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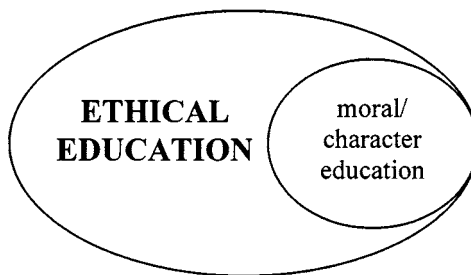
It seemed to me at the time that if we pursued Cheryl's comment, the likelihood of arriving at some sort of respectful conclusion to the

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

this case to explore questions such as "What is it in Islam that makes 1.2 billion people, many of them our fellow citizens, see it as meaningful—and how does it influence their views about our life together?" I believe the health of our increasingly diverse society depends on people who can communicate and deliberate respectfully among differing and often unfamiliar ethical perspectives.

This book contends that schools' continued avoidance of ethical controversy bodes ill for our civic capacity for informed and respectful discourse. My argument strives for a middle ground of sorts, acknowledging the importance of being able to understand and engage with the religious convictions of fellow citizens, while also guarding against the dogmatic imposition of religiously informed policies that affect all of us. I strive to identify the civic and educational principles that underlie this tension, and offer a vision for how educators can help prepare students to engage thoughtfully and productively with ethical conflict in our public square.

While these pages will include some philosophical arguments to support my claims and educational recommendations, it should be clear from our national and local conflicts that "grappling with the good" is very much a part of our everyday lives. Certainly the events of September 11, 2001, have raised a multitude of issues about religious and ethical diversity and how we navigate this diversity both at home and abroad. In addition, questions surrounding the idea of separation of church and state seem particularly salient now. The courts appear to be nearing a crossroads regarding how we conceive of this relationship. Whereas past decades have seen legal emphasis on avoiding governmental entanglement with religion, now the "free exercise" portion of the disestablishment clause is receiving growing attention; religious citizens, the argument goes, should have the freedom to see their convictions reflected in the public arena.

In spite of this ongoing tension in the public square and its obvious implications for our lives together, versions of my English class "pedagogical evasion" episode play out in classrooms throughout the country, and extend across the curriculum. I want to emphasize, however—the avoidance is broader than just the role of religion. While sometimes the potential presence of religion motivates teachers to steer clear, the prospect of grappling with *any* substantive ethical issue can be enough to change the subject. Summarizing her own research and that of others, Katherine Simon observes, "Although moral and existential issues arise frequently, they are most often shut down immediately. If moral issues are not shut

down completely, they are often relegated to assignments for individuals, rather than explored in public classroom discussion."[5] Whether the controversy focuses on stem cell research, gender roles, or our responsibility to others in our community, teachers and schools frequently avoid or downplay the ethical issues involved, particularly when they are informed by religious perspectives. The educational result, I contend, is a citizenry with little skill in discussing ethical controversies, particularly as they relate to religion, and thus even less sense of how to make decisions about living together in respectful and reasonable disagreement.

Ironically enough, our public schools certainly don't suffer from a lack of curricular resources when it comes to "moral education" or "character education" as it is currently conceived. As researcher James Leming noted back in 1995, "It is almost impossible to find a school district that doesn't have some sort of moral education program," whether it be focused on an issue such as drug use or conflict resolution or a broader effort such as character education. Since that time, attention to and funding for such programs have only increased.[6]

But as I will argue, something deeply important is missing from most of these conceptual and curricular approaches, both in terms of depth and breadth. The current focus on acontextual, prescriptive virtues typical of much character education curricula lacks the complexity inherent in most ethical challenges we face. Even those approaches that push students to wrestle with greater complexity do not generally provide sufficient opportunity for them to engage with the deeper ethical sources (religious and otherwise) that often inform our lives outside the classroom.

THE FOCUS OF THIS BOOK

This book describes and justifies a partial approach to ethical education that I call *Ethical Dialogue.* I use this label as a shorthand throughout the book, but it does not signify a formal program or technique. Ethical Dialogue involves cultivating empathic understanding of unfamiliar ethical perspectives and then engaging in thoughtful, civic deliberation in light of this understanding. While such a process should be tailored to the developmental level of students, I contend that Ethical Dialogue is an approach to ethical education appropriate and important for all grade levels.

As I have explained, ethical education should help students explore questions about the good life and human flourishing, and understand the

different ways people answer those questions. Many such ethical issues are not only woven into the way we live our lives but are features of school life as well. Even if not directly explored through intentional classroom curricula, they are addressed in the very texture of the school community. Relationships between and among students and staff, modeling of attitudes and beliefs by adults and peers—the entire social fabric abounds with ethical commentary. In many school settings (especially larger, more impersonal milieus), the responses can be bewildering and even incoherent, but students learn from them nonetheless. A full consideration of ethical education—and even my narrower focus of Ethical Dialogue—needs to take this broader social landscape into account. For reasons of scope and depth, my goal with this book is less ambitious, limited to the formal classroom curriculum as an (important but insufficient) element of ethical education.

Obviously, this limited focus has its drawbacks. Extensive research has demonstrated the importance of community in schools and classrooms in fostering prosocial outcomes. The broader "social web" plays a vital role in promoting or discouraging students' ethical growth.[7] A teacher who plans curricular experiences for her students cannot ignore these wider social conditions—inside of school and out—in which students live. In fact, it is the dissonance between the messages of the broader society and much ethical curricula that often renders them ineffectual and even hypocritical. The school environment itself can overwhelm the best ethical education taking place behind a particular classroom's door. When anonymity and self-advancement are the overriding features of broader school life, a single classroom that nurtures mutual understanding and respect for others will find its influence sadly muted.

