Is Critical Assessment of Moral Education Possible? — A Response to Cochrane

A. Wesley Cragg
laurentian university

In a recent issue of this journal (Cragg, 1979) I undertook to set out some (not all) of the reasons which might lead one to question whether the current wave of support for formal moral education is justified. In Cochrane's comment on my article, the position I sketched is put to the test, and, in Cochrane's view, found wanting. The conclusions set out by Cochrane may well be true. But the support offered for those conclusions betrays a good deal of confusion, first on the position I advanced, and secondly, and more importantly, on the possibility and nature of critical assessment of moral education programs. The first type of confusion is a good deal less important than the second. And I leave it to the interested reader to decide whether the summary and interpretation of my position offered by Cochrane is accurate.[1] But perhaps more fundamental is an underriding disagreement about whether and how a critical assessment of moral education as a formal component of public school curricula can be successfully carried out. Although not explicitly addressed in either of the articles referred to above, the issue is nevertheless important to the debate, for two reasons, the first practical, the second theoretical or, if you like, philosophical.

First, to the interested parent, it is not at all clear what would be taught in a formal moral education program. To this must be added the fact that, while in fields like history or mathematics there is general acceptance that the school system does and should play the primary educational role with support where possible from the parent, in moral education the reverse is the case. To date educators and laymen alike have assumed that the primary responsibility for the moral education of children lies with the parents, with the school and other institutions playing a support role. That being the case, a decision that schools are to play an increasingly prominent role in moral education is bound to be of concern. What moral values are to be emphasized? Will the exposure to moral education undermine, conflict with, or depart from the values advanced in the home setting? We could go on. But the point is well recognized and set out elsewhere.

Second, the possibility and nature of moral education has been a topic of philosophical debate for over 2,000 years. And from the beginning of

that debate philosophers and others have developed profound disagreements on the topic. Thus Socrates commented that if moral values could be taught why did those of moral stature have such great difficulty conveying their values to their offspring? It would appear that Socrates concluded that moral values could not be taught in any conventional sense of the word. Aristotle disagreed. And so the debate has continued.

The conclusion to be drawn from these observations is surely that the merits of formal programs of moral education require careful appraisal. This conclusion can only be re-enforced by reflecting on the cultural diversity of contemporary Canadian society with its plethora of outlooks and approaches. Can one create a formal moral education curriculum which respects such diversity?[2]

How, then, is one to conduct the necessary critical appraisal? Surely one must address both the practical and the theoretical issues. Such an appraisal might turn up a variety of "facts." It might demonstrate the existence of actual meritorious programs backed up by theoretical analysis which at least on important points had garnered wide consensus. One would expect such results in the field of history, or mathematics, or physics, to use but a few examples. Or one might discover a program exhibiting real weakness at the practical level, but where the practical weakness was at least theoretically surmountable. Or one might find a program which exhibited weakness at the practical level, and where there was no general consensus at the theoretical level on methods of overcoming those weaknesses. There are, of course, many other possibilities. But these should serve as illustrations.

The position which I advanced in my original discussion is perhaps best described by the third of the possibilities sketched above. Basically my position is this:

1. There are serious weaknesses (inconsistencies) in the Ontario ministry-approved program of moral education. (Of course, it should be noted that the existence of problems in one jurisdiction implies nothing in itself about other jurisdictions. Nevertheless, for Canadians, Ontario is an interesting test case for a variety of reasons.)

2. Theoretical analyses do not provide unequivocal or uncontroversial ways of overcoming these practical problems.

3. There are reasons quite independent of those advanced under #1 and #2 above for thinking that there are fundamental and unavoidable objections to formal moral education in public school systems.

What does Cochrane have to say about these three conclusions? About #1 he says, "Theoretically — but only theoretically — Ontario's teachers would be put in a quandary were they to attempt to deduce clear uncontradictory directives for classroom practice from the guidelines." But why

are the incoherencies of ministry guidelines on moral education of only theoretical interest? Cochrane says, "Such general statements may serve simply to indicate that there is an official interest in the area though for the exact contours of that interest it is advisable to look elsewhere."

