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Paideia: the learning of values and the teaching of virtue in public education

--Jessica Kimmel, University of the Incarnate Word

--Lawrence Kimmel, Trinity University

“The only thing more dangerous than ignorance is arrogance.”

-- Albert Einstein

I

In public discourse about education there has always been conflict over the question of teaching values in school, and not without reason. But the civility of that discourse has now been stretched to its breaking point. The nation has become more and more deeply divided about questions of moral values and self proclamations of exclusive morality have become the standard fare of political warfare. While perhaps most ardently pressed by the “fundamentalist Right” in politics, polarization of positions is manifest on all sides. In light of the past four years of a presidency committed to a constituency that relentlessly presses its agenda of fundamentalist religious values, and in the mandate of 59 million people that has endorsed a continuation of that policy, the values of liberal education and universal reason so hard won in the Enlightenment two hundred years ago have seemingly been left behind along with the constitutional imperative of the separation of church and state. The idea that there is a liberal—that is open, rational, and responsive—approach to questions of virtue, and a public morality apart from the privileged and dogmatic bias of a self-selected and self-righteous group of citizens who would dictate values, is one that needs re-consideration and re-direction in the context of public discussions of education.

Apart from the alarm one might feel about the co-opting of values by a fundamentalist and politically motivated group, Public Education is faced with a dilemma that is not new. It is best, then, to leave aside the sound and fury of the recent election, and step over the heated

questions that provoke partisan hysteria. There are compelling reasons for educators to remain neutral, or simply outside, political agendas. On the other hand the question of values generally, and of the constituting integrity of individual and nation are not incidental to the task of educating a nation in the responsibilities of citizenship, or for that matter, of the responsibilities of individual life in community. So how should we as educators, think about this issue? Can we bring some common and informed wisdom to the problem of moral education?

Traditional proposals about “teaching values” invariably provoked substantive questions concerning *which* or *who’s* values, and the question of the *objectivity* of any *authority* to decide such things (the presumption of a scientifically oriented society being that values are “subjective”.) Traditional political rhetoric and bickering among and between liberals and conservatives about “family values”, “sexual preferences”, “the right to life”, “capital punishment”, etc. have now been intensified to the point that educational leaders understandably balk at stepping into the fray with rational counsel much less curricular innovation. An additional and legitimate worry is that introducing discussion of values into the classroom, given the tenor of the times, would simply provide a platform for one or another divisive group to indoctrinate young students to their own biases on these and other such matters.

The breach of public sensibility is broadly motivated, but a typical example difficult to understand is the relentless attempt among religious partisans to introduce “Creationism” into the public curriculum. How is such an abridged view of modern science and education to be addressed? In the context of law, perhaps at no time in recent history—since the religious gambit into education of William Jennings Bryan and the Scopes’ trial—has there been a greater threat to the constitutional division of church and state. A measured educational response to this apparent regression—intellectually, morally, and politically—is to concede that at least part of a

concern by some of who advocate Creationism may be that public education has lost its sense of responsibility to questions of spiritual values generally. As a theoretical framework, “Creationism” presumably is intended to rival if not displace the past 200 years of progress in the sciences, never mind the past 2000 years of development of dialectical reason. If we are to take up this complaint seriously, however, it must be divested of the idea that any given group holds title to spiritual values, and also these concerns must somehow be articulated in a form accessible to the public discourse of universal education. Spiritual in this case does not mean religious dogma; much less does it refer to a particular religion or a particular sect within a religion, and most certainly not a politically aggressive wing of any such group. Such values may be acknowledged in the absence of any ritual or practice. Spiritual values, no more entail devotional practice than do social, political, legal, or moral values. The bumper sticker that proclaims “My child prays in school!” is a political advertisement, not a spiritual insight.

