

Moral and Ethical Development in a Democratic Society

Irving Kristol

I HAVE BEEN asked to write about moral and ethical development in a democratic society, and I should like to express my discomfort with that term “development.” It is such a curious word, so tantalizingly neutral and therefore so ambiguous in defining our relation to morality. After all, the title could easily have been “moral and ethical education in a democratic society.” Why wasn’t it? Well, I assume the reason is that we are not certain that it is a proper function of education to shape young people according to any specific set of moral standards, and the term “moral education” does imply an activity of that sort. Development, on the other hand, suggests that morality is something that exists embryonically within every child—rather like an intelligence quotient—and that education’s purpose is to encourage it to unfold toward its fullest potential. Morality, in this view, is something that happens to one, so education then becomes a process of liberating human possibilities for this eventual happening rather than of defining human possibilities in an approved way.

This is certainly a very convenient notion for teachers or all those

in a position of authority, because it means that they need not have any firm moral beliefs or provide a moral model of any kind. The process of development can then be regarded as a purely technical problem—of means, not of ends—and the solution is to get people, especially young people, to have feelings about morality and to think about it: to be morally sensitive and morally aware, as we say. Once this has been successfully accomplished, the task of education is finished. What kinds of people emerge from this process is something we can leave to the people themselves freely to decide; the final disposition of their moral sentiments and ideas is their business, not anyone else's.

It's all very odd and most interesting, rather as if an expert in gardening were to compose a manual on botanical development in a suburban landscape. He would give you all sorts of important information on how things grow—weeds as well as flowers, poison ivy as well as roses—without ever presuming to tell you whether you should favor one over the other, or *how* to favor one over the other. In fact, there are no such gardening manuals, precisely because any gardener has some definite ideas about how a garden might look. Different gardeners have different ideas, of course; but there is a limit to this variety. The idea of a garden does not, for instance, include an expanse of weeds or poison ivy, and no gardener would ever confuse a garden with a garbage dump.

In contrast, we seem unable or unwilling to establish defining limits to the idea of a moral person. We are, as it were, gardeners with all the latest implements and technology, but without an idea of a garden. Is this a function of mere ignorance? Or mere timidity? I think not. Rather, we have faith in the nature of people that we do not have in the botanical processes of nature itself, and I use the word "faith" in its full religious force. We really do believe that all human beings have a natural *telos* toward becoming flowers, not weeds or poison ivy, and that in the aggregate human beings have a natural predisposition to arrange themselves into gardens, not jungles or garbage heaps. This sublime and noble faith we may call the religion of liberal humanism. It is the

Moral and Ethical Development in a Democratic Society 175

dominant spiritual and intellectual orthodoxy in America today. Indeed, despite all our chatter about the separation of church and state, one can even say it is the official religion of American society today, compared with which all other religions can be criticized as divisive and parochial. I happen not to be a believer in this religion of liberal humanism, but this is not the time or place for theological controversy and I am not, in any case, the best-qualified person for such a controversy. I shall simply remark on what I take to be a fact: Though the majority of the American people may well subscribe to some version of this religion—and I think they do—the young among us end up holding in contempt all the institutions in which the ethos of this religion is incarnated. Indeed, incredibly, they become increasingly alienated from these institutions, and end up feeling that these institutions are in some way unresponsive and irrelevant to their basic needs. Their parents soon echo these complaints.

The Legitimacy of Institutions

What I suggest is that the moral neutrality of our institutions, especially our educational institutions, robs them of their popular legitimacy. Nor does it matter if this moral neutrality is, at the moment, popularly approved of and sanctioned by public opinion. It still deprives these institutions of their legitimacy. One does not have to be a particularly keen student of history or psychology to know that people will accept, tolerate, or even praise institutions which later will suddenly be experienced as intolerable and unworthy. Institutions, like worm-eaten trees, can look healthy and imposing until they crumble overnight into the dust. If you look at the *cahiers* submitted to the French Assembly on the eve of the great revolution, you find not a breath of dissatisfaction with the monarchy—not a hint of republican aspirations. Similarly, early in 1964, an opinion poll among students at the University of California at Berkeley found that the overwhelming majority thought very well of the school and believed they were getting an excellent

education there. Nevertheless, both Louis XVI and Clark Kerr soon found themselves riding the whirlwind. Such abrupt eruptions of profound discontent catch us all by surprise, whether we are talking about the rebelliousness of racial minorities, or young people, or women, or whomever. They are characteristic of American society today and also characteristic of a society whose institutions—whether they be political institutions, or schools, or the family—are being drained of their legitimacy—of their moral acceptance, for that is what legitimacy means.

