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Therapeutic Approach in Moral Education: A Critical Assessment

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by Jan Hábl

Abstract:

This study aims to critically assess the so-called *therapeutic* approach in moral education, which emerged in the postwar twentieth century, in the western part of the world. The proponents of the approach used different terms to express its essence: *value clarification method*, or sometimes the *decision-making method* or the *critical thinking method*. These philosophies of education have the common feature of a personalistic, non-directive, or client-oriented approach to the individual. Therefore, I will refer to them here as *therapeutic*.

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There are many advocates, but some of the most notable should be named: Carl Rodgers, Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, Sidney B. Simon, Louis Raths, and Merrill Harmin. For a proper understanding of these approaches, it's necessary to review first the cultural-ideological context of their origin. After that I will analyze and evaluate their key tenets, which I consider problematic. Specifically, we will scrutinize these problems: (1) the problem of process at the expense of content, (2) the problem of devaluation of the educator's authority, (3) the problem of blurring of moral concepts and standards, (4) the problem of value pseudo-neutrality and indoctrination, (5) the problem of individualism, subjectivism, and relativism.

Key words:

Moral, education, therapeutic, method, indoctrination.

Historical and cultural context

Education, in the sense of therapeutic clarification of values (and all related concepts), was in many ways a reaction to the postwar crisis of values and culture in general. The coming generation openly distanced themselves from the "morals" of their parents. In addition to freedom of expression, emancipation of human rights, and emphasis on autonomy, the prevailing sentiment of the flower children was resistance towards the "stale" culture that priggishly preached, commissioned, and taught. The culture of their fathers—

because of the horrors of war that were still fresh in their memories—had lost its moral legitimacy and become more of a source of shame than something to pass along pedagogically. From such a background it was not surprising, therefore, that in the 1960s there arose a method that emphasized discussion, openness, engagement, no guidelines, and so on. The goal of the method was neither the formation nor transmission of any kind of specific "bag of virtues," in the words of Lawrence Kohlberg, or other moral material; it was indoctrination, which was considered one of the cardinal defects of all traditional educational approaches.[1] Teachers and educators of this new type were given the task of helping students think independently and critically, based on the psychological assumption that if the individuals themselves identified their own values, the internalization of those values would be easier and more durable than if they were mediated by some adult. The students were thus guided to discover, classify, and develop their own values, that is, to construct their own moral universe.

Experimental findings by developmental psychologists such as Piaget and Kohlberg conveniently arrived just in time.[2] Although their theories of the moral and cognitive development of the individual were not originally intended to be educational, their application to pedagogy was soon found. Different variations of Kohlberg's famous micro-story dilemmas were used in lessons as a tool for clarifying moral categories and values, a tool which was expected to both move the students to a higher stage of moral development and teach them independent moral judgment and argumentation.

How does the method work in didactic practice? For illustration, I present two mini-stories: Kohlberg's now famous "Heinz's Dilemma" and "Sharon's Dilemma" from the just-as-well-known teacher's handbook of Simon and his colleagues:[3]

> A fatally ill woman lived in Europe. She suffered from a special kind of cancer. There existed a medicine that was recently discovered by a pharmacist from the same town. To produce the medicine was very expensive, and the pharmacist charged ten times more than it cost him to make. Heinz, the husband of the sick woman, borrowed from everyone he could and still had only half of the cost of the medicine. He begged the pharmacist to lower the price or allow him to pay it in installments. But the pharmacist wouldn't budge. Desperate, Heinz broke into the pharmacy at night and stole the medicine.

> Sharon and Jill were best friends. One day they went shopping together. Jill was trying on a sweater, when she suddenly put her jacket on over it and left the store. The guard arrived immediately afterwards, stopped Sharon and asked the name of her friend who had fled the store. At the same time, she threatened to call the police if Sharon wouldn't give the name.

The questions for discussion are obvious: Was Heinz's theft wrong or not? Should Sharon betray her friend or not? The discussion has to be well-controlled didactically in order to fulfill its task. Therefore, the authors present the following instructions. (1) Recapitulate the basic facts of the story and ask a clear yes/no question. (2) Give the students enough time to think through the question and answer independently, ideally in writing, and with justification. (3) Next, the students say their answers aloud. If it happens that most of the group agree, S. B. Simon recommends adding "balancing" information. For example, if most of the class vote for giving the name, the teacher can draw attention to the implications that this judgment would have on the girls' friendship, or bring a new variable into the story—for example, what if Jill was from a weak social background, and so on. (4) The teacher is to lead the discussion in a fundamentally non-directive manner. No interfering unless necessary, only steering it by means of questions—either stimulating (if the discussion lags), or regulatory (if the discussion gets off track) or clarifying (to break down concepts or motives, etc.). Teachers must also avoid the temptation to express their own opinions (even though the students request it) because that usually ends the discussion. (5) The conclusion of the discussion should contain a summary of the arguments (for and against), as well as a re-stating of the beginning and ending opinions. Did the students change their view?

