

BOOKS

A Critical Review of *Yes Virginia, There is a Right and Wrong!*

Kathleen M. Gow, *Yes Virginia, There is a Right and Wrong!* Toronto: John Wiley and Sons (Canada), 1980, pp.248.

As public education in Canada and the United States has become more self-consciously "secular" and responsive to the many different value orientations held by their citizens, a "crisis" over its moral-educative function has arisen. Can a pluralistic society support a form of moral education which does not "indoctrinate" children into the values of a particular subgroup? As the title of her book clearly states, Kathleen Gow thinks the answer to this question is "yes" and she argues that a sound approach to moral and values education (MVE) ought to teach "core moral precepts" which she believes are universal. To her dismay, she concludes that the major approaches to MVE in Canada and the U.S., Simon and Rath's Values Clarification, Kohlberg's Cognitive-Stage Development Model and Beck's Reflective Approach, are in the final analysis relativistic. They avoid indoctrination but sponsor a subjectivism which allows, and even demands, that children make up their own minds about the worth of such values as "honesty". Gow admits that these approaches "have positive features" but warns of their potential "for incalculable harm". Thus she sets out in this book to "unpack" the above approaches such that the reader may appraise their merit.

Gow critiques the Values Clarification (VC) approach to MVE on several grounds. First it fails to differentiate between moral and non-moral values and treats all values alike. No distinctions are made between value preferences (what I think I would like to do) and value obligations (what I think I ought to do). This is due in part to the general framework of VC which aims at developing a greater "awareness" of one's own values and the values of others without the aim of developing a more adequate valuing orientation. The major weakness of the VC approach is its promulgation of the tolerance of different values rather than the criticism of morally inadequate values. Gow finds fault not only with the ends of Values Clarification but with its means as well. Some of the VC exercises engage children in simulations and role-playing which Gow contends might induce embarrassment, anxiety or a loss of self-esteem in the student participant. Often these exercises employ self-disclosure techniques which, if improperly used, might result in more lasting psychological harm to the child. Gow argues that these exercises are often not only potentially harmful but that they appear to be a violation of the child's right to privacy. Proponents of Values Clarification defend their approach by noting that there are very few actual cases of abuse and that safeguards are taken to protect the children's rights to privacy by giving the child the right to "pass" in any given exercise.

The issues raised by Gow are important ones which have been continuously leveled at the Values Clarification approach. Without a more compelling argument for its ends, and without a serious program of research to evaluate its means and outcomes, Values Clarification is in serious trouble as a major approach to MVE. It should be noted that, although Gow does not acknowledge it, many Canadian educators have recently adopted a more critical attitude towards VC. For example, the Alberta, Canada social studies curriculum has withdrawn its focus on VC and relies on other approaches, due in part to many of these problems.

When Gow turns to Kohlberg's Cognitive-Developmental approach, she charges that it too is basically relativistic. This is ironic because Kohlberg has consistently opposed Values Clarification on grounds similar to Gow's, that is, on the charge of relativism. Gow criticizes Kohlberg not so much for his moral philosophy, which she does not seem to understand, but for his practical approach to moral education, which she often oversimplifies and misrepresents. She makes Kohlberg's technique of classroom discussions of hypothetical dilemmas the focus of her critique and ignores the work Kohlberg and his colleagues have done in the past decade on alternative (and preferable) models for moral education (see Power, this volume). Gow notes that while Kohlberg says he goes

beyond the relativism of Values Clarification, he, like VC proponents, is preoccupied with respecting the child's autonomy. This translates into a discussion approach in which teachers are instructed not to inculcate Stage 6 universal ethical principles directly (not allowed to mention the "golden rule" is how Gow interprets this) but to try instead to promote the development to higher stages of moral reasoning with arguments one stage above the child's own. In Gow's estimation, this is a contrived, manipulatory technique which fails to offer the child a suitable moral vision and which places an unfair burden on the teacher who must "stage" the children's reasoning and construct responses at the next highest stage. Unfortunately Gow appears relatively unacquainted with the large body of research in moral stage development as well as the way an actual moral discussion is led. "Tailoring arguments" a stage above the child's own, in theory, represents an effort to carry on a discussion with the child using concepts that the child can comprehend but that will provide some challenge to the child's less adequate way of reasoning. Both common sense and empirical research make it clear that a productive discussion requires that both parties to some extent understand and critically examine what each other is saying. Attempts by a teacher to be better understood by the child do not rule out "challenging" the child to think in a more moral way — that is indeed the whole point of Kohlberg's Socratic approach to moral discussion. Furthermore, there is a sound empirical basis as well as a theoretical rationale for the hesitancy to present Stage 6 principles, that is, that they fall on deaf ears. The child typically distorts them and understands them at a much lower stage. In addition, the need for the teacher to "stage" students and respond one stage above them is anything but an accepted premise of this approach (see Berkowitz, this volume).

Of course the moral discussion approach does entail a certain kind of moral relativism in so far as teachers focus on the adequacy of children's moral justifications for their choices in moral situations, not on the choices themselves. Having the teachers refrain from giving "the right answer" makes sense as a way of avoiding teacher indoctrination and facilitating children to develop by thinking through issues on their own. Nevertheless this approach does not directly address the need to communicate basic moral norms and values, such as honesty and respect for the rights of others, which are important for the way children interact from day to day. In his recent writing, Kohlberg has begun to outline a far more comprehensive way of doing moral education, the Just Community approach, in which teachers have an active role in advocating norms and values supportive of a moral community (see Power, this volume). In addition, many recent writers have advocated the creation of a classroom atmosphere, conducive to moral discussion, that includes openness, honesty, and a concern for others (see Berkowitz, this volume). Unfortunately Gow largely neglects this more recent work.

