

# Teaching Morality in History

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**Abstract.** In this paper, I explore two principal challenges to teaching morality within a historical context: the alleged counter-productivity of moral instruction within a heterogeneous society and the undermining arguments of moral and cultural relativism. I then present a defense for teaching moral traditions within their historical context. Notwithstanding the objections to moral instruction, I argue that teaching morality within a historical framework is not only feasible but essential to the attainment of fundamental pedagogical goals.

**Keywords:** Ethics, Morality, History, Religion, Pedagogy.

## 1. Introduction

This paper seeks to answer two questions. First, is it good, necessary, or even possible to teach moral theory in a course on human history? Second, in public and nonsectarian private schools, how can instructors appropriately incorporate moral frameworks into the study of history?

The approach I adopt here is to formulate generalizable principles on the basis of my experience as a teacher and classroom observer, guided by readings in moral theory. I do not presume that my conclusions will be universally applicable or accepted, but I maintain that regardless of disparate approaches in specific contexts, thoughtful consideration and articulation of the issues surrounding moral inquiry in the classroom is essential to any pedagogy that seeks to educate the whole person.

As it is through the lens of my St. Mark's Teaching Fellowship that I will focalize my assessment of ethical inquiry in the classroom, a few preliminary words on the school and my position there are in order. St. Mark's School of Texas is a nonsectarian, college-preparatory, independent day school in Dallas, serving 852 boys in grades one through twelve. Though the school has no professed ecclesiastical allegiance, the charter states that an education at St. Mark's is "designed to afford its students well-rounded physical, intellectual, moral, and religious training and instruction."<sup>2</sup> The Statement of Purpose expounds further:

The School's major objective is to prepare young men for lives of responsibility and leadership in a competitive and ever-changing world. To this end, we profess and uphold certain values including integrity, honor, courage, acceptance of responsibility for one's actions, the ability to defer gratification in pursuit of one's goals, service to the broader community, and commitment to working with others to make a difference on campus and in the world.<sup>3</sup>

This approach mirrors the philosophy of "educating the whole boy," articulated most notably by Dr. Adam J. Cox, an author and researcher for the International Boys' Schools Coalition, in his 2011 study, *Locating Significance In the Lives of Boys*.<sup>4</sup> According to Dr. Cox, years of clinical fieldwork led him to the conclusion that "deeper, sustainable happiness of boys" relies chiefly on "a willingness to entertain an alternative approach to how to live life—with unequivocal purpose and belief in life's possibilities."<sup>5</sup> Much of Dr. Cox's research deals with how to ignite the "spirit" in boys that allows them to self-realize, to close

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<sup>2</sup> "History and Philosophy," St. Mark's School of Texas Official Website. <http://www.smtexas.org/podium/default.aspx?t=146574>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Cox, *Locating Significance in the Lives of Boys*, 5.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 2

“the gap between boys’ idealized selves and their student selves.”<sup>6</sup> As the language of the Statement of Purpose makes clear, St. Mark’s provides a target range of values for students to incorporate in their “idealized selves”: responsibility, leadership, integrity, honor, courage, and so forth.

My position at St. Mark’s is especially conducive to observation of and experimentation with moral instruction. Whereas full-time faculty teach four to five classes daily, as a Teaching Fellow I divide my time between proctoring study hall, teaching one daily class, observing other classes on a biweekly basis, and coaching after-school sports. In my teaching capacity as a Fellow, I have focused primarily on inquiry-based instruction in a 9<sup>th</sup> grade course on Foundations to World Societies. The rationale behind this flexibly structured position is twofold: (1) to create an ideal environment for a new teacher to experience relatively safe growth and experimentation and (2) to mentor that teacher in all aspects of participation in independent-school communal life.<sup>7</sup> As a consequence, I have had ample opportunity, in others’ classrooms as well as my own, to witness and experiment with the possibilities of moral inquiry.

## 2. Objections to Teaching Morality

Discussing morality in general is a sticky enterprise, and teaching morality through history is especially problematic. Classroom instruction in morality suffers from the mutually reinforcing criticisms that it is fundamentally superfluous and frequently ineffective or counterproductive. These objections are leveled in particular against the injection of moral evaluation into history courses, on the grounds that textbook history does not require moral explication and that the application of sweeping moral arguments to history can be highly contentious. Consider, for example, the prevalent distortion of social and religious history employed to justify pogroms against Jewish communities throughout Russia and Eastern Europe, or the quasi-scriptural, pseudo-scientific arguments disseminated in antebellum America to justify the enslavement of blacks. Anti-Semitism and racism do not demand that their adherents forfeit *the claim of* moral justification; quite the opposite, they require complicity in the historical revisionism necessary to justify the dehumanization of Jews and blacks. Why, one might ask, need history students study morality at all? Do the risks of gross overgeneralization and mischaracterization of the past not outweigh any appreciable benefits? And how can the school guarantee that a history teacher will be a qualified and effective moral instructor? These are serious concerns, which must be addressed before any consideration of *how* to discuss morality in the history classroom.

### 2.1. Why Study Morality?

One of the most notable justifications for moral instruction within the American educational tradition is John Dewey’s assertion in *My Pedagogic Creed* (1897) that to fully prepare a student for future life “means to give him command of himself; it means so to train him that he will have the full and ready use of all his capacities....”<sup>8</sup> Though Dewey speaks particularly of “capacities” that further the well-being of an industrialized workforce—that “eye and ear and hand may be tools ready to command,” “judgment may be capable of grasping the conditions under which it has to work,” and “executive forces be trained to act economically and efficiently-- he clearly does not restrict his notion of human potential to the qualities of a productive employee. Instead, he ascribes to schools the mission to “deepen and extend [the student’s] sense of the values bound up in his home life.” As he explains, “the best and deepest moral training is precisely that which one gets through having to enter into proper relations with others in a unity of work and thought.”<sup>9</sup> Schooling, then, is an indispensable opportunity for moral development, and insofar as “present educational systems...destroy or neglect this unity,” they “render it difficult or impossible to get any genuine, regular moral training.”<sup>10</sup> If there is to be any socialized form of moral instruction, Dewey argues, schools must continue the work begun at home.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 3

<sup>7</sup> Lawson Jr. and Reck, *High Stakes Mentoring*. St. Mark’s School of Texas, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Dewey, John. *My Pedagogic Creed*. “Article I—What Education Is.”

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. “Article II—What the School Is.”

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

## 2.2. The Pluralism Objection

But why, some may object, should moral instruction take a socialized form? Firstly, it can be argued, contemporary society is too heterogeneous and pluralistic for any monistic moral bulwark. And even if society must regulate some behaviors through legislated norms, growing up in such an environment should provide the vast majority of students with sufficient training in the basic responsibilities of citizenship without reliance on moral instruction in school. Is preaching morality from the classroom lectern as well as the seat of government not an excessively authoritarian maneuver, a cultural brainwashing?

Moral instruction, however, is not inconsistent with pluralism; in fact, it is a necessary condition for an ideologically diverse society. A helpful analogy may be found in nineteenth-century social contract theory. As Hobbes observed, absent a governing body, nineteenth-century life in a “state of nature” is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” In such circumstances the majority suffer from the strife brought on by the selfish competition, diffidence, and glory-seeking of uninhibited individuals.<sup>11</sup> The social contract requires all persons to subsume a certain degree of absolute liberty to government in exchange for guaranteed recognition of their rights and interests, thereby preserving the community’s peace and welfare. A similar logic applies to the moral governance of civil society. Parents forfeit absolute license over their child’s moral upbringing in exchange for society’s guarantee that basic moral education in a social environment will protect all children from unchecked depravity or targeted persecution. This is all the more true in a social environment in which apparent differences in ancestry, belief, and social status force children, from an early age, to recognize fundamental differences among their peers. Given the ideological and political ramifications of such distinctions, especially as they impinge on a person’s sense of his relationship to a robustly diverse community, a child’s full moral development ought not be divorced from his social environment. Consequently, as Dewey argues in *My Pedagogic Creed*, society must involve fundamental notions of decency and respect for others—i.e. morality—in its primary vehicle for social education: the school. This social environment is also fundamental to the realization of Cox’s “idealized self”: the pursuit of one’s fullest human potential. Social relations are key to moral education in particular because morality deals with how to treat and think of others, and because recognizing the failure of coercive argument and learning to appeal to others’ standards and ideals is an essential stage in moral development. To deny a child the experience of this sort of education, therefore, might in fact infringe upon, rather than safeguard, his right to the “pursuit of happiness” as enshrined in the U.S. Declaration of Independence.