For what reason? And so on. Of course, the stories and strategies can also be subject to thematic changes and adapted to the age and circumstances of the group.

The method spread quickly and gained popularity. In addition to Simon's handbook, which became a bestseller, many other similar textbooks were published. By the 1980s, however, the first problems and criticisms had appeared. I will not here critique Kohlberg's theory as a diagnostic tool for identifying stages of moral development (others have already done that), but rather I will present a critique of the didactic application.

Critics admit that this method brought about some contribution to the moral educational discussion. If it is used prudently, that is, with sensitively chosen topics appropriate to the age and maturity of the children, circumstances, etc., this method can help make them sensitive to moral reality, sometimes even bringing them to a first "awakening" —from, for example, the typical adolescent egocentrism, or even narcissism. From the viewpoint of the content of the selected topics, this method proved to be very attractive, especially in the critical teen years—what adolescent isn't interested in topics like sex, drugs, relationships, murders, or cannibalism (eating the last survivor of a shipwreck on a deserted island). Non-directive and group strategies entertain, engage, or activate and thus motivate and stimulate students—all results that are seen as the greatest didactic currency of this approach. But the criticism is massive.[4]

Process at the Expense of Content

This therapeutic approach to moral education suffers, above all, from the "subordination of content for the benefit of the process," says James Hunter: The presentation of certain moral content (*content-based instruction*) is secondary and completely overshadowed by questions about the "process whereby morality is acquired."[5] The ideological source of this approach is the anthro-

pological assumption of the innate goodness of human nature, the belief that people are unproblematically good—both ontologically and morally. In the 20th century we first saw this dominance of process over content in Carl Rogers' personalistic concept of client-centered therapy. Rogers says that people should accept themselves as "streams of becoming" in a life-long process of self-actualization. Fully actualized individuals would then see themselves as a "fluid process, not a fixed and static entity [...], a continually changing constellation of potentialities, not a fixed quantity of traits."[6] Later Rogers explicitly states that the process of self-realization applies to education as much as to therapy. "The teacher," says Rogers, "becomes a facilitator in the process of the students' self-definition [...], a resource-finder [...]". He would want the quality of his relationship to the group to be such that his feelings could be freely available to them, without being imposed on them or becoming a restrictive influence on them."[7]

This emphasis was enthusiastically corroborated by many educators. William Glasser, for example, in his book *School Without Failure,* bluntly condemns education aimed at specific moral content as preaching: "We teach mindless conformity to *school* rules and call the conforming child 'responsible.'"[8] Simon, Howe, and Kirshenbaum speak in a similarly unequivocal way when they say that contents of a traditional curriculum are "out-dated, moralistic" and strive after the "inculcation of adult values into the youth," and as such are "indoctrination." They, in contrast, seek a higher goal, "the facilitation of the process of moral judgment."[9] The same appeal comes from the constructivist camp. A school that would present any kind of "objective morality" is compared to an "army camp," and the teachers to "drill sergeants." Proper education should consist of drawing out values only "as the need arises," say Rheta DeVries and Betty Zan. They continue, "we are talking here about a process and not a product. In

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this process, children wrestle with questions, what to believe to be good and bad, right and wrong. They form their own opinions and listen, listen to the opinions of others. They construct their own morality out of daily life experiences."[10] The last thing a teacher should do is to "dictate moral norms to the children."[11] Instead, a teacher should "cooperate with the children by trying to understand their reasoning and facilitating the constructive process."[12]

However understandable the resistance to traditional moral content is, and however welcome the appeal for a helpful pedagogical climate, the unilateral emphasis on the procedural side of moral formation has had the effect over time of emptying the contents of moral education as such. The logic of the problem is simple: If the teacher only therapeutically "recognizes, accepts and validates"[13] students' moral feelings and perceptions without resorting to criticism (because it would improperly interfere with the students' process of self-actualization), it's inevitable that sooner or later the teacher will agree with a completely immoral construction on the side of the student, a result which has also been confirmed in pedagogical practice. Thomas Lickona recalls, from his clinical research, the experience of a 9th- grade teacher who, within the framework of ethical education, used the technique of "voting on values." The teacher began the discussion with the question "Who of you has ever stolen something from a store?" Most of the students raised their hands. "Don't you think that stealing is bad?" Lickona comments that the teacher forgot for a moment that such a question violates the rule of value neutrality. "We have a right to material things," answered one of the students, and the others nodded in agreement. The teacher remained clueless.[14]

In addition to similar narrative testimonies, there are many empirical studies that unsurprisingly support the idea that the *suppression* of the *content* of education leads logically to its emptying of content, and ultimately to its malfunctioning.[15] If the individual is not exposed to moral content, there is nothing to develop; moral development simply does not appear.