Beck's Reflective approach to MVE, like Kohlberg's approach, goes beyond VC in helping students to develop a more "critical" perspective on their own values and those endorsed by social institutions. However, it too fails, in Gow's perspective, to offer clear moral guidance. Beck's approach does not focus strictly on moral issues as does Kohlberg's but subsumes moral issues in broader issues of "ultimate life goals". Thus his concern is not only "What is the right thing to do?" but "Why be moral?" as well. In moving to the domain of "Why be moral?" and "What is the good life?", Beck's approach recognizes that there are no universally accepted answers to these questions and that they must be resolved by each individual. Gow is uncomfortable with Beck's subordination of moral values to these "ultimate life goals". Moral values are by nature social and consensual and thus universalizable. In Gow's view, Beck's approach leads to an unacceptable relativizing of morality.

This issue is a controversial philosophical one which requires treatment well beyond the scope of Gow's book. Nevertheless, it has some important practical ramifications, as she points out. By treating moral values as "means" to more "ultimate ends", there is the danger that practices which violate the rights of others may be adopted in the name of expediency or some other "greater good". Furthermore, Beck's debunking of "moral idealism and sentimentality" may lead students to cynicism and alienation from social institutions.

While Gow's critique of the three MVE approaches makes several valid points it unfortunately also presents a distorted view of how they actually work. A glaring deficiency in her treatment is that she does not give the reader sufficient material on the way MVE is really conducted in the classroom, nor does she give attention to the research which has been done to evaluate the effectiveness of these programs. Thus the reader has no basis for appraising how students and teachers experience these approaches and their outcomes.

On a broader scale, Gow has raised the critical issue of the relationship of moral philosophy to educational practice. She has isolated perhaps the core consideration in this issue — relativism vs. universalism. However, Gow's way of resolving this dilemma which has plagued moral philosophy since the time of Socrates is overly simplistic and presents three problems. First, Gow attributes to the field at large a belief that "the fact that there are extenuating circumstances" implies "that there are, therefore, no basic moral precepts", a belief which she herself rejects. Her solution to this weighty meta-ethical problem is to suggest that there are core moral precepts, such as beneficence, justice and mercy, which the anthropological studies she cites have found to be present cross-culturally. She feels that these core precepts represent a natural law of what is objectively right and good and should be presented to students as such. While cross-cultural agreement about such broadly defined core moral precepts may in fact exist, Gow does not present evidence that there is agreement over the meaning and application of such precepts in specific situations. Furthermore, these precepts alone do not provide procedures for determining which values should take precedence when there are conflicts of generally accepted values and precepts.

Second, Gow does not recognize that these core moral precepts cannot be simply transmitted by the teacher if one wishes, as Gow seems to, to produce rational, responsible children with internalized values. Gow seems to be walking a tightrope concerning the issue of how to "teach" such issues. While she endorses teacher advocacy (indeed at times she demands it), she also warns against it and suggests open discussions in the context of the universal values. How are teachers to meet both conflicting ends simultaneously? Gow does not seriously consider the principles of child development. She never acknowledges that children do not immediately understand what adults may advocate and certainly do not internalize such values merely because they are asked to. Furthermore, Gow does not recognize developmental differences between children of different ages. The child's possible lack of comprehension of an adult's value position is more likely a problem at earlier ages of childhood and the lack of spontaneous internalization is more likely a problem at later ages.

A third and final problem with Gow's analysis is the very concept of MVE. It certainly is true that moral/values education is a phenomenon that must be reckoned with. It is also certainly true that the three approaches she has highlighted are the predominant forms it currently takes. And finally it is true that they do share some common features. However, they do not all agree on the issue of relativism. Gow presents two models for "moral education in a pluralistic society": "Type A", which she feels represents all three forms of MVE and which she rejects; and "Type B", which she proposes and feels resolves the problems of MVE. Unfortunately Type A is most descriptive of VC and Type B is a close approximation of current Kohlberg and Beck forms of MVE.

What Gow does provide is a strong argument for developing safeguards in MVE which will protect the rights of children from invasions of their privacy. She succeeds in making the reader take seriously the "morality" of moral education. Furthermore she challenges MVE to move beyond the preoccupation with the issue of indoctrination to consider the problems of privatism and alienation which so threaten our society. She makes clear that MVE must improve its communications with the community outside the school, and make its goals and methods more accessible to public scrutiny and debate. There are many indications that MVE is developing along lines which Gow would approve and those wishing to have a more current assessment of the "state of the art" in MVE would be well advised to consult other recent publications in the field.

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Reason to Believe

Abstract

Two recent books by Richard Pratte use the methodology of philosophical analysis in the development of a framework for the critical analysis of the belief systems of educational practitioners. *Pluralism in education* (1979) is addressed to practitioners themselves. It identifies the criteria for a rational understanding of cultural diversity and identifies past and present ideologies of cultural pluralism. Pratte argues that past ideologies of pluralism tended to emphasize common interests among minorities while present ideologies tend to emphasize divergencies; both kinds of perspectives contain distortions. *Ideology and Education* (1977) is addressed more to philosophers of education. It attempts to develop a general theory of the relationship of belief to action in education that accounts for the history, structure, and function of ideology in American education. Pratte is criticized for an overemphasis on the arguments for an ideology and a failure to attempt to account for sociological data on how the beliefs of educators are constitutive of their actions.

Richard Pratte, *Pluralism in Education: Conflict, Clarity, and Commitment*, Springfield Illinois: Charles C. Thomas, 1979, pp. 201, \$15.75 cloth, \$9.75 paper.

Richard Patte, *Ideology and Education*, New York: David McKay, 1977, pp. 305, \$7.95 paper only.

A recent book in the sociology of education includes detailed transcripts of interviews for the job of school superintendent in a small town in Midwest America. One interview includes the following exchange: