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'Moral Education' or 'Education of Character'?

In this paper, given at the 1971 (6 February) Symposium on Education convened by the Victoria Institute, Professor Hilliard of the School of Education, Birmingham University, traces the modern history of the terms used in the title. He concludes that the now popular term 'Moral Education', though it might appear innocuous and adequately descriptive of one aspect of the teacher's task, has connotations which are in fact secular, even atheistic, while its descriptive value is diminutive. The older term 'Education of Character', as used and refined by Martin Buber, is to be preferred as a description of the moral aspect of the educative process.

Among the several interesting changes which have come over British education in the last 30 or 40 years has been the increasing tendency to speak of moral education where previously – and certainly in the 19th century, – it was customary to talk rather of character-training. I suppose the earlier tendency is best illustrated in the more popular form given to it by Charles Kingsley's 'Be good, sweet maid and let who can be clever', and in more philosophical terms by Herbert Spencer who declared, 'Education has for its object the formation of character'. Certainly it is the case that Victorian Britain – and to a lesser degree perhaps Edwardian Britain as well – generally subscribed to the notion that formal education was above all concerned to form the characters of the young. So far as elementary schools, and after 1902 the new secondary schools also, were concerned this was due to a considerable extent to

the fact that they were strongly influenced by the attitude of the denominational schools which had preceded them in the field. On the other side of the educational fence the public schools had inherited a similar conviction as a result of the reforming work of Arnold, Thring and others in the 19th century. Had not Thomas Arnold declared: 'What we must look for here is, first, religious and moral principles; secondly, gentlemanly conduct; thirdly, intellectual ability'?

Today, however, we would hesitate to speak in these terms. Character training, and even (since 'training' would be anathema anyway) the 'Education of Character' do not appear to be any longer part of our language of education. On the other hand 'Moral Education' is, and seems to be an increasingly important part of it. Indeed it has in recent years begun to attract to itself a gradually increasing amount of the literature of education.¹⁻⁵

I suggested a moment ago that Victorian Britain generally thought and spoke in terms of character training. There was one most interesting exception and I want, if I may, to allude to it in a little detail because at a later stage in this paper it will be necessary to refer to it again for the light that it sheds on certain characteristics inherent in current usage of the term *moral education*. The exception was that the 1890s saw the foundation of a body called the *Moral Instruction League*.⁶ Briefly, the League was formed by a number of humanistically-minded men and women (as we would now call them: at the time they would have been described as agnostics or atheists!), philosophers, scientists, educationists with 'advanced' views and philanthropists who believed that the moral instruction of the young ought to be substituted for, or at any rate clearly distinguished from, religious instruction. The League had considerable success in influencing government educational policy, as can be seen by the fact that in the Education Codes issued by the Board of Education in 1904 and 1906 and in certain publications of the Board, stress was laid upon the importance of 'moral training' and 'moral instruction' of the a-religious kind for which the League had campaigned. In 1909 the league changed its name to the *Moral Education*

League and at the same time it altered the general direction of its activities. It had realised that it could not persuade the central government to put pressure on local authorities to introduce secular moral instruction in their schools. It therefore directed its efforts towards the local authorities and the teachers in an effort to persuade them to further this kind of moral instruction. In this matter it achieved some, though not very great success but for various reasons its support and efforts began to peter out from 1914 onwards. After 1919 it appears to have died altogether. Its origins, aims and achievements are of interest to the educationist today because, as I want to argue later, they represent the real roots of the current attitudes to 'moral education'.

However, this is to jump the gun a little. What I mainly want to do in this paper is to examine the questions, What more precisely is involved in the concept of 'moral education' as we now use the term, and, In what respects is it different – if it is so – from what appears to be the more positive and perhaps slightly suspect (from the standpoint of current thinking about education) term 'Education of Character'?

In juxtaposing these two terms I am not in fact intending simply to compare past with present attitudes in British education, but rather to compare two recent attitudes and concepts. For the fact is that the phrase 'Education of Character' is a key phrase and expresses a fundamental concept in the educational writings of Martin Buber, whose thought and writings exercised such a profound influence upon the development of the modern state of Israel. Buber's intellectual activity continued unabated almost up to the time of his death in 1965 and his views remained remarkably consistent throughout his long life. What he has to say about the education of character is contemporary, or almost so, and can be taken as an interesting point of comparison with current thinking here about moral education.