## 2.3 The Relativity Objection

In the case of history, however, some might object that the school should not train students to impose socially normative moral judgments on a heterogeneous array of bygone cultures and societies. Such critics might well ask whether the academic standard ought not be impersonal objectivity, such as that putatively provided by the social sciences, rather than the subjective assignment of moral valence.

A response to this subjectivity objection requires a brief digression on the history of moral relativism, which emerged from the philosophy of the Enlightenment, especially in the works of philosophers David Hume, Friedrich Nietzsche, and G. E. Moore, and anthropologists Franz Boas, Ruth Benedict, and Margaret Mead. By the twentieth century, the relativist school of thought produced a twofold rejection of normative morality. One element of this rejection was emotivism, which G.E. Moore introduced in *Principia Ethica* (1902), replacing any claim of an objective reality behind morality with a “faculty of intuition.”<sup>12</sup> The thrust of Moore’s position is that statements alluding to absolute standards (e.g. “He is a good man”) in fact indicate only approval of the described object (i.e. “I approve of this man”).<sup>13</sup> Even the moral standards of a representative democracy, therefore, are no more than an expression of the governing majority’s approbation.

Another element of the rejection of normative morality was the abandonment of the assumption that moral arguments are universal, especially when employed to assess the values of other cultures and societies. In contradistinction to the attempt of Western philosophy to investigate a common nature, and thereby purpose or meaning, to man’s existence, Franz Boas wrote that “much of what we ascribe to human nature is

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<sup>11</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*. Chapter XIII.

<sup>12</sup> MacIntyre, 15

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* Such thinking surfaces in much ethics-centered pedagogy today.

no more than a reaction to the restraints put upon us by our civilization.”<sup>14</sup> In 1928, Boas’ student Margaret Mead advocated explicitly for a relativistic moral outlook: “Realising that our own ways are not humanly inevitable nor God-ordained, but are the fruit of a long and turbulent history, we may well examine in turn all of our institutions, thrown into strong relief against the history of other civilisations, and weighing them in the balance, be not afraid to find them wanting.”<sup>15</sup> In a pluralistic society, accordingly, the majority can make no overriding claim for the foisting of its moral constructs on others whose cultures remain distinct, albeit enmeshed in the larger society. Moreover, should history as an academic discipline adopt any moral teaching, the aim should be to circumscribe, rather than broaden, students’ culturally determined moral conceptions.

The impossibility of achieving moral objectivity may well be fatal to most current techniques for incorporating moral thinking into the classroom. Yet the broad application of moral relativism to all moral issues does not withstand close scrutiny. The conclusion that teaching *any* absolute moral framework is wrong because such a framework will necessarily exclude all other moral frameworks *itself* stems from an absolute and exclusive evaluative framework camouflaged by a rhetoric of universal inclusivity. Specifically, relativism denies the claim of any moral system to apply its principles universally. Yet that basic principle of relativism must be applied universally (not relatively) to have any meaning, and therefore by its own logic relativism cannot operate as a check on absolute morality.