Devaluation of the Authority of the Educator

The imperative of therapeutic non-instruction is not only a matter of the teachers' didactic manner or conduct in the classroom; it basically concerns their social role. Proponents of the methods described above encourage educators to programmatically abdicate their traditional role as ones who instruct, interpret, and present moral content. We have seen a shift in the understanding of their role—teachers should act as facilitators or consultants, sometimes as assistants. They still have the responsibility of organizing classroom activities and academic discipline, but the way of accomplishing it is different under the therapeutic conception. In 1963 Jean Piaget said that the "imposition of the authority" of an adult is, in an educational context, "absurd" and "immoral." In his judgment, an adult should only be an "elder collaborator and, if he has it in him, a simple comrade" to children.[16]

The same philosophy applied in Kohlberg's experimental community (*Just Community*)— "students and teachers participate equally in the creation and enforcement of rules."[17] Parents are also encouraged to take the same approach: "To achieve [the] parental goal of raising responsible children who grow into responsible men and women, parent-child relationships need to be based on democratic principles […] of mutual respect and equality."[18] To this, James Hunter observes that the term "democracy" is used here, but it is losing its specific historical meaning. The original—Greek—usage of the term expressed a way of organizing the political life of a society where the roles and relational responsibilities between the people (*démos*) and those who lead them, were defined in a concrete way. But educational therapeuticians use the term democracy without that context, and here it describes the process of social organization without any further identification. Thus, it becomes a code or charm legitimizing the right of individuals to participate and make decisions in any context.[19] The consequences are predictable. The established structure of pedagogical authority loses its social significance.

Blurring of Concepts and Standards

The growing reluctance to convey any kind of moral content, however objective, accompanied by the phenomenon of weakened teacher authority to safeguard the content, had the effect of eroding moral terminology and, ultimately, moral standards as such. As in theory, so in practice, the normative distinctions for seeing and clarifying good from evil were lost. The concepts of good and evil, right and wrong, did not completely disappear, but they were redefined, a result that caused a fatal confusion of terminology and was a source of misunderstanding.

When, for example, Kohlberg talks about morality or immorality, these are always relative terms, defined according to the level of moral judgment the individuals are capable of using in this or that period of their development. So as people evolve and become more "moral," their morality is not the same as becoming good. For example, if selfishness or other character flaws appear in the judgment or behavior of individuals, these are considered the result of developmental or cognitive immaturity, or general inadequacy in their cognitive functionality.[20] Thus, the concept of good and evil has lost its ontological status, and with that also its objective meaning, and gradually also its meaningful referential framework in language, a loss that Alasdair MacIntyre very aptly pointed out.[21]

In the therapeutic context, the concepts of *good* and *evil* have slowly become outdated and incorrect, precisely because they have lost their ability to relate to anything that would be considered as moral reality. Adam Philips notes that the therapeutic approaches have literally developed a "phobia" to the word *evil*.[22] I have personally observed a similar fate for the word *guilt*. The fact that there is a pathological form of this "emotion" has led to its stigmatization and the subsequent neglect of its healthy form. At the same time, the psychological strength of guilt is, in terms of healthy moral development, irreplaceable. It has the "power" to save people

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from their tendency towards wrong behavior and also to motivate them towards correction, when a wrong has been committed. But this potential is dependent on a shared consensus on the concepts of good and evil. By eliminating it, educators and therapists have made the concept of guilt powerless and forbidden. The guilty one needs therapy, not punishment.

Hunter adds that neologisms such as the word *prosocial* are an unconcealed attempt to avoid the encumbrance of the old moral categories.[23] In principle, the meaning remains the same—socially positive or negative behavior matches with the statement "what you did is good/bad," but the hard emotional tip of the concepts is broken off, and in addition the teachers are enabled to distance themselves from terminology that sounds judging or condemning. This phenomenon is well illustrated by the fact that the frequent use of the term *prosocial* didn't used to be contrasted in literature with the word *evil*, nor with *antisocial*. Rather, it was contrasted with the somewhat amorphous word *negative*, in discussions about the deficiencies of pro-socialism, but never to talk about *evil*.

If the moral concepts still appear in linguistic usage, they do so only as categories of meaning that individuals construct on the basis of their experience. Teachers, then, have the task of encouraging students in that construction of moral reality, for example, by programmatically creating the opportunity for students to vote on rules for classroom behavior or the values that will become the code of the group. But what happens when the students—in their predictable invention and creativity—vote, say, that someone who doesn't cheat is a "chicken" or maybe that they don't wish to do certain school activities that require effort, such as grammar lessons or PE, on the grounds that these activities don't belong to their value system?

