

# THE MORAL AGENDA OF CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

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## Confusion About Morality

My starting point is that as a society we are deeply confused about the very idea of morality. On the one hand there are tendencies towards the 'personalisation' of morality: towards the idea that it all comes down to individual choice or how the individual feels about it. I do not think that the term 'relativism', often used by critics of this tendency, is the best label, but I shall not argue that here. On the other hand there is, if anything, an increase in the use of explicitly moral language in public life; witness Tony Blair's rhetoric about the Kosova campaign in which he used not only moral language but the term 'moral' itself about the war. Whether you agree or disagree with his stance is not the point here; the point is some shared public moral understanding – not a personalised matter of choice – to be appealed to. Yet at the same an appeal to morality is often received with suspicion; as Paul Standish has put it recently

*“For many the very word 'morality' has become tainted, suggesting the stiff correctness of Victorian behaviour, sexual repression (if not hang-ups), timid subjection to conformity, and a certain starchiness of tone.”* (R. Smith & P. Standish (eds.), *Teaching Right and Wrong: Moral Education in the Balance*, Trentham 1997. p. 50).

Ambivalence is reflected in thinking about citizenship education – as one can see by looking through the abstracts for this conference (*Conference on Citizenship for Teachers and Researchers*, Institute of Education, University of London, 7 and 8 July, 1999). To some people it is clear that moral education and citizenship education are intimately interrelated; others will discuss citizenship education quite independently of anything that sounds like morality; to the latter, if moral education should be in the curriculum at all, it

should perhaps be in some compartment – such as PSHE – which is seen as dealing with matters of personal choice and lifestyle, not among the public questions of citizenship.

## A Responsibility for Citizenship Education

If I am right that current thinking shows this ambivalence, how should education respond? One possibility is to ignore it, that is, not to see education as having any responsibility to address the continuing confusion. But that would be to do nothing on matters which are surely important to citizenship. In some sense, shared citizenship does require shared values; yet it also requires that we understand, tolerate, perhaps are supportive of, differences in values. We cannot, at least not in advance of further interpretation, say that the values in question do not include moral ones. And if we are to make some sort of public/personal distinction, we cannot say in advance that morality lines up either with the public or with the personal side of the distinction. On the face of it, the category of the moral cuts across the public/personal distinction. It is just on this point that there is so much room for differences of interpretation both between individuals and between cultural and religious traditions. An education which aims at an educated citizenry cannot ignore these differences. That means that citizenship education should take morality explicitly as a topic;<sup>1</sup> and since there are competing views – that morality is a matter of personal choice, that it is God-given, that it is just social convention, and so on – these have to be discussed. Notice that this is not simply echoing the familiar point that somewhere within citizenship education controversial issues will be discussed, and different views expressed about what is right and what is wrong. Indeed, for what I am advocating, it may be just as important that non-controversial moral issues should be attended to: where there is agreement, why is there agreement; where there is disagreement, why? What do the areas of agreement and disagreement themselves tell us about morality?

Such discussion will not by itself lead to convergence; it may make some of the differences all the clearer. That so far as it goes is, I think, a gain. If we want mutual respect for differences, we have to understand the differences. On the other hand, there may be positive strengths to be drawn from a shared understanding of morality, and discussion and understanding of differences does not deliver this. To repeat, the shared understanding I am speaking of is not only an agreement on certain values, e.g. an agreement that certain ways

of behaving are wrong. It is a shared interpretation of what kind of phenomenon morality is, such that when politicians or ordinary citizens are inclined to appeal to morality in public discourse, they at least have some mutual understanding of what it is that is being appealed to.

Are there any prospects for such a shared understanding? To this I want to add another question: What are teachers to make of the idea of morality? Is it teachers who will have to deliver the requirements both for PSHE and for citizenship. In these requirements as we have them in draft form at the moment, the word 'moral' occurs from time to time, but with no explanation. The drafters may have assumed that its meaning is obvious. If I am right, and we cannot assume a shared understanding of morality across citizens generally, then we have no reason to assume it across teachers. So even if you are not persuaded that citizens generally need a shared understanding of morality, you might accept that teachers need some shared and workable conception.