These are reassuring words. But should we be easily reassured? The guidelines, after all, come from the central and fundamental curricular statement of objectives to be achieved in primary and junior grades in Ontario's schools. To use an analogy, imagine that the same document contained an equally incoherent statement of learning objectives for mathematics or for reading. Would one dismiss the incoherencies as of only theoretical interest? And would one easily conclude that "Oh good, the ministry of education has 'an official interest' in mathematics and reading!" I think not. Why then the complacency with regard to moral education?

Let us concede, however, what is logically irrefutable, namely, that the existence of smoke does not entail the presence of fire. Smoke after all can be caused by a number of things. And so our investigation should carry us beyond simply noting the symptoms to ask, "Do the incoherencies of ministry of education official directives on moral education signal deeper problems? Or are these problems of passing interest only?"

It is this concern which carries us from Part A to Part B.

The purpose of the second part of my article was to determine whether there existed a coherent theoretical account of moral education which could be safely relied upon by those wishing to design and implement programs of formal moral education in Ontario schools. For if such a theoretical account does exist or can be seen to be possible, then one might have the beginnings of an argument that the inconsistencies of curricular policies were not indicative of inherent or inevitable inconsistencies in formal moral education programs themselves. What we discover on examining the Ontario scene is that serious attempts to provide a sound theoretical foundation for programs of formal moral education have been made. And simply put, what emerges from those studies is the view that a coherent and morally acceptable program of moral education is possible if one emphasizes not moral values or moral attitudes but rather moral reasoning.

As I suggested in my article, an approach to moral education which focuses on reasoning is bound to be regarded as very attractive, a speculation which is confirmed by a cursory inspection of the MacKay report. But here, too, on analysis the superficially attractive gives way to underlying difficulty. If one is to teach students to reason well in matters of morality, one must have a clear account of the nature of moral reasoning. And if one is to avoid begging some crucial questions, one is going to have to come up with a criterion of good moral reasons which is independent of a particular morality. It will not be enough to say either openly or

implicitly, "Good moral reasoning is that variety of reasoning which leads to conclusions I agree with."

Bearing all this in mind, what do we discover when we turn to the literature? We discover a number of competing and inconsistent accounts, both the scientific and philosophical, of the nature of moral reasoning. We find that the accounts offered, if put into practice, will lead to morally incompatible conclusions. (Contrast, for example, Skinner's view of freedom and dignity with that of Kohlberg.) And we find fundamental differences of opinion rooted in well-developed, long-standing philosophical traditions about the matters at issue.

What is Cochrane's response to this? He argues that one of the contestants (Kohlberg) can deal with *one* of the basic objections to his work, namely his alleged commission of the naturalistic fallacy. And indeed Kohlberg has written extensively, though not to all convincingly, on this point. But he then goes on to say:

> Should the work of science teachers necessarily be disrupted if Stephen Toulmin is not seeing eye to eye with Karl Popper, or the work of history teachers, if Patrick Gardiner and William Dray are still in dispute? Not all such disagreements require that practical pedagogy be brought to a standstill.

Once again we have words of reassurance. But it is a kind of reassurance which requires evaluation. First, there are no deep-seated disagreements about the content of the science curriculum though there may be disagreements about where the emphasis should lie and what methods are to be used in the teaching of science at various levels. The same is true of history. But this is emphatically not the case with moral education. Unlike science and history, the nature and content of moral education are very much in dispute. To put it another way, the guidelines which direct the activities of the history or science teacher in Ontario are not "vague" or "inconsistent." The history teacher does not need to turn to the philosophers to know what it is he is meant to do. This is emphatically not the case when we turn to moral education. The guidelines on moral education in Ontario at least are incoherent. The nature and content of the subject of moral education are not established and widely accepted. And those drawing up programs of moral education must of necessity turn to theorists of moral education for guidance of a fundamental sort, as a careful reading of Cochrane demonstrates.