Martin Buber was not in any sense a professional educationalist, though he was intensely interested in education, and indeed was actively involved for a time in the adult education programme in Israel. He was for most of his life in Israel (to

which he came as a refugee from Hitler's Germany in 1938) Professor of Social Philosophy at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He is, of course, best known for the slender but impressive monograph which he published in 1923 – at the age of 45 – and which he called *I and Thou*. In it he set forth, in a highly individualistic blend of metaphysical, poetical and traditional Jewish prophetic styles, his conviction that the essence of existence is to be discerned in the full encounter of person with person and person with thing, the 'I' accepting other persons and all things as they are in themselves. This briefly, is what the phrase 'I and Thou' involves in contrast to an 'I–It' type of encounter or relationship in which the 'I' categorises and perhaps makes use for his own ends of another person or a thing.

I do not however propose to concentrate in this paper upon this most seminal of all Buber's writings, because it is with the application of the I–Thou principle to formal education, and particularly to the education of character, that I am concerned, and this is mainly developed for us in a lecture on the subject which Buber gave in 1939.⁷

Yet one must recognise at the outset that in a most remarkable way, Buber's fundamental convictions about the 'I–Thou' relationship, formed while he was still in Europe, were to find one of their most direct and powerful forms of practical application in relation to the aims and methods of adult education in Palestine. Two factors combined to make the whole task of adult education of immense importance in Palestine in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The first was the considerable increase in the number of Jewish immigrants into Palestine between 1935 and 1947. The second was the foundation of the independent state of Israel in 1947. It was immediately clear to leaders of the political and cultural life of the new State that there was an urgent need to educate the adult immigrant population, made up of people with diverse cultural and political traditions who had come from various countries in Europe, Russia and North Africa, in a manner which would give cohesion and a sense of national purpose to their life as members of the new State of Israel.

In 1949 therefore a Centre for Adult Education was formed, closely associated with the Department of Education of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. One of its first acts was to establish a Seminary for Adult Education Teachers. The immediate purpose of the Seminary was to train instructors in a ten month course to teach adults in towns, villages, in kibbitzim and immigration camps. Buber was the initiator of the idea and he became the first Principal of the Seminary. He found in this venture an ideal means of applying to education the basic principles which he had enunciated twenty years previously in his 'I-Thou'. In 1950 he contributed an essay on *A New Venture in Adult Education* to the Semi-Jubilee Volume of the Hebrew University. In it he said of the kind of adult education which under his direction the Seminary had striven to promote:

Contact is the root and basis of education. It means that the connection between teacher and student is not merely on an intellectual plane – the influence of a developed mind upon one that has not yet fully matured – but a connection between personalities, so that one human entity confronts another . . . what is sought is a truly reciprocal conversation in which both sides are full partners. The teacher leads and directs it, and he enters it without any restraint. I call this the 'dialogue principle' in education.

There has, I think been a tendency to try to interpret Buber's attitudes to and conclusions about education from an abstract standpoint, as though his application of the I-THOU principle to education was a philosophical principle, capable of being understood without reference to the particular situation in which Buber himself lived and worked. This seems to me true only to a limited extent, as the essay from which I have quoted shows. In all that he wrote from 1938 onwards about education Buber was primarily interested in the problems and purposes of education in the new State of Israel – certainly not unmindful of education elsewhere or indeed of education in general terms – but above all, influenced by the educational needs of Israel. This has to be appreciated particularly when one comes to consider his convictions about education as education of character.

As I remarked earlier, one of Buber's well-known essays deals with the education of character and was first delivered as a paper to a national conference of Jewish Teachers of Palestine in 1939 – one year after Buber himself had settled in Palestine. In it he deals with what he considers to be the most important application to education of the 'I–Thou' principle. If a genuine encounter of the developed personality of a teacher with the developing personality of his pupil is what is essentially involved in the educational process, then the principal outcome could hardly be seen in other terms than what is commonly called an education of the 'character'.

Education worthy of the name is essentially education of the character. For the genuine educator does not merely consider individual functions of his pupils, as one intending to teach him only to know or be capable of certain definite things; but his concern is always the person as a whole, both in the actuality in which he lives before you now and in his possibilities, what he can become.