But where might such a conception come from? The answer cannot be that we pick on some particular understanding of morality and put it across – to teachers, and through teachers to citizens in general – *as if it were incontrovertibly the single correct understanding*. No one has the authority to do that. It is not for politicians or for teachers in state schools to decide, for instance, that a secular naturalistic understanding of morality is correct and a religiously-based understanding wrong, or *vice versa*.

This would leave us in an impasse *if different understandings of morality were mutually exclusive*. On the other hand, it may be possible for citizens in a plural society to converge on a certain understanding of morality which will be workable for certain public purposes, *while not having to reject other understandings of morality*. If that is possible, then it will be possible for citizenship education actively to promote a certain understanding of morality, without excluding or downgrading other views.

## A Conception of Morality

I think there is available to us a way of thinking about morality which can do the job citizenship needs from it. It may be a thoroughly familiar way of conceiving of morality; indeed to some readers it may seem the obvious way; but, importantly, it will not seem that way to everyone. It picks out what some philosophers have labelled 'morality in the narrow sense'. Morality in this sense

is a system of constraints on people's conduct, which serves a social function of protecting the interests of other people, and which works by checking people's inclinations to act in ways which would be harmful to other people's interests. (This is intended as a way of capturing a familiar idea, not as a technical definition.)

There is a lot that may come into many people's idea of morality which this account makes no attempt to capture. In this narrow sense morality says nothing about what you should aim at in life, how you should live, what sort of person you should be, provided you respect certain constraints on hurting others. In this way the function of morality is rather like that of the criminal law, but its mode of operation is much less formal: it is not clearly codified, it carries no formal sanctions, and so on. You could say it exists primarily in the form of shared ideas – ideas which are part of public discourse, which can be passed on from one generation to another, and which can be variously called to mind or referred to in speech or writing as the occasion demands.

### What Kind of Language?

In *Values, Virtues and Violence: Education and the Public Understanding of Morality* (Blackwell, 1999) I have said more about this conception of morality in the narrow sense, and also about the kind of language in which it is best expressed. Perhaps the obvious way in which to express the content of morality in the narrow sense is in terms of norms, that is, prescriptions telling people to do this or not to do that (here I include under 'norms' the ideas both of rules and of principles, though there is also an important distinction to be made between those two ideas). In some philosophical writing recently this kind of language has been challenged in favour of a language referring to desirable personal qualities or 'virtues'. With the different languages can go different conceptions of what moral education is about; the moral education which uses a language of virtues wants people to grow up having certain kinds of concern, being motivated in certain ways; in short, being people of one kind rather than another. The moral education which goes with a language of norms primarily wants to bring it about that people are aware of the norms and will abide by them; given that, it is less interested in their feelings and motivations. To take the example which I pursued at greater length in that book, and allowing myself some drastic simplification here, if it is important that people should not behave violently, a morality using the language of norms would try to prevent violent behaviour through the rule 'don't be violent', a rule which it

would expect people to adhere to even if they sometimes felt like being violent. A morality using a language of virtues would be concerned that people should not be violent *people*, that is, they should not be people who are inclined to violence – a matter of their feelings and motivation, rather than directly their actions.

To go far into this debate would take me too far from my main argument, so let me say just three things about it. (1) I do think that a language of norms has a certain priority if we are talking about morality in the narrow sense. This kind of morality does work primarily by influencing, often restraining, people's behaviour. But (2) even a morality conceived in the narrow way is unlikely to be able to function entirely with a language of norms. And (3) it is so much ingrained in the way we commonly talk that we do refer to personal qualities (courage or cowardice, honesty or dishonesty, generosity or meanness, and so on) that there would be little future in any attempt to restrict morality in the narrow sense to using only a language of norms.

One educational upshot of this brief consideration of different ways of expressing morality is that teachers, above all, need to be able to work with both sorts of language, and need to be able to see differences between and connections between them. Meanwhile, for my argument here, the upshot is that I shall in what I say below about the content of morality in the narrow sense I shall use a language of norms, having acknowledged that this will not be the only kind of language used in the relevant public discourse.