As a positive frame of reference for such “spiritual” values, it is useful to consider a series of interviews with a broad spectrum of American citizens a few years ago by a group of social anthropologists that resulted in the book *Habitations of the Heart*. That text address issues at the core of human and communal life in America as matters “of the heart” in the sense of fundamental beliefs and habits that inform the spirit of individual and communal life. Better than risk misunderstandings and misappropriation of the concept of “*spiritual values*”, and “*spiritual life*”, however, it may be better to translate public access of such matters into the language of moral values, or simply of public virtue that acknowledges a genuine concern for the well-being of others and a commitment to the rational order of shared values in community.

The endorsement of 59 million people can hardly be ignored. It is neither feasible nor educationally productive to dismiss as fundamentalist cranks the public sector voicing such

concerns. On the other hand it may be crucial to take issue with what is divisive and particularized in the language of those many voices. One way to address the problem of a regressive religious conservatism is to regard it as an expression of a legitimate concern that public education better attend in some way to the question of spiritual character and moral life. Setting aside eristic particulars, the question of moral values and the teaching of virtue may be addressed as a legitimate project, so that the question can be addressed in a more positive and progressive manner within the domain of public education, rather than left to the default of regressive, and divisive rhetoric in partisan politics.

For better or worse, the political involvement of education cannot be dismissed and should not be ignored. Public education has its entitlement from and so a direct obligation to the informal polity of which it is an essential part. Politics derives from the Greek concept of the *Polis*—human community—the public space in which people come together to resolve conflicts and solve common problems. In this sense the classical polis is essentially an educational forum and so an excellent model for the conception of the informal polity of democracy. In the most elementary sense of educational training, people learn values as they learn to speak the language into which they are born, and which they share with others in their family, community, and nation. Formal education is primarily a normalization and refinement of this language. Students thus “learn values” as they learn much else in life, and a principal question of educational theory is one of facilitation—to what extent can the schools provide critical direction for this learning, create a discursive forum and formal training ground for the positive development of values that are not biased or preclusive of the genuine interests and needs of the whole community.

In the classical Greek concept of *paideia*, education, (it also means “culture”, which is a case in point), it is conceived as the essential framework that enables a community of free human

beings to discuss serious matters of common interest, so that citizens can come together to decide and enact policies for the public good. *Paideia*, in Aristotle's *Politics* functions to develop methods for deciding what is required by public interest as well as deciding what is just in the private dealings of men. Education, so conceived, is an enabling structure of public values necessary to the functioning of human community. Aristotle joins Socrates and Plato in stressing the essential role of education in promoting the *arête*—virtue, excellence—of the individual student, but understood always in the context of community.

This rehearsal of classical educational theory is to underscore the imperative of public conversation in democracy as the best model as well as best argument for the importance of values in public education. The problem of morals in education, like every other problem, is one of context. Education in America cannot be separated from the structure and tensions implicit in a democratic state and pluralistic society. In terms of public funding and commitment, schools have two primary functions: to educate, and to socialize. We often take the second task to be a matter of course, requiring no special planning other than a disciplined classroom. Socialization is a complex process that goes on in the total life of a student in the broader domain of her life; but within the schools, this process can also be given form and direction toward a better order of solidarity in common community. In this light, it will profit theories of education to attend to questions of fundamental virtues and operational values necessary to create a healthy and open society prepared to meet the challenges of the future.

In a society that is either confronted with, or that takes pride in promoting pluralistic values, conflict is to be expected if not encouraged. The very existence of pluralistic values requires acknowledging legitimate differences among people. This means, in turn, that procedures must be in place for understanding and sorting out such differences, and resolving disputes that arise when they conflict. Procedural remediation of conflict exists within courts of law through mandate and sanction, but the better and prior procedural wisdom is to introduce measures of consideration that temper resolution through the discourse of public education—which would include media and politics as well as the schools.

There are but two paradigms of resolving conflict: force and suasion—forced concession, or persuaded agreement. At its most heated point in a conflict, the choices are to continue

talking or begin fighting. Adlai Stevenson once defended the United Nations in its infancy against the complaint that all it ever accomplished was talk, by pointing out that the alternative, the violence of atomic war, is unthinkable, so we had better continue to put faith in the power of public conversation, dialogue, and persuasion.