We try to cope with this problem by incessantly restructuring our institutions to make them more responsive to popular agitation, but that obviously does not work very well. The more we fiddle around with our schools, the more energetically we restructure and then re-restructure them according to the passing fancy of intellectual fashion, the more steadily do they lose their good repute. One can only conclude that either there is something wrong with the idea of responsiveness as we currently understand it, or that there is some fault in our idea of the people as we currently understand it. I suggest that there is something wrong with both of these ideas as we currently understand them. Ultimately, we are talking about a single error rather than a dual one: an error in the way we conceive the relations between a people and their institutions in a democratic society.

Strategies of Responsiveness

There is an old Groucho Marx chestnut about how he resigned from a club immediately upon being elected to membership, his resignation prompted by the thought that any club that would elect him a member couldn't possibly be worth joining. I think that, in this old chestnut, there is a lesson for all of us about responsiveness. More and more of our institutions have been reaching out for greater participation and involvement, and an ever-larger number of those new recruits to full membership in the club have been busy resigning.

It is not easy to say to what degree our various strategies of respon-

Moral and Ethical Development in a Democratic Society 177

siveness are motivated by sly cunning or plain self-deception. In the heyday of campus protest over the Vietnam war, amidst an upsurge of general political radicalism among college students, Congress decided to lower the voting age to eighteen. To the best of my knowledge, there was not a single protest meeting on any American campus on the issue of a lower voting age. Similarly, to the best of my knowledge, Congress did not receive a single mass petition on this matter from young people. Nevertheless, Congress decided that, in the face of unrest, it couldn't simply remain mute and impassive, so it decided to be responsive in its way. It didn't end the Vietnam war or abolish capitalism, but instead passed a constitutional amendment lowering the voting age to eighteen. That amendment was promptly ratified by the requisite number of state legislatures, and shortly thereafter Richard Nixon was elected President by an overwhelming majority of the popular vote.

One of the ways in which we characteristically respond is to give dissatisfied people what they have not asked for, what there was never any sound reason for believing they really wanted. Thus, when non-whites in the ghettos of New York City began to express dissatisfaction with the fact that their children graduated from high school without even being able to read or reckon at an elementary school level, they were promptly given community control over their local school boards and open admissions to the senior city colleges, but if you look back at the course of events, you will discover that there never was any real popular demand as distinct from political–demagogic demand for either community control or open admissions. Neither had any bearing on the problems at hand. As a matter of fact, any authentic conception of community control stood in rank contradiction to the practice of busing students for purposes of integration, which was also under way in New York's schools.

We are responsive in another seemingly more candid, but actually even more cunning, way. This is to give people what they actually demand—or what some vociferously demand—in the tranquil knowledge that because these demands are misconceived, their satisfaction is

a meaningless gesture. That is what has happened with parietal rules, course gradings, class attendance, curriculum requirements, nominal student representation on various committees, and so forth, on so many of our college campuses, as well as in lower schools. The strategy may be defined as follows. When confronted with protest, dissatisfaction, and tumult, unburden yourself of your responsibilities but keep all your privileges, then announce that your institution has enlarged the scope of participation and freedom for all constituents. Since participation and freedom are known to be good democratic things, you have the appearance of rectitude and the reality of survival.

This complicated game of responsiveness has been skillfully played these past years and has enabled a great many institutions to secure their imperiled positions. In that sense, it has been unquestionably successful. In a deeper sense, however, it has gained nothing but time—a precious enough gain, but only if one realizes that it is simply time that has been gained, and that this time must be used productively if the gain is to be substantial rather than illusory. It is not my impression that any such realization exists.

Through the ages political philosophers and educators have argued that it is unwise to give people rights without, at the same time, imposing obligations—that rights without obligations make for irresponsibility, just as obligations without rights make for servility. Edmund Burke pushed this thesis further when he declared that it was part of the people's rights to have obligations—that an absence of obligation means a diminution of humanity because it signifies a condition of permanent immaturity. We can extend this line of thought even further and declare with confidence, based on our own more recent experience, that obligation is not only a right but a need. People upon whom no obligations are imposed will experience an acute sense of deprivation. It is our striking failure to recognize this phenomenon of moral deprivation for what it is that explains our fumbling, cynical response to the dissatisfaction that Americans express toward their institutions.

Institutions that pander to citizens (I use that word “pander” advis-

Moral and Ethical Development in a Democratic Society 179

edly) in an effort to achieve popularity may get good press for a while. Our mass media, for which pandering is an economic necessity, are naturally keen to see other institutions remake themselves in the media's own image, to become responsive as a television station or network is responsive. Responsiveness here means to satisfy popular appetite or desire or whim or fancy or, rather, to satisfy what is thought at any moment to be popular appetite or desire or whim or fancy. Such responsiveness, being timely and circumstantial, is also thought to be relevant. But amidst the noise of mutual self-congratulation, what is lost sight of is the fact that these institutions, floating on clouds of approval and self-approval, have uprooted themselves from that solid ground of moral legitimacy from which all institutions receive their long-term nourishment.