The obfuscation of moral language is also evidenced by pedagogical practice based on the therapeutic approach. Critics point out that

the fundamental misgivings and dangers of the method of moral dilemmas consist in their implicit relativization of moral principles. If students are programmatically exposed to unsolvable moral situations, they can get the impression that all morality is "unsolvable," i.e., problematic, controversial, and ultimately relative. Students who are confronted with one extreme situation after another in which it isn't clear whether they should steal, lie, kill, or eat each other, in the end become convinced that concepts such as good and evil are completely vague—evidence of a very sophisticated form of indoctrination because it is carried out on a latent level.[24] But is the starting point of the premise of this approach correct? Is it possible to apply conclusions derived from extreme situations to non-extreme situations? From abnormal to normal? From exceptional to common? Let us consider the example of Heinz's dilemma. In a life and death situation, stealing seems acceptable, even moral. What would it be for a person who puts morals (not stealing) above human life? Does it follow from these extremes that stealing is permissible—even under ordinary (or all) circumstances? The answer is obvious (at least I hope so). And I believe that neither Kohlberg nor any other supporters of the critical method would agree with a conclusion of unrestrained robbery. Nevertheless, the method of moral dilemmas really leads to such a conclusion, even if the teacher is not aware of it.

Kilpatrick[25] wonders how a dilemma about theft could help young teenagers overcome the temptation to steal money from their parent's wallet. He says that most of the moral situations faced by both children and adults are not dilemmas: most moral choices are unambiguous. We simply have to do what we know we should do, and not do what we know we shouldn't. The time spent in school would be much better used by considering (and practicing) virtues such as friendship, loyalty, and honesty rather than focusing on unsolvable situations where truthfulness seems wrong, friendship is separated from honesty, and cannibalism is legitimized. Kilpatrick further notes that the method of dilemmas, especially when applied to children at an early stage of moral and cognitive develop-

ment, is "woefully inadequate," because it comes out of the assumption that children already have the "ABCs of morality," and are therefore able to cope with questions requiring a higher level of moral judgment.[26] In other words, Kilpatrick is arguing that before children are exposed to moral complexity (remember Sharon: "Is it right to be loyal to a friend, or truthful to the authorities?"), they should be taught the basics of morality ("Is it right to steal this sweater?"). If that doesn't happen, the youth are put into moral confusion because they are instilled with the preconceptions that (a) suppress the basic moral intuition that some things are really and unproblematically good and some bad; and (b) lead to a contradiction between moral theory and moral practice. However possible it is to instill and hold the *theory* of the relativity of moral norms, it cannot be meaningfully applied in *practice.* We start teaching children from the time they're in the sandbox that there are some things they cannot do to others, and we say the same thing to criminals in court.

Value Pseudo-neutrality and Indoctrination

Critics of therapeutic pedagogy point to the fact that, in spite of their claim that the therapeutic approach is completely value-neutral, the reality is the opposite. Kilpatrick presents an example of a favorite didactic strategy, "VV," which is Value Voting.[27] The exercise begins with innocent questions like "How many of you like to go for walks in the countryside?" or How many of you love picnics?" or "How many of you love yogurt?" But soon there appear questions like "How many of you approve of premarital sex?" or "Which of you are for legalizing abortion?" or "How many of you are in favor of having homosexual couples married by priests, ministers, and rabbis?" Kilpatrick points out that the authors of the method have made no effort to separate the heavy-value questions from the light ones. They are intertwined as though there were no significant differences between them. The exercise is designed to give young people the impression that "all values are questions of personal taste—as in the case of yogurt," says Kilpatrick. This kind of design is not only not neutral, it is "indoctrinat-

ing" because it deliberately and somewhat deceitfully instills the doctrine of *value relativity*. Whether or not it is the teachers' intention, if this method is used in pedagogical practice, it does indoctrinate (although students/teachers usually are not even aware of it).

Proponents of the therapeutic method understandably don't like to be associated with such a—for them almost vulgar—word and vehemently defend themselves.[28] Indeed, resistance to indoctrination was one of the central motives of the alternative approach. But the problem is that they defined the term indoctrination very vaguely. It didn't occur to them that they also held a set of specific values and doctrines that they perforce communicated to children by whatever indirect method. Once the term is defined, it becomes clear that their approach fulfills every criteria of indoctrination. The definition of Downey and Kelley, to which Kohlberg referred in one of his apologies, is an illustration of the problem. The triad of indoctrinating criteria—questionable content, questionable method, questionable goals—is so general that even its proponents fall into it. They communicate notoriously questionable content or doctrine—values are relative. They use questionable methods—the therapeutists' preferred non-directive methods of teaching. Non-directiveness, however, doesn't guarantee anything. Teachers may (and often do) indoctrinate in a non-directive way. That is, in effect, an effective trick. Intentional? asks Kilpatrick.[29] I won't be as mistrustful as my colleague here. I use the adjective "effective" as opposed to "intentional" because I am not presuming that there is any premeditated or manipulative intent. On the basis of my own pedagogical experience and personal interaction with fellow teachers, I have come to the conclusion that few teachers actually seek to relativize moral values on the part of their students. Rather, I think that users of the therapeutic method simply haven't anticipated the implications of their theory. There

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is nothing more practical than good theory. If, however, the theory is dubious, the practical consequences will be dubious too, even though the way is lined with good intentions.

