Maritain Explains the Moral Principles of Education to Dewey

by Madonna Murphy

Another shocking example of school violence occurred on March 21, 2005, when a sixteen-year-old teenager gunned down students and staff at Red Lake High School in Minnesota. Six years after the killings at Columbine High School in Colorado, schools still seem as vulnerable to violence despite the serious attention schools have given to safety and order.

Why is there such a moral crisis in American culture today, one so vividly reflected in our schools? What societal problems are instilling such violence in youth and in schools? Can it be that we no longer have a moral anchor to our lives? Do we have a moral vacuum in our schools? To what extent can we say that John Dewey, the American philosopher of education studied by all teachers, has contributed to the situation?

John Dewey, American Philosopher

John Dewey, America's chief philosopher of education from the turn of the twentieth century, influenced education—especially moral education—not only in the United States, but throughout the world. Many studies have been made of his most popular writings, especially *Democracy and Education* (1916), which outlines his complete educational philosophy; fewer analyses, however, have been made of his *Moral Principles in Education* (1909), which includes not only his main ideas on moral education but also many of his educational innovations.

Dewey's Educational Innovations

In *Moral Principles,* Dewey suggests several pedagogical methodologies followed in today's schools, such as interdisciplinary study, service learning, cooperative learning, and the development of thinking skills. The "activity method" and "authentic educational experiences" are both outgrowths of Dewey's idea that education should be regarded not

as a preparation for life but as a process of living or growth itself. Problem solving is also a key component of his educational theory. The teacher has an indirect role in Dewey's classroom. Students may make mistakes but the teacher should allow them to do so and learn from that experience whenever feasible. Dewey's ideas are also the basis of the "whole language" and "thematic/interdisciplinary units" movements in the United States, for he states that "there is no line of demarcation within facts themselves which classifies them as belonging to science, history or geography, respectively," so students should be helped to see "the relations of studies to one another and to the intellectual whole to which all belong."[1] Dewey also encouraged cooperative learning by suggesting that there need to be "methods of school activity which afford opportunity for reciprocity, cooperation and positive personal achievement."[2]

Dewey's Philosophy

Dewey outlines other educational implications based on pragmatism, experimentalism, and instrumentalism. Dewey's pragmatism defines truth as a tentative assertion derived from human experience; it rejects metaphysical absolutes. If something works, it is true and useful; if it no longer works, it is no longer true.[3] Experimentalism sees experience as the basis for all knowledge; the human is in continuous interaction with its environment. Instrumentalism is a moral relativism that defines values as arising from the human response to various environmental situations.[4] Many feel that Dewey may at times be saying the right thing educationally, but for the wrong reasons philosophically. The excellent educational innovations outlined above could have been based in a realistic philosophy.[5]

Moral Principles

Dewey's proposals on moral education are more suspect, based on an instrumentalism that lacks absolute values. There is great agreement with Dewey's contention that "the greatest defect of instruction today is that children leave school with a mental perspective which lacks faith in the existence of moral principles which are capable of effective application";[6] yet some commentators blame Dewey himself for creating this defect through his criticism of truth and universal moral values. Truth, according to Dewey, is that opinion fated for acceptance by all investigators; there are no eternal, unchanging truths, and the truth is always changing. His definition, similar to the "constructivist" theory of learning, has important implications for the field of moral education: the moral agent is the one who proposes to himself an end to be achieved by action. The validity of moral principles for Dewey will be found pragmatically, in their utility. He states in *Moral Principles* that there is

no difference between actions congruent with reason and actions congruent with feelings. There is no distinction between moral values and non-moral values. Dewey articulates a theory of moral development that emphasizes reflective thinking rather than moral lessons. His writings focused moral education for the next fifty years on a process-oriented approach rather than the content-oriented approach of character education. His philosophy forms the basis for values clarification and Kohlberg's developmental approach to moral education.[7]

However, for Dewey it is not the values but the situation that is clarified. Dewey believes that values arise as outcomes of human responses to varying environmental situations.[8] To ask if something is of value is for Dewey to ask whether it is "something to be prized and cherished, to be enjoyed."[9] He writes, "A moral agent is one who proposes for himself an end to be achieved by action and does what is necessary to obtain that end."[10] The emphasis in this system is on the process, not on the product.