"Well," it might be asked (especially by a philosopher), "what is wrong with turning to philosophy for guidance?" And so Cochrane urges the perplexed reader to consider "the seminal work of R. S. Peters." Now in fact for those of a particular moral persuasion the work of R. S. Peters is seminal and worth reading. I doubt that the quality of education in Ontario could but benefit were Ontario's teachers of moral education to spend several evenings of a cold winter reading *Reason and Compassion*, to give but one good reference.

To put Cochrane's point briefly, surely the teacher can be trusted to evaluate for himself the merit of the theories being advanced.

There are two initial comments to be made. First, only in moral education must a teacher undertake the theoretical research here being called for. Second, very few teachers in our schools today have a training in philosophy, let alone moral philosophy. And very few of those can be expected to have either the time or the inclination to read and evaluate the work of even just those authors referred to in the two articles under consideration.

It should be evident now that we have returned to a crucial dilemma inevitably to be encountered by those designing or teaching formal moral education programs. By reference to what criteria does one choose between and amongst the competing inconsistent theories of moral education? And can prospective moral education teachers be expected to have the expertise or the time to evaluate the variety of approaches available and make choices which are sensitive to the relevant moral, philosophical, and pedagogical issues? None of Cochrane's arguments suggest that the *practical* problems inherent in this task are surmountable.

There is, of course, a response to all this. Surely, it might be argued, something is better than nothing. And so Cochrane suggests, "Surely we can develop separate programs along the lines proposed by Beck and Kohlberg on the grounds that students are better off with the accomplishments prized by either theory than with none at all." But this comment again simply begs the question. In what sense would students be "better off"? And who is to be the judge: the student? the teacher? the government? the parent? Lurking behind this question is another which is equally important. Will any approach to moral education do? If so, why not return to a program of religious education with a substantial moral content? Or, alternatively, what are we to say about values clarification methods, to say nothing of the bevy of more radical approaches available? At what point do we conclude that something is *not* better than nothing?

But there is a second and equally important assumption present in the passage just quoted. Why do so many supporters of formal moral education programs assume that "students are better off with the accomplishments prized by either theory than with none at all"? The assumption is that unless the schools take up formally the task of moral education, there will be none. Unless schools urge students toward moral accomplishment there will be no urgings or perhaps no moral accomplishments.

When put boldly, as I have just done, this assumption is unsupportable. Yet it appears to lie behind a good deal of the support for formal moral education programs.[3]

Let us turn then to the final section of my critique. As Cochrane notes, my final comment highlights political concerns. Why is this so? Without restating the argument let me set out the outline. First, moral education is

a politically sensitive subject. The kind of moral education program one is likely to find in the Soviet Union will differ from that to be found in China or South Africa or Canada. Secondly, as the MacKay Committee pointed out, some theories of morality and moral education would appear to be quite compatible with, and indeed supportive of, authoritarian ideologies.[4]

It is clear (isn't it?) that no provincial government in Canada would choose to adopt a formal moral education program which was hostile to democratic values. But this might well change. That being the case, prudence suggests that government and moral education be held at arm's length. Indeed, maintaining a distance between government and moral education may well be as important to the health of our democratic institutions as maintaining an independent judiciary. Nineteen eighty-four is not as distant as moral education rhetoric might suggest.

To this argument, Cochrane seems to have two responses. He points out that, even on my own account, discussion of values is an inevitable feature of education. "It is strange," he says, "that Cragg's fear of the government's hand does not reach this corner." And then follows an almost bitter litany of the inadequacies of the value content of the typical Canadian curriculum.