A nation is civilized, Whitehead pointed out, to the degree it substitutes persuasion for force. The leverage of force, short of violence, is typically exercised within a nation through political legislation, but also through the strictures of social and economic order. Classical Greek philosophy classified the relative advantage of different forms of government depending on the needs of a people, but insisted that any form of government that has a concern for the whole of the polity and people is preferable to one that serves only the interests of a ruling class. Aristotle pointed out that a Monarchy in which one person rules in the interests of the whole community is better than a democracy in which the majority rules only in their own interests.

To educate and socialize a nation involves not only the common interests of each person, but an acknowledgment of the legitimacy of different interests, and a common allegiance to the well being of the whole community in terms of those differences. This is not an easy task, but it is essential to the idea of democracy, as a system of government designed to make freedom operational. The procedural rule for understanding and accommodating differences is that of critical and open communication, which requires the virtue of patience as well as the measure of time. Democracy ultimately is an exercise in the ordeal of civility: failing this lesson, no person is qualified for citizenship, no state deserving the name of human community.

There is nothing more devastating to moral life than a divided nation and divided people. Once again, classical Greek theorists were already clear that the greatest threat to any community is *stasis or* sedition—the danger from within—a betrayal of that trust required to hold a community together. Such a threat is not new in our history; the clearest expression of its danger and the most eloquent plea for reconciliation in the face of such elemental internecine conflict was given by President Lincoln in the context of his remarks that a nation divided against itself cannot long endure.

Whatever the understandable reservations concerning moral principles and ideals that tend to be exclusive, there are compelling reasons on every side against remaining neutral to the question of public virtue, and of not leaving values to the laissez-allez marketplace of competing interests—most particularly in a society that seems less and less principled or sustained by a sense of common community. Fortunately, the question of values in education has a long history of critical development from its originating source in classical culture that can serve as a resource in constructing a proposal for the learning and teaching of values in the public curriculum in our own time.

II

The much maligned Sophists first established the point of formal instruction with respect to public values in ancient Greece. As teachers of rhetoric and the art of persuasion, their emphasis on the promotion of self-interest in the public domain engaged the critical response of Socrates and Plato that generated the rational tradition of Western philosophy, and led to the first major institutions of formal instruction in Plato's *Academy* and Aristotle's *Lyceum*. The prosecution, public trial, and eventual execution of Socrates as a "corrupter of youth" in his public teaching, however, raises a critical educational question about the teaching of virtue. Socrates' instructional engagement was anything but neutral to the question of values, and his critical approach to questioning arbitrary authority, official or otherwise, was such to arouse the political animosities of an influential sector of a democratic state.

The joint indictments against Socrates—both of religious and educational heresy—were related to mentoring a model that encouraged challenging the uncritical acceptance orthodox opinion. In brief, Socrates was a teacher of values, and the values in question were alleged to be unorthodox—against the gods of the state, and the professed values of society. Clearly on

Plato's account the citizens, court, and judgment were mistaken in his portrayal of Socratic teaching as concerned not with accepting or rejecting particular values, only with the need to engage in a critical appraisal of all values. Hegel's historical reading is probably the correct one, that this was a tragic confrontation in which both sides, Socrates and State, were right for different reasons. Socrates was right that the worth of values depends on their critical review and reflection, and the State was right insisting on the final voice in their acceptance. Plato acknowledges as much in the discussion in the *Crito* of prior obligation to the principle of law and to the final authority of judgment.

It was left to Plato to formalize developmental instruction in both theory (*The Republic*), and in the institution of the *Academy*, and for his student Aristotle, at Plato's death, to formulate a curriculum in terms of systematic research in his own institution, the *Lyceum*. The fundamental values on which the whole of Greek classical education upon which all agree are summarized in the traditional virtues of Wisdom, Courage, Temperance, Justice, and Piety. While views differ with respect to interpretive emphasis, no Greek doubted the validity of such virtues. More generally with both the Greeks and in every ensuing culture, the fundamental values of the true, the good, the beautiful, and the sacred are universally acknowledged as essential to human community, again with variations on the detail and priority of their importance. It is with respect to these cultural invariances that we will proceed to address the educational question of the learning and teaching of values.