Moral Organization of Schools

Dewey's ideas on education and his philosophy still influence American thinking and schooling. He sees society, more than family, as the influential educator of character; he places prime importance on fostering character through a democratic school atmosphere; and he proposes that schools be a natural source of moral education in all that they do.[11] Dewey focuses on the moral organization of the schools rather than instruction in virtue formation. His theory of moral education, lacking any absolute values, contributes to our schools' tendency to change their focus from year to year looking for "something that will work" with students instead of sticking with unchanging basics.

Dewey denies promoting "progressive education," i.e., child-centered education that emphasizes the importance of teaching what interests the

child; instead, he says, he advocates society-centered education, and the teacher is crucial in the learning process. Dewey sees the child as a "bundle of intellectual, emotional, and moral potential" that needs to be guided by a teacher. Education is the supreme art, "the art of giving shape to human powers and adapting them to social service."[12]

Moral Education

According to Dewey, moral education should be not a matter of teaching students what to do or not to do but a method to help them decide what to do: "Moral education in school is practically hopeless when we set up the development of character as its supreme end."[13] Thus, Dewey could be considered singularly responsible for the dramatic change in schools in the twentieth century, from the character-promoting mission of American education established in colonial days to the current situation in which violence, unethical behavior, and disrespect toward others runs rampant not only in our schools but also in our society.

Jacques Maritain

Jacques Maritain was the most influential Catholic philosopher of the twentieth century. A French intellectual, Maritain converted from Protestantism, and then discovered St. Thomas Aquinas. Maritain lived in America during World War II, where he lectured and wrote on philosophy, politics, education, and religion, drawing from the theology of Aquinas and the philosophy of Aristotle.[14] His works on education support the pedagogical suggestions made by Dewey in *Moral Principles in Education*, especially the idea of interdisciplinary instruction and developing thinking skills, but sharply disagree with most of Dewey's ideas regarding moral education. Maritain and Dewey advocate completely different philosophies; they have divergent opinions on what education is and its purpose because they disagree on what man is.[15] Inasmuch as most American education is based on Dewey's philosophy, and inasmuch as many will agree that American education's efforts to produce moral persons are problematical, we have much to learn from Maritain.

Morality and Natural Law

Maritain and Dewey disagree on the foundation of morality. Dewey's relativism states that values are personal, situational, and ever changing. Maritain bases his statements in a realist, teleological ethic based on natural law and inspired by faith. According to Maritain in *The Education of Man*, "[N]o system of morality based only on natural law has ever been able to succeed; although morality is a fundamental and necessary requirement of culture and civilization, it must be backed up by faith."[16]

Jude Dougherty, in his recent book *Jacques Maritain: An Intellectual Profile,* states that Dewey has no use for religion and sees it as socially dangerous insofar as it attempts to mold personal conduct, but Maritain does not confuse morality and religion. He knows that morality does not depend on religion: moral norms have a life of their own, independent of religion.[17]

Importance of the Family and Faith Community

Again contrary to Dewey, Maritain states in *The Education of Man* that the responsibility for moral education rests directly and primarily on the family on one hand and on the religious community on the other.[18] In *Education at the Crossroads*, he outlines the educational sphere, which involves first of all the family (no matter what deficiencies the family group may have): the virtues (especially the virtue of love) must develop first in the family. Maritain goes on to outline the educational sphere as also including the school, the state, the church and the extra-educational sphere. He admits the problems also seen by Dewey, especially a crisis in morality, and admits that the problem could be due to family disintegration and the break between religion and life. Maritain agrees too that children have not been trained sufficiently in proper conduct, law observance, and politeness, but he believes that the cause must be addressed to remedy the problem.