By 'character' Buber says he does not mean 'personality'. 'Personality' is a given, the 'ego' as Freud described it, or as Buber puts it in more Hebraic form, 'the unique spiritual-physical form with all the forces dormant in it' 'Character' is what a man may become as a result of the interaction between this 'personality' and his whole environment. It is 'the link between what this individual is and the sequence of his actions and attitudes'.⁹ The distinction is important in any case, of course, but especially important to Buber's argument because he believes that though a teacher can do little to influence his pupil's personality he may hope to assist in the development of his character. 'Personality is a completion, only character is a task'.⁹

Having encountered this bold assertion by Buber the modern reader is bound to wonder whether as it is worked out Buber's conception of this over-riding task of education amounts to the blunt form of 'indoctrination' which it begins to sound like. The answer is that it is not. Buber was too much of a 'modern' and more an existentialist than a traditionalist, to allow him to believe that the task could be properly conceived in such simple terms. He was opposed to formalised and systemised attempts by the teacher to discuss

moral issues but believed that this did not mean that the teacher ought to tackle the job by stealth. He must not disguise the fact that education of character is his intention but he must wait for the moment when, his relationship with his pupils having produced trust, his advice is sought about a specific moral problem. Given this right relationship, Buber believed that the whole of the educational process, 'lessons and games, a conversation about quarrels in the class or about the problems of a world war' can, quite naturally and spontaneously, open a way towards the education of character.

It all begins at this point to sound to the modern ear both a little idealistic and perhaps even just a shade unhealthy — a suggestion of Thomas Arnold, or of the atmosphere of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie!* But the suspicion is quickly dispelled as one pushes on with the essay. Buber is clear that it is neither the 'values' of the teacher, nor indeed any traditional set of values, which the teacher may hope to encourage his pupils to accept as a result of their facing up to moral dilemmas: what can be expected is that each individual adopts an attitude which is 'real' for him. The kind of advice which a teacher gives to a pupil who seeks advice about a specific moral problem will, Buber says, 'probably lead beyond the alternatives of the question by showing a third possibility which is the right one'.¹⁰

What Buber had in mind when he spoke of 'a third possibility' is, I think, a reflection of the very strong existentialist stratum which is to be discerned in the structure of his thought. He was acutely aware of the 'pluralistic' nature of modern societies. In an earlier lecture given in 1935 in Hamburg which he called *Education and a World-View*, he declared:

We live — one must say it ever again — in a time in which the great dreams, the great hopes of mankind, have one after another been fulfilled as the caricature of themselves. What is the cause of this massive experience? I know of none save the power of fictitious conviction. This power I call the uneducated quality of the man of this age. Opposed to it is the education that is true to its age and adjusts to it, the education that leads a man to a lived

connection with his world and enables him to ascend from there to faithfulness, to standing the test, to authenticating, to responsibility, to decision, to realisation.¹¹

In the later essay Buber's existentialist standpoint emerges even more plainly.

We cannot conceal from ourselves that we stand today on the ruins of the edifice whose towers were raised by Kant. It is not given to us living today to sketch the plan for a new building. But we can perhaps begin by laying the first foundations without a plan, with only a dawning image before our mind's eye.¹²

I have not, of course, done justice in these brief references to Buber's writings to the full range and depth of his treatment of what he sees as the fundamental task of education. Nevertheless, I want to argue, first that what he calls the education of character is very different from 'moral education' as it tends to be conceived today, and secondly, that his view of what is involved in the education of character is by no means incompatible with the educational situation that confronts the modern teacher faced with the restraints and obligations imposed upon him by educational principles which are inevitably conditioned by the pluralistic nature of most modern societies.

In allowing references to the education of character to disappear from the current language of education, and substituting the more colourless term 'moral education', have we been altogether wise and realistic? I ought perhaps first to defend my description of 'moral education' as a more colourless term and propose to do so by referring all too briefly perhaps to the book which emanated from the Farmington Trust Research Unit at Oxford in 1967 called *Introduction to Moral Education*.³ It is probably the most substantial of all the recent publications which have attempted to examine the meaning of the term. For my present purpose I propose to ignore the sections dealing with the psychological and sociological aspects of the process of moral education because in the nature of the case they deal with the conditions in which this aspect of education may proceed rather than with what it actually stands for.

John Wilson strikes the keynote of his discussion of the nature of 'moral education' in his first sentence. 'Moral Education is a name for nothing clear'. It would be fair, I think, to regard this as the main burden of his essay — that we do not yet know what moral education is, that it can refer to a number of different things, and that we shall not be clearer about what it ought to mean until a great deal more analysis of the concept has been done.

