolved when one realises that these chapters do not build on his earlier plea for an open and discussion-centred approach as much as they change the subject. Wringer's distinct concern here is to deliver a set of mid-level directives for how certain themes of particular relevance to the contemporary world should be handled in moral education. In every case, his recommendations are sensible, progressive and tolerant. With regard to sexual morality, he seems to suggest that young people should be instructed in open-mindedness about such recurrent issues as homosexuality, fidelity, sex and love in asymmetrical partnerships, and abortion and should learn to appreciate how difficult and personal decisions regarding sexual questions can be. With regard to family life, moral education, he claims, should have

a hand in eliminating ‘bigotry, prejudice and irrational fear’ (p. 137) towards alternative lifestyles by demonstrating how different people find personal fulfilment in a range of family arrangements and that a person may conceivably find much personal fulfilment in choosing not to have a family. In this chapter, his three-category taxonomy of contemporary families into the ‘traditional’, the ‘modern’ and the ‘deviant’ is of particular value and is outstanding in its sociological astuteness. Once again, we find Wringe articulating what so many have been thinking but have failed to express.

Local and global citizenship are dealt with in two separate chapters but his thesis is the same in each case: a primary task of citizenship education is to show, in Wringe’s words, that ‘a commitment to rectify [social] imperfections and injustices is a duty of perfect obligation upon the polity as a whole’ (p. 150). Citizenship education, that is, should draw attention to the imperfections of society and provide the factual knowledge and practical and intellectual skills that would be favourable to their gradual elimination (p. 146).

The book concludes with a chapter on how schools should organise themselves in taking on the task of moral education. The debate over whether moral education should be a discrete curricular item or whether it is better handled ‘across the curriculum’ is quickly dismissed as presenting a false dichotomy (p. 162). With level-headed qualifications registered in almost every case, Wringe’s comprehensive account of the practice of moral education addresses educational value in role modelling (p. 163), everyday exchanges between students and teachers about moral reasons (p. 163), service learning (p. 166), praise and blame as support for moral motivation (pp. 165–166), direct didactic exposition (p. 174), trying to set up schools as ‘moral communities’ (pp. 162–164), sport and games (pp. 169–170), and initiation into the intellectual virtues of the specific academic disciplines (pp. 170–171). Unsurprisingly, he makes a vigorous case that specific time be allotted to moral education in school schedules, arguing that, ‘moral education is too serious a matter to be left to the whims and fancies of individual teachers, to be added on as an appendage to other subjects or dealt with at odd moments in form periods after registration’ (p. 172). Of course, a significant portion of these periods will be spent in discursive engagement with moral problems and issues, but such discussion should be conducted, Wringe says, in a spirit that is significantly different from that of progressive moral education in the classical mode. Perhaps too optimistically, Wringe claims that former staples of the progressivist conception of moral education—namely, the idea that traditional moral beliefs are always questionable, that the notion that the pinnacle of moral development is the capacity to assess moral problems in light of self-justifying moral principles, that the proper role of the teacher in moral education is that of the ‘facilitator’, and that teachers have an obligation not to muddy the free exchange of moral reasons among peers with their own beliefs—are no longer viewed as credible either by educational theorists nor by most practising teachers.

Wringe's book does not betray its title. It is strongest as a polemic against conceiving moral education as teaching children the difference between right and wrong. Now more than ever, one suspects, the beginning of moral wisdom is an appreciation that controversy and uncertainty are the very essence of ethical life. To anyone with a keen sense of this, like Wringe evidently, determining moral education's goal as straightforwardly 'teaching children to be good' and then calculating how to achieve that goal is disingenuous and unwise. Simpler still, the view mistakes moral education for social control, and what is wrong with that, of course, is that it treats children and adolescents as things. The book is to be admired for the sensitive manner in which it keeps these two concepts distinct. That it is also so timely is a sad commentary on how easy it is, when it comes to their concerns for the smaller people, for grown-ups to run the two together. Wringe's book helps to show why we should be irritated by talk of teaching right and wrong.

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NOTES

1. For a recent discussion, see Gilbert Harman (1999).
2. For a detailed recent treatment of traditionalism and progressivism in this sense, as perennially competing conceptions of specifically moral education, see David Carr (2004).
3. For other treatments of education for character and virtue that are philosophically rich and, on the whole, very much alive to the interpretive gulf between the conceptualisation of virtues as desirable moral traits in the abstract and their precise practical application, see various contributions to Carr and Steutel (1999).
4. See, for example, Lapsley and Power (2005).
5. For a recent discussion of kitsch and its rich variety of forms, and its particular prevalence in the field of education see Reichenbach (2003).

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