Truth and Its Discovery

Maritain states that the direct and primary responsibility of the school is not moral but intellectual in nature: namely, responsibility for the normal growth of the intellect of the students, i.e., teaching them how to think, an emphasis with which Dewey also agrees. However, Maritain states, "Teaching's domain is the domain of truth."[19] Dewey believes that truth is relative; thus, Maritain does not see how Dewey could ever really teach or prepare a human mind to think for itself. Pope John Paul II identified the issue as one of the deep problems of contemporary society in *Veritatis Splendor:*

> There is no morality without freedom. . . . Although each individual has a right to be respected in his own journey in search of the truth, there exists a prior moral obligation, and a grave one at that, to seek the truth and to adhere to it once it is known.[20]

Maritain proposes that formation in moral life and virtues is the most important component of education in the broad sense of the word. He uses Aquinas's work to define education "as the process by which man is shaped and led toward fulfillment and formation as a man."[21] His formulation may appear similar to Dewey's definition of education as

growth, but it is really very different, for Maritain has a determinate end in mind and Dewey has no such product in mind—he is only interested in the process. This impasse is also the problem of contemporary education, which emphasizes differences and diversities instead of stressing the "unity" of all human persons manifested in and through their intellect, will, and ability to know and to love.[22]

Maritain explains in *Education at the Crossroads* that, chiefly through intelligence and truth, the school and the college may affect the powers of desire, will, and love in youth and help them control their tendential dynamism. Moral education, he says, plays an essential part in school and college education, and that part must be emphasized more. In *The Education of Man*, he agrees with Aristotle's assertion that "[r]ight moral conduct is not a matter of teaching"; nevertheless, the responsibility of the educational system in this regard, although indirect, is no less necessary.

> Knowledge is a general precondition necessary for virtue. . . . [N]o human life can have solidity and stability without a vision of the world in which firm convictions about moral and spiritual values appear rationally founded. It is the role of the school and college to develop such a vision of the world and firm convictions about moral and spiritual values.[23]

Can Virtue Be Taught?

According to Donald and Della Gallagher, Maritain confronts the Socratic-Aristotelian paradox by asking, "What is of greater importance than right moral conduct if young people are to become educated men and women?" However, one cannot teach or impart virtue itself (as Socrates suggested), only what virtue is, its principles, its excellence, and its necessity in moral philosophy (as Aristotle explained) and in general through the humanistic curriculum. Although some ethicists speak of teaching virtue as though one could actually transmit a portion of one's virtue to the students, and others speak of inculcating moral science as though its acquisition involved the acquisition of the virtues, Maritain sharply rejects such ideas, agreeing with Dewey that moral education is not just a matter of teaching a "bag of virtues."[24]

So if virtue cannot be taught, are we obliged then to say that the educational system should not be concerned at all with moral education? No, Maritain says: The task of present-day education is to develop a vision of the world in which convictions based on reason about moral and spiritual values are fostered. In an age when men and women are confronted with a materialistic and positivist philosophy that makes moral

principles completely relative, this task of the school has become more urgent than ever before.

In summary, according to Maritain, direct shaping of character depends chiefly on the influence of the family, but indirect moral formation regarding the attainment of moral virtues (also known as "education of the will" or character building) relies on the school and college as they enlighten the intellect.

The Important Role of the Teacher

The specific task of school education is to have a teacher solidly instructed in and deeply aware of the psychology of the child and capable of forming an environment or ethos in the school life that supports the moral training by offering opportunities to exercise the student's will. Maritain disagrees with Dewey's ideas on the role of the teacher and the way morality is to be taught in the schools. Maritain's concept of the teacher comes from Aquinas's work (*ST* I q 117a1): The teacher exercises a real causal power over the mind of the pupil, as the doctor does on the patient—by assisting nature and cooperating with it—realizing, however, that the principal agent is the intellectual energy of the pupil.