He argues that in common usage it is an umbrella term under which have sheltered a variety of different beliefs about the nature of the educational process and of practices associated with them. 'Moral Education, in various forms and under various titles, has been a matter of perennial concern . . . under such headings as 'bringing up children in the fear of the Lord', 'the education of a gentleman', 'educating the whole man', 'Character-training' and many others, various ideals and values have been held up by churches, states, political parties or social classes as the proper content of moral education'.¹³ He then asserts that a great deal of what is said and written today about moral education consists of a more or less incoherent acceptance of, or reaction against, one or more of these traditional notions, and that what is now demanded is 'the public acceptance of more rationally-defensible expertises which must stand on firm philosophical foundations'.

At first blush there may not seem in Wilson's argument so far any great disagreement with what Buber had in mind, apart that is, from terminology. It is agreed that traditional values, or as Buber prefers to call it, the conception of character, have lost their currency for many young people. But look more clearly at the remedies that are suggested for this problem. Buber takes it for granted that what he calls 'a new building (to replace the ruined Kantian structure) will have to go up: we are not in a position to sketch the plan for it. This being so we have to try to lay the foundations without a plan, with only a dawning image before our mind's eye.

Contrast this with Wilson's view that the main task is philosophical rather than intuitive and practical — to strive for the public acceptance of more rationally defensible expertises which must stand on firm philosophical foundations.

To be fair, Wilson is by no means indifferent to the need for action; parents and teachers have their own value-systems which they seek to transmit to the young: schools and society generally will make certain rules which the young will be required to observe. But all this, Wilson maintains, represents the pre-conditions of moral education.¹⁴ Moral Education itself is a mainly intellectual process, the purpose of which is to impart those skills which are necessary to make good or reasonable (notice the equation here) moral decisions *and to act on them*.¹⁵

I do not want to labour the point that it is odd indeed to talk of moral activity as a 'skill'. If it were so, then some normal people would be better at 'doing morality' than other normal people because they possessed or were capable of learning certain skills rather than because, as is widely assumed, they had the will. But this is less important (because it is not a point which is laboured in the essay) than the tendency which runs right through Wilson's contribution to reduce moral education mainly to ethics, by which he would understand mainly the study of the language of morals.¹⁶ Thus, in his view moral education is inevitably mainly a form of intellectual activity. The teacher must arrive at a liberal and neutral intellectual position by a careful examination of the nature of moral activity and moral principles. He in turn must aim principally at assisting his pupils to examine and choose, consciously and rationally, principles which should influence their moral behaviour. That this is not an unfair description of his point of view is indicated by Wilson's own rather defensive remark. 'The reader may feel that we have pitched our interpretation of moral education too high: in particular perhaps that in stressing the notion of rationality we have failed to do justice to the essential groundwork of moral education'. . . (p. 126).

I think it is worth remarking that in identifying moral education so closely with ethics, Wilson is accepting, apparently without serious question, the kind of interpretation which was given to the term when it first appeared as part of the language of education in the late Victorian period. Then it was secular, in the anti-religious sense, it was rationally-as

opposed to theologically-based, and it was geared almost entirely to 'instruction': the League which promoted it was called, as we have noted, *The Moral Instruction League* for the greater part of its existence.

It is not without significance that the renewed attention which the term 'moral education' has recently been given by educationists has been stimulated by the successors of the Victorian secularists, the members of the British Humanist Association and to a lesser degree, the National Secular Society. Their aims, broadly speaking, are closely parallel to those of the Moral Education League (as the Moral Instruction League called itself from 1909 until its demise about 10 years later).

Now it is not my intention in drawing attention to these facts to engage in polemics against Humanists or against their efforts to secure a place for their form of moral education in place of religious education in the curricula of state schools. I am concerned rather to suggest that before the term 'moral education' becomes an established part of our current educational vocabulary we should recognise the severe limitations which it brings with it as a result of its origins and more recent associations. My contention is that bearing in mind these limitations it is inadequate as a description of the task which in fact the schools and teachers are expected to undertake in relation to education in its moral aspects.