It is important to note, moreover, that the relativist objection to moral instruction—viz., that the objectivity problem rightfully precludes any attempt at moral instruction—hinges on the assumption that morality is a product of culture and civilization. Traditional morality typically does not identify itself as the product of either, though the mutual evolution of all three is hardly in doubt. My contention is that traditional morality must be studied in its historical context, as *both* authoritative moral canon and cultural embodiment. Given their extensive interrelatedness, and the limitations of our ability to judge their origins objectively, I maintain that to devalue one or the other is to do injustice to both. Before outlining this approach, however, I must address the sociobiology-based language surrounding morality in the classroom today, so that I may distinguish its failings from the framework I intend to defend.

## 2.4 Morality and Ethics

Most modern approaches to teaching morality center on ethics: the science of morals.<sup>16</sup> This phenomenon may be attributable to the fact that the use of the term *moral* has reached a point at which discussion breaks down into mutually incomprehensible articulations of individual priorities.<sup>17</sup> In the common parlance of today’s students, one can have his own morals, apart from and not necessarily intelligible in the context of her morals, their morals, or our morals. As comparison between moral ideologies becomes increasingly tortuous, evaluative language begins to lose its meaning. The only “bad” morals are those that infringe upon certain utilitarian goods of agreed-upon value. In such a relativistic moral system, however, the only universally upheld utility is unqualified acceptance of differences as morally equivalent, and thus the only bad morality is one describing certain actions as universally good or bad. In short, all absolute morality is bad morality.

Ethics introduces an appealing alternative to morality because it seems more amenable to universalization and is putatively scientific. The universality of ethics results from its concentration on traits of character deemed “virtues”—recall St. Mark’s emphasis on responsibility, leadership, integrity, honor, courage—that conduce to greater success in any human undertaking, regardless of moral underpinnings. Furthermore, ethics tends to understand the development of such virtues in a sociobiological light, thus mapping morality onto the accepted scientific view of human development.<sup>18</sup> In circumventing any discussion of moral ends, virtue ethics attempt to elude the relativistic attack on teaching morality by

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<sup>14</sup> Boas, Foreword to *Coming of Age in Samoa*.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 233

<sup>16</sup> Online Etymology Dictionary, © 2010 Douglas Harper.

<sup>17</sup> MacIntyre, 2-3

<sup>18</sup> “The Sociobiology of Ethics and Leadership.” St. Mark’s School of Texas Leadership and Ethics Program.

<http://www.smtexas.org/podium/default.aspx?t=146655>. Cp. “Ethics in Education” at <http://www.ethicsineducation.com/intro.htm>: “The history of ethical thought is, in this regard, a record of attempts to promote, or to dictate, communal behavior in order to ensure stability and harmony within the social group.”

surrendering to the governing premise that all moral systems are culturally determined, and therefore cannot be compared with one another objectively.

Nonetheless, virtue ethics falls on its own sword in failing the relativity objection. Courage, leadership, responsibility, and integrity for example, each purportedly attributable to biological drives conditioned during the social forces of early human history, take on a specific moral valence in the context of modern society. Communal utilitarianism, though it may plausibly explain the historical advantage conferred by traditionally virtuous behavior, does not provide satisfying answers to real moral dilemmas. A terrorist may exemplify selfless leadership, responsibility to fellows, courage in the face of danger, and integrity to his ideals. The question students must ask is: are the ends he intends moral? How can they judge his actions from within their moral system, acknowledging that he denies that system's moral authority?<sup>19</sup>

### 3. Moral Authority and Tradition

It is my argument that to make such judgments, the student must become familiar with conflicting traditions of moral thought *by studying their historical development*. At a remove from the passions and prejudices of the moment, the history student can assess past moral arguments with attention to both abstract reasoning and its concrete ramifications. Moreover, studying the historical evolution of moral traditions teaches the student to distinguish culturally determined values from the moral tradition's comprehensive presentation of the ultimate good for human beings. From an articulated concept of human teleology, moral traditions derive the authority to integrate ethical behavior, which may be socially determined, with moral principles, which exist outside cultural values. Thus, whereas virtue ethics makes a self-effacing attempt to circumvent cultural relativism, traditional moral authority confronts the issue directly. *Pace* Boas and Mead, moral authority understands itself as neither a response to civilization nor a matter of cultural determination; it precedes and informs both civilization and culture.