A Curriculum with Moral Exemplars

Maritain proposes that the normal way of teaching the principles of natural morality is to embody them in the humanities, literature, and history. The reading of classics will feed the mind with knowledge of natural virtues and convey to youth the moral experiences of mankind. In particular, biography will give students inspired examples of character and encourage them with a vision of greatness. A great deal depends on the general inspiration of the teaching, especially on the way in which the study of the humanities and the reading of the works of great poets and writers convey to young people the treasure of moral ideas and moral experience of mankind. That is why Maritain insists the early curriculum should avoid early specialization and emphasize basic liberal arts that develop a unified person through meaning, truth, and beauty. The crisis in education today can be directly linked to the failure to understand the unifying power of education, both intellectual and moral.[25] Maritain comes out against the comic books of his time and their images of violence and brutality in much the same way that educators today deplore the violence of video games. He asks that we offer children a moral atmosphere of grandeur and heroism and believes that if it is done, the school will accomplish a duty in which many families are now failing.

The Challenge of Modern Education

The challenge of modern education is, according to Maritain, to free itself from the background of positivist, empiricist, agnostic, and pragmatist philosophies that overlook what man is and deny the dignity and primacy of truth. He sees it as no less than a war of civilization in which we must fight for human dignity, justice, and freedom—the values that make every human person worthy of respect and love. Although Maritain was talking about the world as it was during and following World War II, his words were echoed by Pope John Paul II regarding the world today:

> We face a great challenge at the end of this millennium. . . . [T]he neglect of being inevitably leads to losing touch with objective truth and therefore with the very ground of human dignity. . . . Truth and freedom either go together hand in hand or together they perish in misery.[26]

To quote Maritain's words, so relevant even today, "Now it seems that American education finds itself at the crossroads."[27] We need to return schools to their original mission and teach students to develop their character as well as their minds.

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Notes

1. John Dewey, *Moral Principles in Education* (1901; Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1909).
2. Ibid.
3. Alan Ryan, "Deweyan Pragmatism and American Education," in *Philosophers on Education*, ed. Amelie Rorty, 399 (London: Routledge, 1998).
4. Gerald Gutek, *Philosophical and Ideological Perspectives on Education* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1988), 87–97; and Harry M. Campbell, *John Dewey* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1971), 21ff.
5. B. Zedler, "John Dewey in Context," in *Some Philosophers on Education* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1956).
6. Dewey, *Moral Principles in Education*.
7. D. Carlin, "Is Kohlberg a Disciple of Dewey?" *Educational Theory* 31 (Summer and Fall 1981); and L. Kohlberg, "Moral Education for a Society in Moral Transition," *Educational Leadership* 33, no. 2 (1975).
8. Gutek, *Philosophical and Ideological Perspectives,* 89.
9. John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty* (New York: Macmillan, 1929), 260.
10. John Dewey, *Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1891), 3.
11. Holly Salls, "John Dewey and Character Education: Is He the Answer?" in *Midwest Philosophy of Education Conference*, ed. Michael Oliker, 36 (Chicago: The MPES Society, 1997).
12. Ryan, "Deweyan Pragmatism and American Education," 397.
13. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916).
14. Nicholas Capaldi, "Jacques Maritain: La Vie Intelletuelle," *Review of Metaphysics* 58, no. 2 (2004): 399; and Jude Dougherty, *Jacques Maritain: An Intellectual Profile* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press of America, 2003), 1.
15. Donald Gallagher and Idella Gallagher, "Introduction," in *The Education of Man: The Educational Philosophy of Jacques Maritain,* ed. Donald Gallagher and Idella Gallagher, 14 (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1962).
16. Gallagher and Gallagher, eds., *The Education of Man,* 106.
17. Dougherty, *Jacques Maritain*, 13, 21–22.
18. Gallagher and Gallagher, eds., *The Education of Man,* 104.
19. Jacques Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1943), 26.

20. Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* (Boston: St. Paul Books & Media, 1993).
21. Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*, 1–2.
22. Mario D'Souza, "Educational Pastiche versus the Education of Natural Intelligence and the Intellectual Virtues According to Jacques Maritain," *Educational Theory* 46, no. 4 (1996): 1.
23. Gallagher and Gallagher, eds., *The Education of Man*, 105.
24. Gallagher and Gallagher, "Introduction," 22.
25. D'Souza, "Educational Pastiche," 2.
26. Pope John Paul II, *Fides Et Ratio* (Boston: St. Paul Books & Media, 1998).
27. Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*, 118.

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