The "hidden curriculum" messages that students receive are not all negative, however, and opportunities for ethical education extend well beyond schools themselves. Families, communities, and civil society play influential roles in helping students consider the relationship between their own ethical perspectives and broader society. In particular, extensive research has been conducted on the value of service activities in encouraging ethical growth, through exposure to the processes and structures of civic engagement and the opportunity for youth to incorporate civic involvement into their own developing identities.[8]

Clearly, this broader realm of ethical education is far too complex to address completely in this book. While I certainly do not claim that my argument for Ethical Dialogue in public school classrooms represents a

wholly sufficient approach to ethical education, I believe a focused consideration of such a process can play an important role in helping our students talk and live together respectfully across ethical difference, and thus contribute significantly to their ethical growth and the health of civic society.

My book is also limited in its focus on public schools. This is not to say that Ethical Dialogue is not possible in private schools, secular or religious. In fact, I see public schools—for legal reasons as well as the challenges of ethical heterogeneity among constituents—as perhaps the most challenging setting for Ethical Dialogue (excluding, of course, strongly sectarian private schools that have no interest in thoughtful engagement with ethical difference). If my argument for Ethical Dialogue proves compelling and plausible in the public school context, then I believe it would prove even more so in a private school setting that shared similar commitments to mutual understanding and deliberation.

This is obviously not the first book to advocate improved ethical understanding in schools, nor is it the first to argue that students should develop a commitment to respectful deliberation and the skills necessary for it. But it is less common for the former approach to address how deeper mutual understanding can contribute to civic deliberation; likewise, arguments for deliberative democracy—rarely focused on K–12 schools in the first place—generally devote less attention to the process of developing *substantive* appreciation of the ethical frameworks that inform our deliberation. This project insists on a strong connection between the two: civic deliberation is a vital skill in an ethically diverse society, but a deliberative outcome without a substantial groundwork of mutual understanding lacks moral justification.

THE STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

My approach involves an interplay of sorts between theory and practice. Chapter 2 describes the historical and legal terrain of ethical education, arguing that U.S. public schools have moved from a reliance on a single dominant ethical source (pan-Protestantism) to an almost complete avoidance of ethical sources altogether. This avoidance has been manifested in the past four decades in the curricular models of values clarification, cognitive developmentalism, and character education.

In chapter 3 I offer a philosophical argument for why this avoidance of deep ethical sources often fails to demonstrate respect and ultimately

hinders our capacity to engage in just civic deliberation. In situations of ethical conflict, respect requires understanding the ethical frameworks of those with whom we disagree. This chapter also sketches the contemporary American religious landscape and seeks to explain some of the dissonance between current ethical education and the religious-ethical frameworks of many students.

Chapter 4 describes the vital process of "imaginative engagement," wherein students strive for empathic understanding of unfamiliar ethical perspectives. More than mere propositional knowledge, imaginative engagement combines both "head and heart" and is a crucial precursor to the process of civic deliberation addressed in chapters 5 and 6. This chapter also discusses some pedagogical strategies that seek to foster imaginative engagement.

Since the attempt by people to fulfill their differing visions of the good life will frequently result in conflict, decisions will need to be made about how we will live together; this process of civic deliberation is the focus of the next two chapters. In chapter 5 I draw crucial distinctions between the private, civic, and political realms and describe the qualities of "deliberative reason" that we should be helping students develop. Chapter 6 considers more closely the role of religion in civic deliberation.

Chapter 7 explores the implications of a commitment to Ethical Dialogue for teacher education. Teachers need to develop a basic understanding of the topics being discussed and gain skill in facilitating thoughtful, respectful discussion. In addition, schools need to nurture in teachers a *commitment* to Ethical Dialogue, a recognition of its vital importance for both students' education and the health of civic society. In light of these demands, I endorse a conception of teacher education that extends well beyond the initial year or two of preservice experience and that emphasizes the importance of peer collaboration in preparing teachers for Ethical Dialogue.

A LEARNING PROCESS

It has been sixteen years since I began teaching in public schools, and in this time I've thought a great deal about these issues, both from the perspective of a classroom practitioner and an educational theorist. Even now as a university professor, I still teach an eleventh-grade English class in the local public high school, and so am regularly reminded that the challenges

of fostering Ethical Dialogue are substantial. There are days when, if you visited my high school class, you would question whether I am qualified to prepare future teachers or write these books. Certainly the adolescents I teach have raised such questions! Simply put, good teaching is very hard work, and Ethical Dialogue adds to the challenge. Anyone familiar with K–12 schools and classrooms will find the prospect of Ethical Dialogue demanding and even daunting. My intent here is not to present Ethical Dialogue as a quick or easy formula, but as something worth our aspiration and ongoing commitment.

In spite of my arguments here, I realize that plenty of teachers will find good reason to avoid such risks in their classrooms, as I did a dozen years ago with Cheryl and *Brave New World.* But the alternative—an inability to engage thoughtfully and respectfully amidst increasing social and ethical diversity—is even more perilous. As David Purpel rightly contends, "No set of issues is as explosive, controversial, emotional, and threatening as moral and religious disputes. None is more vital."[9]