Not only the teacher but also the student is outwitted here. They were promised a tool to "stimulate" moral thinking, which would lead to greater moral competence, but in reality they were subjected to the process of methodological relativization of values. It is woven into the therapeutic textbooks, not in a neutral way but skillfully (and probably unintentionally) hidden. Despite the rhetoric of value neutrality that it proclaims in theory, practice shows that the therapeutic educator is anything but neutral.

Individualism, Subjectivism, Relativism

In light of what has been said, it is unsurprising that therapeutic pedagogy has earned accusations of moral subjectivism, accompanied by individualism and eventually leading to moral relativism. Conservative theoreticians and practicioners of education have been thoroughly heard from in this respect. See, for example, Kilpatrick's bestseller, *Why Johny Can't Tell Right From Wrong*, first published in 1992. In the title, the author makes a deliberate reference to the earlier book by Rudolf Flesch, *Why Johny Can't Read*. In it, Flesch clarifies the reason for the failure of certain didactic experiments carried out in America in the postwar years. Briefly, the traditional phonetic method of language teaching was replaced by the "look-say" method, in which the focus of reading acquisition was transferred from teachers to students. The authors of the project promised greater engagement of students, which would lead to more effective acquisition of reading skills. The reality was just the opposite, and the project was a total failure, but before it ended (for a certain time it had the approval of the federal authorities), it produced a whole generation of nearly illiterate "readers." Kilpatrick says that something similar happened in the area of

moral education. In his judgment, the dramatic decline in moral literacy, which can not only be documented statistically but also seen with the naked eye, is the consequence of implementing a bad method. A whole generation of children have been fooled by its moral relativism and are now unable to recognize the good from the bad.

Proponents of therapeutic pedagogy defend themselves against the accusation of relativism. They say that their method "definitely promotes the values of thinking, feeling, choosing, communicating, and acting" as well as "rationality, justice, creativity, autonomy, and equality."[30] Alfie Kohn denounces the "rampant individualism and self-assurance" that threaten society as a whole and argues for "community cooperation" as a key goal of moral education.[31] Abraham Maslow similarly explains that "valuelessness" is the "greatest disease of our time."[32] The term *democracy* also often appears as a non-negotiable value that should be promoted by moral or civic education. (There is even a subject called Education to Democracy or Democratic Thinking—as opposed to totalitarian thinking). The same goes with *respect*, tolerance, empathy, and the so-called Golden Rule. So, no relativism?[33]

It is good, however, to ask all these sets of values these questions: Where are they coming from? On what ontological basis do they stand? How are they anchored or validated? One way to avoid meta-ethical problems is simply to assert that they are values of the type of universal maxims or ideals that are self-validating or self-evident, and that no further justification is needed. But such an evasive maneuver doesn't work in education. From the earliest age, children are wired in such a way as to need to know the reasons for their actions, or the actions required of them. The instruction "you should" do this or that, or behave in this way or that, calls forth a child-like natural and unaffected desire to know *why*. It's true that there are "why" questions and developmental stages that really don't need an answer, such as "Why shouldn't I touch the burner?" But others literally cry out for an answer: "Why should I be brave?" "Why must I control myself?"

Most educators know this fact very well; and

therefore, if possible, they look for good answers or fundamentals, which would give meaningful justification for moral values and rights—including therapeutic educators. But on what basis? Moral ideals are rooted "neither in the conventions of social life or public discourse, nor in an external or transcendent standard inherited from any particular moral tradition," explains Hunter; and, he continues, "rather, these ideals are rooted in the rights (the desires, feelings, needs and potentialities) of the autonomous individual. The self, in brief, is both the source of all moral sensibility and the final object of moral accountability."[34] Rodgers can in many ways be considered the father of this concept:

> The individual increasingly comes to feel that the locus of evaluation lies within himself. Less and less does he look to others for approval or disapproval; for the standards to live by; for decisions and choices. He recognizes that it rests within himself to choose; that the only questions that matters is "Am I living in a way that is deeply satisfying to me, and which truly expresses me?"[35]

Elsewhere he adds,

> Everyone possesses the capacity to expand, extend, become autonomous, develop, mature. [Moral capacity] exists in every individual and awaits only the proper conditions to be released and expressed. [...] Whether one calls it a growth tendency, a drive toward self-actualization, or a forward-moving directional tendency, it is the main-spring of life.[36]

In psychotherapeutic circles, Maslow speaks similarly about people. Everyone has an "inner core," which "as much as we know of it so far, is definitely not 'evil,' but is either what we adults in our culture call 'good' or else it is neutral," he explains.[37] "Self-realization" and "self-fulfillment" are, in his judgment, "instinctive." Let Maslow speak more extensively about human nature:

> Man demonstrates in his own nature a pressure towards fuller and fuller Being, more and more perfect actualization of his humanness in exactly the same naturalistic, scientific sense that an acorn may be said to be "pressing

toward" being an oak tree, or a tiger can be observed to "push toward" being tigerish, or a horse toward being equine. Man is ultimately not molded or shaped into humanness or taught to be human. The role of the environment is ultimately to permit him or help him to actualize his own potentialities.[38]