No one has ever doubted that values are learned; on the other hand, it is an ancient question whether they can be taught. Plato raises the questions importantly in the dialogue *Meno* and elsewhere about the nature of virtue, whether character can be taught, and what can be the deciding authority of the teacher. In the dialogue *Protagoras*, the old Protagoras, in response to

the questions of a young Socrates concerning who are the teachers of value, or virtue (*arete*, “excellence”, the means requisite to good judgment, of living well) answers that everyone who speaks the language is a teacher of values. Socrates takes issue with this, in the obvious sense that there are better and worse teachers, and better and worse values to be taught. Even so, Protagoras has a point. We learn and appropriate the values we learn in the learning of our common language. Values are encoded in that language, embedded in expressions used simply to describe some state of affairs or person, as virtuous or vicious, as democratic and progressive, etc. Even so, within the common language, there are variable and conflicting expressions of values, and while the shared public language is the foundation for the learning of values, it is important to critically refine the limits of the arbitrary use of these many informal teachers.

Classical Greek philosophy first set out the idea that Man is identified as a creature with *logos*—that is, a creature with speech. Aristotle’s definition of Man as a “rational animal”, is a the common translation of this idea of *Logos*; but his primary point is that the possession of speech allows the development of a common language, and common values that constitute human community, as well as the conception of the human being as a rule-governed and self-governing creature. In the subsequent analysis of the primary areas of human activity as concerned with questions of knowledge, conduct, and belief, of discerning what is true, good, beautiful, and sacred, the crucial importance became not in an exact designation of reference in each case, but of assuring a common commitment to the value of each, and to the range of interpretation that sense will allow. How important is it, even in the formal exercise of logic for example, that a given argument is compelling or binding, or that one side defeat the other in a point in dispute? Not as much as is commonly supposed. The difference between sophistic and logical reasoning remains today what it was for Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle: the public value of

the practical activity of logic is valuable as much to clarify differences toward a broader based resolution, than it is to force compliance of a particular point of view.

The point here is to realize that the problem facing formal education is less that of teaching values, than of teaching a concern for and commitment to values. In the process of moral instruction, there is, initially, simply the task and activity of training—the leaning of the language. Subsequent reflection on the complexities of the language that involve choice, sense of the other, duty to community, etc. is for the most part a matter of reminders and refinement in the practice and contextual analysis of principles and policy. The process from training, practice, reflection, eventually issues in the habits of mind, custom, and tradition that create the solidarity of a culturally diverse and pluralistic society.

A rational program of public education cannot endorse positions that divide individuals or communities. Its task is rather to construct a common framework within which values can be clarified, so those with differing judgments about things can begin to understand their differences. It was a Socratic conviction that persons of intelligence and good will who engage in dialogue will quickly discover the imperative to speak truthfully and consistently in order to reach a common goal, either of conclusion or resolution. Such informal association, the hit and miss of conversations among friends, proved unsatisfactory to Plato, and his development of a dialectical development of moral discourse into Idealist structure to attain a synoptic vision of the form of the Good, that is, the perspective from which all values can be determined, led to the idea of moral experts, and the conception of a total authoritarian state—albeit one whose legitimacy was contingent upon a rational principle of justice. Plato developed the crucial idea of a universal framework of an educated society in the *Republic*, but it remained for Aristotle to

restore practical reason to its function in the complex contexts of ordinary discourse of a democratic community, in his critique of Plato's utopian Idealism.