Much could be said in response to Cochrane's comments. I shall note just three things. First, Cochrane is alluding to a type of argument, the hidden values argument, which has been widely used in support of formal education. It is not my purpose to examine that argument here. I have done so elsewhere (Cragg, 1978-79) and in the process have taken up a number of issues hinted at by Cochrane in this section of his reply. Second, this observation of Cochrane's is itself a double-edged sword. The teachers who mold the "social curriculum" in a typical Canadian school or the "moral atmosphere" of a typical classroom are the self-same people from whom those responsible for teaching formal classes in moral education will be drawn. If our teachers are as unenlightened morally speaking in their history or physical education classrooms, why should we expect that to change when the label on the timetable says "moral education"?

Third, while not impossible, it is, I suggest, harder for a government to manipulate the values instrinsic to the discipline of mathematics or physics than is the case with moral education. The reasons for this are too long to set out here, though a few moments' reflection on the part of the reader would perhaps give weight to my observation. This is not to say that values not intrinsic to a discipline do not creep in. Clearly they do. But the best way to deal with that problem is to examine textbooks carefully with a view to removing expressions of value (e.g., sexist values) which are unrelated to the subject matter at hand. Setting up a separate course to immunize students against such errors or biases seems a rather awkward and ineffective way of doing the job, rather like dealing with

air pollution by asking everyone to wear a face mask. It would be better, one should think, to improve the air quality and thus get at the problem directly.

The final point raised by Cochrane with which I should like to deal is what I take to be his suggestion that the best protection against the abuse of authority, whether in government, the school, or the home, is a morally educated person. Such persons would have the tools and inclination necessary to careful and critical evaluation of proposals or institutions they encounter. This is the Socratic ideal.

It is not difficult to acknowledge that some moral educators have this kind of objective in mind. But this group is by no means the only one. Neither have I seen any evidence to suggest that they are the majority. Here again Cochrane simply begs the crucial question. What are to be the objectives of formal moral education? A variety are available from which to choose. Some set as the goal of moral education critical evaluation; some, respect for authority; some, values clarification. Why do Cochrane and many others simply take for granted that the objectives which will be pursued in formal moral education will be the ones they like rather than some others which lead in quite a different direction?

And so we come back to the central issue. If we are to have formal moral education, how is the curriculum to be chosen? By reference to whose view of what ought to be the purpose of moral education are the crucial decisions to be made? And do we want to encourage the development of institutions where crucial decisions about the content and objectives of moral education are open to direct influence by the government of the day? Advocates of formal moral education programs have an obligation to take up these issues and to provide persuasive responses and not just easy reassurance. If my arguments are valid, that task is a difficult one indeed.

NOTES

[1] For example, while the three parts of my argument are related to one another, I make it clear (p. 36) that the arguments of Parts A and B are unlikely to convince formal moral education proponents. Hence, as I point out, arguments are needed which suggest reasons independent of those advanced in Parts A and B. Contrast this fact with Cochrane's assertion, "Cragg's position rests on a briefly sketched political argument, not — as he seems to imply — on the two philosophical sections which precede it." And what, one might ask, leads Cochrane to call the first parts of the paper philosophical and the last political?

[2] This fact about contemporary Canadian society has been widely thought to be central to the debate. This has been without question true in Ontario. And my argument makes a great deal of it. Yet, strikingly, it goes unnoticed in Cochrane's reply.

[3] I have argued at length (Cragg, 1978-79) that there are many good reasons at least in the matter of formal moral education for concluding that something is not better than nothing.

[4] Once again this point was made clearly in the original article, yet received no comment in the reply. Yet the point is crucial to the debate in question.

REFERENCES

Cragg, A. W. Moral education in the schools. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 1979, *4*(1), 28-38.

Cragg, A. W. Moral education: The hidden values argument. *Interchange*, 1978-79, *10*, 12-19.

A. Wesley Cragg is an Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy, Laurentian University, Sudbury, Ontario P3E 2C6.