The existence within a pluralistic society of a variety of value-systems (religious, in various forms, humanistic, materialistic) certainly makes the task of moral education more complex than it appeared 60 or 70 years ago. This fact does not, however, allow us to invert the priorities in moral education, making the second-order or ethical aspect of it its major concern and reducing its traditional first-order function, its role in encouraging pupils to accept and apply to conduct certain values for themselves, to a subordinate position. This is to put the cart before the horse with a vengeance. Nobody would wish to belittle the importance of ethics. The endeavour to understand moral experience is an important part of man's rational activity. But morality preceded and precedes ethics: it is the groundwork, a first-order activity,

and ethics is part of the structure built on it, a second-order activity. Art, in all its varied forms is similarly a first-order activity, and aesthetics a second-order activity. Ethics might even with advantage be an activity in which older pupils who are capable of engaging in it might usefully learn 'to do'. But this would still be 'to do' only a secondary and not the primary activity in which they must engage if their education in its moral aspects is to be properly conceived. The major concern here is to encourage the young to develop a moral sense, to respect moral principles, to acquire moral values and principles, of their own, and above all, to translate their moral values and principles into practice in the various situations in which they will find themselves. In the course of this development some degree of reflection upon morality in its various manifestations will be inevitable and to this extent it could be argued that ethics may contribute to the developmental process. But the extent to which this is possible will depend upon the capacities of each individual and is therefore a variable. The constant is not ethics: it is morality in its first-order sense.

So if at present I want to find a term which adequately describes the task of formal education in its moral aspects, I am disposed to prefer Buber's "The Education of Character" to the term 'moral education'. It goes to the heart of the matter in a way which is by no means apparent in current usage of the term 'moral education', and the existentialist approach which Buber adopts in facing the question of what is meant by 'character' frees the phrase from earlier socio-theological associations, and from associated suspicions of 'indoctrination' which might in consequence cling to it.

In the pluralistic society it is certainly true that education in its moral aspects must free itself from in any of the attitudes and methods which may still cling to it from what Sir Peter Venables calls the Age of Assent, and adopt those which are appropriate of the Age of Consent. The teacher has to be alive to the importance of morality but to more than one particular value-system. He has to work from a wider variety of moral principles, values and practices than did his Victorian or Edwardian predecessors. His point of entry may be one

or the other or a mixture of several but he will have to have a point of entry, if he is to contribute at all to the education of the character of his pupils.¹⁷ This is to say that he will need to be a person who himself consciously and deliberately engages in moral activity in the first-order sense. He may also engage in it in the second-order sense, be something of a student of ethics, but this is a secondary consideration. He will not necessarily be a teacher of R.E., (and certainly not, one hopes a teacher who is given the job of taking a 'subject' labelled on a time-table M.E.). He will be a teacher of any part of the curriculum. As Buber puts it:

For educating characters you do not need a moral genius, but you do need a man who is wholly alive and able to communicate himself directly to his fellow beings. His aliveness streams out to them and affects them most strongly and purely when he has no thought of affecting them.¹⁸

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- 8 Buber, M., in *The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1925-50; Semi-Jubilee Volume*, Jerusalem, 1950, p. 115.
9. Ref. 7 p 104
- 10 Ref. 7 p. 107
- 11 In *Pointing the Way, collected Essays of Martin Buber*, tr. and ed. M. Friedman, 1957, p. 105.
- 12 Ref. 7. p. 111.
- 13 Ref. 3. p. 12.

- 14 Ref. 3. p. 128–9.
- 15 Ref. 3. p. 27, 751.
- 16 This has, of course, been the view of the nature of ethics which has been favoured by most recent philosophers in Gt. Britain. R.M. Hare, for example, regards ethics simply as ‘the logical study of the language of morals’ (Preface to *The Study of Morals*, 1952, p. iii). Wilson on the whole appears to accept much the same point of view (see also his *Reason and Morals*, 1961, pp 2-3.). Mary Warnock however (*Ethics Since 1900*, 2nd Edition, 1966), believes that there are indications that ethics is emerging from an over-preoccupation with analysis of ethical language towards the study of moral behaviour.
- 17 Recent discussion of ‘indoctrination’ has not always sufficiently distinguished between the importance for effective teaching of the teacher having his own attitudes and convictions and the manner and extent to which he allows these to influence his teaching. For a recent attempt to balance these considerations, see B.G. Mitchell, *Indoctrination*, 1970. The Fourth R. Appendix B, pp. 353–8.
- 18 Ref. 7. p. 105.