Addressing the problem of ethics, Aristotle cautioned about the degree of exactness to be expected in different areas of inquiry, and that some subjects, including ethics, can only be learned by being made part of the learner's very nature. The learning of values and the development of character, in short, requires appropriation; this takes time, and can only be measured in the life and worth of the learner. Our interest in the accountability of learning in the classroom must be expanded to include a larger domain of the student's life. This is no easy matter, but it should not for that reason discount the critical issue of this element of learning in the life of the child and community.

III

So, in a universally educated advanced industrial state, where does the common enterprise of a common language, common community, and common values, go wrong? Individuals invariably have their own interests as do nations, which predictably result in conflict. The common language of moral life allows for the expression of those differences, however, and the common possession of reason at least provides a civil framework of resolution. The classical triumvirate we are drawing on—Socrates, Plato, Aristotle—in addition to agreement about the foundational values of traditional culture, all addressed the basic issue of motives in terms of egoism. That is, people and governments *of course* operate on the principle of self-interest. The educational task is to extend as well as limit the boundaries of self-interest—to show how the interests of individuals extend to others for their satisfaction so that individual interests are fundamentally tied to the solidarity and well being of community. Ethics, as a particular inquiry into the character that defines a person, a people or more broadly, human-kind, is a general

attempt to discover and make operational a method, means, sphere, domain, way and ground, for understanding and resolving real differences and disagreements that arise in the context of a common community. But a sense of common community and foundational values must develop apace.

The modern framework of moral discourse derives from theorists of the Enlightenment, through which the argued capacity of ordinary human beings to both formulate and follow rules of self-governance becomes the basis for establishing universal reason as a source of values common to all, and an entitlement of access to a life framed in those principles and values.

This concept, indeed postulate of universal reason as a foundation of universal values has come into question in contemporary times in “postmodernist” critiques of the Enlightenment. This discussion alleges that the idea of “universal reason” is presumptive, and that the Enlightenment project is in effect an ideology that rationalizes a Europeanization of world culture. Although there are legitimate moral and political concerns about the historical process of European colonialism in which the language and values of oppressed peoples have been destroyed. There are also reasons to think that these are separate questions—that there is no reason in principle that “universal reason” cannot remain an open frame of discussion, no reason to think that the demand of rational discourse precludes differences in cultural considerations of what should be counted as true, good, beautiful, or sacred. The concept of enlightenment, if we extend it back to the classical Greek explication of *logos* as a basis for the development of a common language and discourse for articulating and discussing differences has been historically insistent on the liberal idea of an open society. There are cultural differences among the many peoples in a changing world, and where conflicts arise, we are confronted again with the definitive choices mentioned about—force or persuasion, talking of righting, a commitment to

civility or the resort to violence. Those who argue to undermine enlightenment values hopefully do not wish to leave the world without rational recourse to a common language. It may be that the point of such critiques are intended primarily to counteract the tendency to use reason as an instrument of closure, rather than a format for open consideration of alternatives. But that returns us once again, not to an intellectual issue of epistemic knowledge, but to a moral issue of character, and consequently to the educational importance of teaching virtue. Part of a conception of moral education clearly must address the difficulty of common values determined by universal reason in the diverse cultures of the world. The fact remains, however, that a clear conception of the interdependencies of different peoples within a shrinking world should become part of the curriculum. A globalized economy is only the most apparent context in which this appears as a problem. While we do not yet live in a global village in moral or emotional terms, the escalating empowerment of technology, as witnessed in the phenomenon of the internet, is sufficient reason to address these issues in the contexts of the schools. The internet is not merely an instrument of international literacy and ubiquitous employment opportunities; it is fast becoming a universal mode of existence as well

IV

Let's review the logic of the case:

1) The classical Greek concept of *logos* provides a beginning point for a consideration of *paideia*, of an educational program that includes the teaching of values. The point of this education is practical—to learn how to live well, not simply master information, knowledge and methods of inquiry. The teaching of virtue addresses the means and ends of moral life (“moral” here meaning that which has to do with the whole of human interests, covering the

scope of human life, the fulfillment of human-being, of the individual defined only within human community.

- 2) The moral concept of the individual entails a relation with others in community.