Fathers of liberal education like Rousseau would have rejoiced: *no molding, no teaching, permission, letting the potential itself be actualized…* What potential? "Creativeness, spontaneity, selfhood, authenticity, caring for others, being able to love, yearning for truth are embryonic potentialities belonging to his species-membership just as much as are his arm and legs and brain and eyes."[39]

The therapeutic educational concepts are, in their theory, true echoes of this anthropology. Again and again we read that "learning is a process whereby meaning, ethical or otherwise, must be actively invented and reinvented, from the inside out."[40] Or, write other authors, "The individual who is autonomously moral follows moral rules of the self. Such rules are self-constructed, self-regulating principles"[41] —hence the didactic emphasis on autonomous decision-making and choice, which are so characteristic of this kind of education. True values "represent the free and thoughtful choice of intelligent humans interacting with complex and changing environments."[42] But the values must be chosen freely, else they're not "right"; or, at least, they are "chosen from among alternatives," but mainly, "after independent consideration." The imperative for free choice has become so inviolable that educators have been encouraged to "help the children look for value, *as long as* [emphasis mine] the children make the decisions. It is also possible that the children decide not to develop values. The teachers' responsibility is to support even such a decision." [43] Kohn adds pregnantly, "children must be invited to reflect on complex issues, to recast them in the light of their own experience and questions, to figure out for themselves—and with one another—what kind of person one

ought to be."[44] In other words, a value can become one's own only through choice.

Pedocentrism of this type necessarily leads to moral subjectivism and relativism, as is well illustrated by the handbook of one of the therapeutic education programs with the title *Growing up Caring*. Let's consider two examples. In the chapter on cheating in school, a student discovers a picture of a girl during an exam looking over the shoulder of her classmate, with the accompanying text: "Cheating, in any form, is bad for your self-esteem." In another chapter in the book is a photograph of a young girl who is stealing from a store, while the next picture shows two other people watching her and recording it on camera.

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The accompanying text says, "One way to test the impact a decision will have on your feeling of self-worth is to imagine a picture being taken of you implementing your decision."[45] The ethical argument of these instructions is clear—the children are not led to believe that cheating or stealing are objectively wrong because they violate a universal law. Cheating is wrong because it calls forth an unpleasant feeling or threatens the self-confidence of an individual. Such an argument is almost amusing to someone who grew up under a totalitarian regime in the seventies and eighties. In a culture deformed by Communist ideology, people felt downright happy if they could manage to steal from the state-owned property, or at least get around some law. After all, the best people—from a moral perspective—were usually "illegal" or in prison or exile. Things are different now in both the East and the West. The "feeling" argument no longer works today—the number of individuals whose self-esteem would be lowered by being exposed as a person who committed an unethical act is rapidly declining everywhere.

Subjectivism, which is behind the therapeutic concepts of pedagogy, has a direct connection with the "cultures" of ethical utilitarianism and emotivism (sometimes called expressionism). In utilitarianism, moral discourse determines the logic of expediency and usefulness; in emotion-

alism, the logic of psychological well-being. In both cases, it is the individual I who arbitrates moral prudence. In this frame of reference, the most important moral act is that of choice, making a decision—not a decision *for something*, just making a decision, period, and deciding it yourself—Jean Paul Sartre in pedagogical robes.

The results? Therapeutic pedagogies have achieved their goals; and in doing so, they have become part of the problem they wanted to solve. The therapeutically raised generation is truly autonomous, at least to the extent that they have ruled out any commitment that would go beyond the borders of subjective choice and personal well-being. It is the logical result of programmatic questioning of objective moral reality. If I am being convinced that the final arbiter of moral values is me or my feelings, eventually I will believe it. If I am methodically urged to self-identify my existence through free choice, I will eventually do it. Who would have expected that, entirely freely, I would choose evil? But it could have been expected—at least since Zimbardo and Milgram.[46] But before them, Dostoyevsky already said it; and before him, Aquinas, Augustine, Paul of Tarsus, and many others.

In Place of Conclusion: The Abolition of Man

Many of the problems of the therapeutic approach were uniquely dealt with by C. S. Lewis in his book *The Abolition of Man*, subtitled *Reflections on education with special reference to the teaching of English in the upper forms of schools*. Lewis's treatise crosses lines not only in its form—concise, intense, brief, and all with typical Lewis readability—but most of all in that Lewis almost prophetically predicted the moral problems that came later. Most observers or critics—including those I refer to here—normally analyze the results of some phenomenon, but Lewis, with unprecedented foresight, presented a description of what was yet to come. Therefore, he deserves special attention in the conclusion of this paper.

The text of the book is based on three lectures Lewis gave in 1943.[47] Lewis is reacting to a textbook on the English language which—so it wouldn't offend anyone—was hidden under the designation "green book" by the pseudonymous authors "Gaius and Titus." It was a book written in 1939 called *The Control of Language: A Critical Approach to Reading and Writing*, by Alex King and Martin Ketley. Lewis analyzes the way in which the authors of the textbook subvert the students' values—not only the moral ones. When a value statement is made, such as "that waterfall is beautiful," the authors teach that it is only the subjective statement of a specific feeling on the part of the observer, not a statement about objective reality. We think we're saying something important about something real, but we are actually only saying something about our own feelings, claim the authors. Lewis argues that such subjectivism in value judgments is flawed because some subjects and some acts are actually real; that is, they are objective and deserve an evaluation, whether positive or negative. A waterfall is objectively beautiful, a villain is objectively evil. Understandably, an ethics which doesn't believe in the reality of objective moral values will avoid the concepts of good and evil. But if we replace "good" with predicates like "necessary," "progressive," or "impressive," we are using just a trick of language, a linguistic ruse, says Lewis, who explains with the questions "necessary for what? progressing towards what? effecting what? In the last resort they [Gaius and Titus] would have to admit that some state of affairs was in their opinion good for its own sake." In other words—it is good to call things by their right names and cultivate an "ethics without predicates."

According to Lewis, this ethics has been well taught by good teachers from time immemorial. Lewis reminds us of the thinkers of antiquity such as Plato, Aristotle and Augustine, who, in one way or another, cultivated "ordinate affections," that is, teaching people to love that which ought to be loved and to hate that which ought to be hated—to love good and hate evil. Although moral feelings and values are real, they don't develop automatically in people, says Lewis. Hence the need for education. Those who don't have these moral capacities are lacking the very thing that would make them specifically human. They would be, in Lewis's words, "men without chests" or "without hearts." The Gaius and Titus book

produces such people by undermining the fact that people are capable of contact with objective reality (moral, aesthetic or other) and thus taking away from them that which is humanely the most valuable. (If such people were asked, "Do you think there is something real outside of you—truth, goodness, beauty, the *noumena*?" they would answer, "No—there's only you, the subject, your impression, phenomena, illusion.")

What will happen with the human world when we explain away and thus domesticate moral reality? In the last part of his book, Lewis gives an unbelievably accurate sketch of the contours of the modern dystopia that should soon emerge if this demoralizing trend were tp continue. The power of human beings to do exactly what they wish will grow with the so-called "conquest of nature," that is, the development of the natural sciences. However, every new power acquired by Man is, at the same time, "power over man," says Lewis. Therefore, it is good to ask whose power grows with every further sublimation of nature. Lewis predicts that if the dream of some scientists becomes a reality and we humans "take control of nature," it will mean the supremacy of hundreds of people over billions of others. The final stage of conquest will be conquest of one's self, that is, human nature. Human nature will be the final bastion of the natural world that will be conquered. The victorious ruling minority will become a caste of Conditioners, that is, people who will have control tools (he mentions eugenics, genetics and psychology) and who will knead, form, and cut out the nature of the succeeding generations however they want: "The process which, if not checked, will abolish Man goes on apace among Communists and Democrats no less than among Fascists," warns Lewis, I remind the reader, in 1943. He adds, "The methods may (at first) differ in brutality. […] The belief that we can invent ideologies at pleasure, and the consequent treatment of mankind as mere specimens, preparations, begins

Pedocentrism of this type necessarily leads to moral sujectivism and relativism, as is well illustrated by the handbook of one of the therapeutic education programs with the title Growing up Caring.

to affect our very language." [48] Man's conquest of Nature turns out to be Nature's conquest of Man. Man's power over everything destroys him.

Lewis called the process of conquering, when people sacrifice one thing after another, and finally even themselves, in order to gain power over nature and human nature, a "magician's bargain." Faust's metaphor illustrates the fact that modern "science" has the same goal as the ancient magic, which is the submission of reality to the wishes of humankind—to command the wind and the rain, to gain *that hideous strength,*[49] which is in fact to become a god. To achieve their goal, they use magic and science to do things that have long been considered "disgusting and impious."

The same applies to moral values and principles. If they are conquered, people will have the power to freely modify, design, and even produce them. Moral values and ethics are not things that determine a person, but things that persons themselves determine however they see fit, a situation that means the end of them. And this is the "tragi-comedy of our situation," Lewis concludes: we call loudly for precisely those qualities that we ourselves have subverted: "In a sort of ghastly simplicity we remove the organ and demand the function. We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honor and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful."[50]

Disclosure statement

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Endnotes

1. Davison J. Hunter, *Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age Without Good and Evil* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 219.

2. Jean Piaget, *The Moral Judgment of the Child* (London: Kegan Paul, 1932); also Lawrence Kohlberg, *Essays on Moral Development II* (San

Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984).

3. I freely edidted and shortened both stories. See Lawrence Kohlberb, 1984, Sidney B. Simon, et al, *Values Clarification: A Handbook of Practical Strategies for Teachers and Students* (New York: Hart Publishing, 1972).