Do I exaggerate? Well, let me cite the problems of ghetto education. During the past decades we have had dozens of bold innovations in the schooling of slum kids, each claiming to be more responsive and more relevant than the previous ones. Some of these innovations have even revived forms of classroom organization and techniques of pedagogy that were popular a hundred years ago, and you can't be more innovative than that! Each innovation, at some moment, is held up as a breakthrough, is the subject of enthusiastic magazine articles and television reports, is quickly imitated by enterprising school administrators elsewhere, and is generally judged to be a success before any results are in. Then it quietly vanishes, and nothing more is heard about it as attention shifts to some later innovation, by some other bold educational reformer who has broken through encrusted tradition and has come up with an even more responsive and relevant program. Meanwhile, back in the ghetto, there exists a whole set of successful schools that no one pays any attention to—schools successful in the most elementary yet crucial terms: A long list of parents try desperately to register their children in these schools; the truancy and transfer rates are low, there is less juvenile delinquency and a lower rate of drug addiction among all students, and academic achievement levels tend to be slightly higher than average. I

refer to the parochial schools in the ghetto, which no one writes about, which the media ignore, but which—in the opinion of parents and students alike—are the most desirable of all ghetto schools. Many of these parochial schools are in old buildings with minimal facilities—a pitiful library perhaps, a squalid gymnasium perhaps, a Spartan lunchroom perhaps. Anyone who ever takes the trouble to open his or her eyes to the existence of these schools is not taken aback—as so many were—by the findings of the Coleman report that the condition or even nonexistence of such physical facilities had little connection with educational achievement.

Why are the parochial schools in the ghetto so well regarded? The answer is obvious: They are self-respecting institutions, demanding institutions, with standards that students are expected to meet. Many of them enforce dress codes as a symbolic gesture of self-affirmation. By making such demands upon their students, they cause them to make demands upon themselves and, most important, cause their students to realize that the only true moral and intellectual “development” occurs when you do make demands upon yourself.

The Case for Authority

I suppose that what I am saying can and will be interpreted as just another critique of what we call permissiveness. I should be unhappy if this happens, because I so intensely dislike both that term and its associations. People who indiscriminately attack permissiveness are themselves victims of confusion between authority and authoritarianism—a confusion they share with the very tendencies they criticize. Permissiveness and authoritarianism are two possible poles of moral discourse. Both of them are poles that come into existence when the center no longer holds. That center is authority, meaning the exercise of power toward some morally affirmed end in such a reasonable way as to secure popular acceptance. Legitimate authority is not always reasonable, since it is exercised by people who are not always naturally reasonable. No

Moral and Ethical Development in a Democratic Society 181

one is always reasonable, and therefore legitimate authority is open to criticism and correction. But if authority may be flawed in operation, both permissiveness and authoritarianism are flawed in their morally void and substanceless goals. This second flaw is clearly infinitely more important than the first. It induces a kind of technocratic mania, with exponents of permissiveness devising ever-new ways of liberating the citizen, with no idea as to what he is being liberated for, while exponents of authoritarianism are busy learning how to control people solely to secure the power of existing institutions, with no serious conception about the ultimate purpose of this power.

Properly understood, authority is to be distinguished from power, which is the capacity to coerce. In the case of authority, power is not experienced as coercive because it is infused, however dimly, with a moral intention that corresponds to the moral sentiments and moral ideals of those who are subject to this power. Education, in its only significant sense, is such an exercise in legitimate authority. When educators say that they don't know what their moral intention is, that they don't know what kinds of human beings they are trying to create, they have surrendered all claim to legitimate authority. Moral development, as now conceived in our schools of education, is never associated with ultimate mental intentions. (That would be authoritarian.) As a result, what we call moral development can easily give rise to moral deprivation—a hunger of the soul for moral meanings—which is far more devastating and dangerous than physical hunger. In the end, this hunger of the soul will satisfy itself by gratefully submitting to any passing pseudoauthority. But where on earth, in this bewildered age, are our educators going to discover this moral authority without which authentic education is impossible? Who is going to answer questions about the meaning of our individual and collective lives? I recognize both the cogency and poignancy of this lament: Ours is indeed a bewildered age. I would say this: If you have no sense of moral authority, if you have no sovereign ideas about moral purpose, you ought not to be educators. There are many technocratic professions in which, for all

182 *Irving Kristol*

practical purposes, the knowledge of means suffices, but education is not one of them. An educator who cannot give at least a tentative, minimally coherent reply to the question, "Education for what?" and who cannot at least point to the kinds of persons a good education is supposed to produce, is simply in the wrong line of work. It is my impression that, in fact, most educators, being sincerely committed to the educational enterprise, are in the right kind of work. Most do know more than they feel free to admit about the aim of education to achieve this freedom as one of the major purposes of education reform today.