Another way of expressing this, from Aristotle to Heidegger, is that human existence is fully comprehended and realized only in relation of the individual in the world with others. Values come about through the public activity of valuing and enculturating rules of valuation, so that common ‘mores’ or customs develop in terms of a shared language. Moral life and language is neither specialized nor technical, so the issue of teaching is not limited to *techne* or technique, but rather pursues a common goal of *sophia*, or wisdom. The moral model for Aristotle provided a mentoring model of moral education in the idea of *phronesis*—practical wisdom—toward the development of a *phronimos*, a person of good judgment. The ideal of moral instruction then is that of *sophrosyne*—the wisdom of practical judgment that depends on training, rational reflection, habit, and the assimilation of values into character.

- 3) As this learning takes time, both teacher and learner must be trained in the common language and practice of making distinctions, must learn to reflect on differences and develop habits of character through assimilation of moral experience. What is crucial finally is *not* to find a *final solution* for problems—problems will forever vary and change in time—but to develop a *common ground* for understanding and resolution. Such common ground will be found in a *common appeal* to moral *sense and sensibility*, *not to moral truth* (whatever that might be.) Since there are no final moral authorities any more than final ends or final truths, moral sensibility must seek out and be satisfied with common grounds of engagement and means of resolution.

It therefore is not imperative that the teacher know all the answers to the questions of moral life, whether she is teaching 1st grade or 12th grade. This is not a technical but a human subject; it is aimed not at knowledge of facts (only) but understanding of the relation of self and others in and to a continuously changing world. If there are no experts who can speak with ultimate authority, where does the teacher derive her confidence in the subject?

There is not space here to even outline the various disciplines that converge to inform moral sensibility and insight. Clearly knowledge of psychological, social, and cultural life is as important as skills in logical discourse, of critical questions and developed response. At the very least a college curriculum should be developed to the end of both knowledge and informed judgment for prospective teachers, and a final year of practicum with a master teacher in which that knowledge can be transformed into understanding and developed into a teaching method.

Max Ascoli once defined democracy as the attempt to make freedom operational. Moral life requires the development of the free activity of judgment on the part of the individual in community. To make the teaching of virtue work, the teaching and training of teachers must seek to develop the whole person and the capacity and determination to assist students at every level toward becoming autonomous and whole human beings. This is obviously asking a lot of the institution of education, and of the teacher. But unless this is accomplished, no amount of knowledge, skill, intelligence, wit or any other endowment will accomplish the end of moral life and community.

There is a sense no beginning or end to the development of a human being. Moral life begins in the infant's relation to the mother, if not already in the nourishing environment of the womb. It clearly does not end with the termination of formal schooling. The conception of moral life and education that is envisioned, must involve some aspect of continuing and adult

education: The moral principles which constitute and sustain moral life are reinforced through individual actions and relationships in shared community, and so moral education must stay open, not locked into a check list that betrays arrested development of a particular job, or class, or calling, in which moral sense hardens into specialized and exclusive bias, doctrine, or dogma. The classical Greek conception of this task provides a *telos*: the end of moral action is happiness—not as a state, but as an activity, a mode of existence. The point of moral engagement in the whole of life is to the end of *eudaimonia* “good spiritedness”—to keep the human spirit alive in oneself in community with others

Final Note:

A good deal of work obviously needs to be invested in developing a program of teacher education and training, and attention to particular courses both in the university curriculum, and in the scheduling of courses or areas of education in the curriculum of the public schools.

There are social science theories which inform the planning of educational programming at various levels of psycho-social and socio-cultural development. There are philosophical clarifications of the relatedness of cultural and moral development. The following is a bare suggestion of the sort of organization that might guide development:

Elementary School: foundational training, socialization in community, practice in use.

Middle School: developmental and interpersonal relationships, mentoring.

High School: multicultural extensions, critical argumentation, practice in complex applications

Higher Education: Humanistic integration of values, Integration of values within professional disciplines.

Continuing Education: public information and support for family and community discussion.