In the classical tradition, Aristotle describes the formation of a political state itself is an instance of a human action which "aims at some good"—namely, the community's well-being.<sup>20</sup> Yet politics—the science of the communal good—though essential, is not the highest form of activity in Aristotle's ethics. Rather, Aristotle's metaphysics inform the two highest activities available to man: friendship and contemplation.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, in the monotheistic religious tradition, divine revelation on Mount Sinai, as understood by rabbinic Judaism and incorporated later into both Christianity and Islam, provides moral relativism with a cogent rebuttal. Within these religious traditions, 'ought' and 'ought-not' statements emanate from the same authority as all empirical existence. There is no distinction in objective reality between indicative statements about the world and evaluative moral conclusions, which Hume famously sought to divorce.<sup>22</sup> There are therefore no ethics independent of morality. Though the moral law in some instances gives specific instruction to a particular people at a given historical moment, its general prescriptions against idolatry, adultery, murder, blasphemy, theft, and torture are absolute and ubiquitous. Whereas differences in appearance, dress, custom, taste, speech, and so forth are readily intelligible as the products of social history, the moral law is neither a product of nor a reaction to civilization or culture; it is the first principle of all other relations, the contract between human and divine that enshrines all mortal life.

### 4. Moral Instruction

It is now time to address the moral instructor's methodology, with the aim of dispelling several other ancillary objections to moral instruction in a history classroom. First, the teacher need not be a moral paragon to instruct students in the history of moral thought. In fact, though modeling in the classroom is always an important factor, it is the instructor's humanity—which is to say, humility—above all else that induces students to engage personally with the subject matter. The student's deference need not be based on

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<sup>19</sup> I do not mean to imply that terrorism is necessarily immoral. My contention is precisely that moral assessment of any kind concerning the actions or beliefs of an ideological dissident outside society (to the extreme, in this example) requires a morality that is not circumscribed by culture.

<sup>20</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. Chapter 1

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, Chapters 2, 9, 10

<sup>22</sup> MacIntyre, 56; Hume, *Treatise* III. i. 1

the teacher's identity, beliefs, or background; in fact, these particulars should influence the student's moral development as minimally as possible. It is the power of moral ideas to inspire and persuade which deserves paramount respect—that measured, critical respect of an academic nature not to be confused with credulity or naiveté

Second, the study of history affords encounters with such diverse traditions of moral thought that any student will struggle to affix a single and comprehensive ideological lens atop civilization. The locus of moral instruction is radical exposure to the truth in all its forms, and the history student must grapple with the perplexingly manifold nature of the traditions he encounters. The best remedy to insularity is not the neglect of moral faculties, but broadening of the student's philosophical appetite through exposure to moral principles invoked throughout history.

A final pitfall arises: the student's illusory familiarity with a historical moral tradition through exposure to its contemporary heirs. This is a notion that requires dispelling early and often, and there is no better arena for it than the history classroom. The student familiar only with the portions of scripture prized in his religious community must encounter the Book of Genesis, the teachings of Jesus, and the prophecy of Mohammed before taking full ownership of his own stake in a religious moral universe; so too, all three Abrahamic faiths must struggle to comprehend the profoundly different outlook of Hinduism, Buddhism, and so forth. The athlete must read Oscar Wilde to expand his aesthetic imagination, while the artist must discover the poetic beauty of rowing contests and chariot races in Homer's epics, and each must recognize that cultivation and pursuit of certain talents is not only a social or aesthetic decision, but a moral and ethical choice as well. For potential of all forms—moral, ethical, spiritual, social, aesthetic, athletic, poetic, and so on—is human potential, and the endeavor to realize one's human potential demands a notion of what human success *is*. This is why the student of history must delve into the moral heart of ancient Greece and Victorian England alike, and why he must do so in full consciousness of the cultural and intellectual past behind each. Such an education will best prepare him to realize his “idealized self,” to discover his fullest human potential, and to take ownership of the ends toward which his pursuit of happiness ultimately aspires.

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