4. See, for example, Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U Press, 1982); Craig R. Dykstra, *Vision and Character: A Christian Educator's Alternative to Kohlberg* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981); Thomas Atherton, *A Critique of Lawrence Kohlber's Theories of Moral Devellopment and Moral Education.* Unpublished Dissertation (Boston University, 1979); and Davison J. Hunter, *Death of Character* (2000). I present here only a brief overview.

5. See Hunter, 177-178.

6. Carl Rodgers, *On Becoming a Person* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1961), 122.

7. Ibid, 289.

8. William Glasser, *School Without Failure* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969) , 186.

9. Sidney Simon et al., *Values Clarification: A Handbook of Practical Straategies for Teachers and Students* (New York: Hart Publishing, 1972), 15-16.

10. See Rheta DeVries, *Early Education* (New York: Teahers College Press, 1994), 28.

11. Ibid., 132.

12. Ibid., 78.

13. Hunter, 181.

14. Thomas LicKona, *Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility* (New York: Banatam, 1992), 11.

15. Compare with William Kilpatrick, *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right from Wrong: Moral Illiteracy and the Case for Character Education* (New York: Simon & Shuster,1992).

16. Jean Piaget, 319.

17. Clark F. Power, et al, *Lawrence Kohlberg's Approach to Moral Education* (New York: Columbia U Press, 1989), 62.

18. See Don Dinkmeyer, Sr., et al, *The Parent's Handbook: Systematic Training for Effective Parenting* (Circle Pines, Minn.: American guuidancce Service, Inc., 1997), 5.

19. Hunter, 182.

20. Cf. Ibid., 183.

21. MacIntyre's book, with the title *After Virtue*, first published in 1981, presents a "disturbing hypothesis" about the current state of moral discourse. Entire and coherent conceptual systems have disappeared, according to MacIntyre, and in their place we have only fragmented sayings and partial beliefs. The cause is not the decline of morality in a superficial sense, but the deeper decay of meaningful moral language into which these fragments could be put and rationally developed. MacIntyre believes this decline is connected to the expansion of modern individualistic morality. He shows that moral emotivism has degraded every moral statement into a mere expression of individual preference. All statements like "it should be" or "it's right" can be decoded and reveal someone's will behind them. In continental philosophy, the parallel to emotivism is primarily Friedrich Nietzsche's conception of morality. MacIntyre opposes both concepts and argues that they are only a reflection of the state of moral language after its decline in modernity, especially in the Enlightenment.

22. Adam Philips, *On Flirtation: Psycholanalytic Essays on the Uncommitted Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U. Press, 1994), 59.

23. Hunter, 183.

24. Cf. Elmer Thiessen, *Teaching for Commitment: Liberal Education, Indoctrination, and Christian Nurture* (McGill-Queen's U. Press, 1993).

25. Kilpatrick, *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right From Wrong*, 1992.

26. Kilpatrick, 1992.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid., 81-82.

29. See, for example, Lawrence Kohlberg, *Moral Education: Theory and Appliccation*, ed. Marvin W. Berkowitz and Fritz Oser (London: Lawrence Erlbaum Assoiates, 1985); or Meriel Downey and A. V. Kelley, *Moral Education: Theory and Practice* (London: Harper and Row, 1978).

30. Kilpatrick, *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right From Wrong*, 82.

31. Howard Kirschenbaum, *Advanced Value*

Clarification* (La Jolla: California University Associates, 1977), 12-13.

32. Alfie Kohn, *The Truth About Self Esteem* (Phi Dlta Kappa, 1994), 272-283.

33. Abraham Maslow, *The Psychology of Science* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 133.

34. Hunter, 2000.

35. Ibid., 188.

36. Rodgers, 119.

37. Ibid., 9.

38. Maslow (1959), 130.

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid.

41. Kohn, 429-433.

42. De Vries and Zan, 46.

43. Louis E. Rathes et al., *Values and Teachinng*, 2nd ed. (Columbus, OH: Charles E. Merrill, 1978), 41.

44. Ibid., 48.

45. Kohn, 435.

46. Hunter, 122-123.

47. Much has been written about the so-called prison experiment of Philip Zimbardo (it was even filmed), and likewise about Stanley Milgram's study of human conformity. For details on Zimbardo, see, for example, the home page of the Stanford experiment <http://www.prisonexp.org/>. On Milgram, see his *Obedience to Authority.* The goal of these experiments was to study why, how under what circumstances people choose evil.

48. I will not burden the text with heavy referencing. All the quotations are taken from Clive Stapes Lewis, *Abolition of Man*, *Or Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of Schools* (London: Oxford U. Press, 1943; New York: Touchstone, 1996).

49. Ibid.

50. I am referring to C. S. Lewis's *That Hideous Strength* (London: Random House, 1945), which narratively portrays this problem.

51. Lewis, *Abolition of Man.*