## A Morality in Which Citizens can Engage

Why should we focus, as a matter of citizenship education, on morality conceived in this narrow way? I have already said that it is not because of any arguments for this being the single correct way of conceiving of morality. Rather, the point is that people in a plural society should be able to agree that *whatever else morality may be, whatever else there may be to morality*, it is at least the case that morality in the sense I have referred to does exist as a social phenomenon or institution. Moral ideas do exist, they do get expressed in public discourse, including educational discourse, often in the form of norms ('don't tell lies', 'keep your promises', 'don't take what doesn't belong to you', 'don't hurt other people' and so on) and it would be implausible to think that reference to such ideas does not at least sometimes makes a difference to what people do – which is why, as I said, morality in this sense can to some extent serve the same sort of function as does law.

What, for citizenship, is the effect of looking at morality in this way? That it brings morality into the public realm in which citizens can themselves exercise some influence. Morality in this sense, existing firmly in the realm of public discourse, is clearly not timeless. It does, at least in some aspects, change over time (there are clear examples in the area of sexual behaviour), and the changes can be interpreted in terms of the function which morality serves. Of course, most citizens, individually, do not exercise very much influence over the changes that may come about; in that sense it may still seem to an individual that morality (even if its content seems different now from fifty years ago) is like a grid laid over individual behaviour. And in a way it has to be like that, just as the law is; otherwise we are back to the thought that it all comes down to individual choice. But the law is susceptible to change, through processes which are intelligible, which individuals can become involved in. The processes by which morality, as a social institution, changes are not so very different, though they are not formalised. Consensus does have a lot to do with it; morality as a social institution cannot exist without at least some consensus across society, and cannot change without consensus either. But whereas in the case of the law there are formalised processes of change depending on majority vote, there is no such explicit process determining changes in morality. While there is consensus on certain moral norms, they remain in force, in the only sort of way that moral norms can have force; when there is no longer consensus, respect for the norms tends to wither away or they are replaced by others.

I should stress that by consensus here I do not mean agreement of a majority; I mean, ideally at least, agreement of everyone. In practice, of course, we cannot expect consensus of everyone, perhaps not even on what may seem to us the most obvious moral principles. Does that put us in a moral limbo? Clearly not. Morality as an existing institution has a certain inertia, if you like a certain inbuilt conservatism. Nevertheless it does change, and the processes by which it changes need not be obscure. People can wonder whether certain norms serve the function that morality (on the conception I'm using here) is supposed to serve; they can express opinions about the matter; they can discuss the relevance of particular norms in the prevailing circumstances, and so on. This sort of thing happens anyway, and it is not very different from the way the law can be criticised and eventually changed. What I am advocating is that a process which happens anyway should become so far as possible transparent and inclusive. We should want people to be able to see themselves, not as subject to an alien force labelled 'morality' – it is this sort of view that breeds scepticism and nihilism – but as participants in morality.

## Why Should Anyone Take This Seriously?

That, in short, is the view of morality which I believe citizenship education would do well to promote. No doubt many questions may be raised about it, and I suspect that among the most pressing will be 'Why should anyone take morality, on this view of it, seriously?' If morality – as it is, at the moment, in a particular society – says I am not to do something, why should I take any notice? Why should I grant to prevailing norms any respect or authority if I recognise that they are (at least in so far as they are expressed, taught and backed up) human social constructions?

I think the answer that can be given to this has to be similar to the answer to the similar question about why anyone should have any respect for the law. Of course, not everyone will abide by the law and many people may break certain laws if they think they can get away with it; nevertheless, in a democratic system (with all its real world deficiencies) it is possible to feel a part of the society for which the laws are made and of the process by which they are made. People who feel themselves in this way to be citizens are more likely to take the law seriously. I think much the same can be said about morality as a social institution. It is possible for people to feel alienated from it (this is all the more likely if their experience of it is of something handed down, ostensibly on tablets of stone, but actually by people with power). It is also possible for people to feel part of it (with all its doubts and controversies). So the underlying aim for education in an understanding of morality has to be the same as the underlying aim of education for democratic citizenship: that people should be able to see themselves as included, not excluded.

## Notes

- [1] I see little evidence in the recent proposal for citizenship in the National Curriculum that this will be done. It is possible that it could be done within PSHE. In the PSHE draft framework there is an intriguing phrase in the proposal for Key Stages 3 and 4 (in the first sentence of the text for each Stage) '[with]in a context of moral reasoning'. This is intriguing partly because in each case the phrase seems to be just dropped in there, with no explanation. I could make a guess at why it is there, which I may or may not be able to confirm at this conference.

