

This book explores why moral education must be a purposeful and integral part of the life of every school. It is essential reading for educators, parents, and all those concerned about the values of the next generation and the future of the country.

Nurturing Decent Human Beings: The Case for Moral Education in Our Schools

By Michael Nill, PhD

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About the author:

Michael Nill, a lifetime educator, served as a teacher and administrator, retiring as the headmaster from a PS – 12 school in Brooklyn, NY. He earned his doctorate in Classics and Philosophy at the University of Texas at Austin and master degrees from Johns Hopkins University in Classics and Columbia Teachers College in Educational Administration. He is the previous author of *Morality and Self-Interest in Protagoras, Antiphon, and Democritus*. He currently resides in California and Mexico with his wife Irene Cohen.

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Preface

To give context to what follows, I offer some initial comments about how and why I came to write this book. Certain experiences were crucial in the development of my interest in the moral domain and moral education, and almost led me step-by-step to this project as a culmination of my work as an educator.

Readers will find the first of those experiences briefly mentioned in Chapter One: my education in ancient Greek and Latin languages and literature. I will admit to falling in love with Greek literature, attracted particularly by how it so frequently highlighted issues of what constitutes a worthwhile life. It started in the *Iliad*, with those ferocious epic heroes seeking the only kind of immortality open to them: recognition and fame for their bravery and leadership that will live on after they die.

Think of Achilles, letting Greeks die without his lifting a finger to help because the commander-in-chief had taken away a prize that was a token of the recognition he was due. Centuries later a tragedy pictures the epic hero Philoctetes, who was also dishonored unfairly during the Trojan War, being portrayed by Sophocles as abandoning his hatred and rejoining society in recognition that the only immortality open to human beings is participating in the holiness, nobility, or moral goodness that outlives our individual lives.

This is just one of so many examples of Greek writers raising questions about the components of a good life, issues which are, of course, traditionally raised in a liberal arts curriculum. At bottom, teachers work to nurture students who will lead a worthwhile life, but I felt particularly gratified that my teaching area was so conducive to such nurturing.

These questions about the worthwhile life eventually led me to the study of philosophy, particularly Greek philosophy. I marveled at how the early Greek thinkers managed over time to identify and argue about the domain and content of what is moral, good, or noble, despite their struggle to do so without the benefit of any of the abstract

vocabulary that later philosophers could take for granted. This interest eventually moved me to choose a dissertation topic that involved reconstructing the arguments of three early pre-Platonic Greek thinkers on the relationship between morality and self-interest.

In our world, we have largely come to regard that relationship as completely oppositional. Morality requires us in certain relevant circumstances to sacrifice our self-interest to avoid harming others. But the Greek thinkers, rationalists that they were, struggled to find self-regarding reasons for why we should be moral—they wanted to know what good it does for the doer, the agent who acts morally. Plato aimed to find a compelling enough reason that we would act morally even if we had a magic ring that could make us disappear at will and remove any worry that our actions would be discovered. That is quite an astonishing quest, which they pursued with no appeal to religion.

Suffice it to say that over time they developed increasingly stronger arguments in showing morality as compatible with self-interest, but, in the end, they were unsuccessful in what really is an impossible quest. The search, however, adumbrated the more plausible idea that acting morally is a constituent part of our good as human beings.

What I took away from all of this is that the moral domain is central to life, focusing as it does on what makes a life worthwhile, what best fulfills that which constitutes our good—a view of morality that is particularly apt in an educational setting. However, this take on morality clearly differs significantly from the common perceptions we are used to, which tend to view it reductively as a set of rules and principles or do's and don'ts that we have a duty to observe. That understanding always sounded so onerous to me, and even more so when there was a threat of punishment, even eternal damnation, for not observing these rules.

In any case, while the broad sense of what is moral played a significant role in my teaching, I did not reflect on the role it might have for a school or education as a whole. But in the 90's, I was inspired by reading Thomas Lickona's *Educating for Character*. He provided arguments for why it

is important for a school to take on this role and how to implement it.

That prepared me for the most crucial experience that led to this book: my time in a PS – 12 Quaker school in Brooklyn, N.Y., where I served for the final 15 years of my career in education, 10 of which as the school's headmaster. Here's what I wrote when I announced my retirement to the school's community:

When I first arrived as head of the middle school, it probably didn't even take a week for me to realize I loved this school...I came with the strong belief that education had to have a moral dimension to it, and what was immediately clear to me was that this dimension was woven into the fabric of the institution in a way that I had never experienced before.

Included in its mission and core values were respect for others, integrity, a commitment to be guided by such principles of truth and peaceful resolution and conflict, and an institutional purpose of offering each student “a challenging education that develops intellectual abilities and ethical and social values to support a productive life of leadership and service.” While it certainly helped to have such clearly stated values and goals in line with what is broadly moral, what really made the difference was the consistent, purposeful commitment on the part of the school community as a whole to ensure that they be woven into the fabric of the institution. I then understood that while individual faculty members can weave moral messages into their classrooms, moral education becomes more powerful and effective when it is a coordinated schoolwide effort.

As a result, the values of the school were, so to speak, part of the conversations that occurred in the hallways, classrooms, faculty rooms, and administrative meetings. Of course, this did not mean that the school or its students were perfect. Institutions remain subject to human error and failings, and certainly students present similar challenges everywhere as they struggle to learn and identify who they are. A school can nurture certain values, but ultimately it is the individual student who chooses his or her own path. I would say, though, that the school's graduates by and large

chose careers in which they could make a positive difference in the world.

What became increasingly clear to me was that students in any type of school—be it public, independent, charter, or religiously-affiliated—would be tremendously well served by moral education crafted with intelligence and purpose. Upon retirement, that belief drove me to research and reflect more on this dimension of education and eventually to write this book—to use my experiences as an educator, my research, and my background in moral theory to promote more national attention to the role of education in helping the younger generation become decent human beings and choose attitudes and behaviors that represent our better selves. Beyond national attention, though, it is ultimately at the local level that decisions are made; and it would be up to each school to design an approach to moral education that best accommodates its community and circumstances. There is no one size fits all.

At the moment, this role for education admittedly receives little public acknowledgement, and it certainly is not on the national agenda. There are a number of reasons for this, which are discussed in the book; but here I merely allude to three of them: our divisiveness that eschews finding common ground on just about anything, our increasingly restricted view of education as mastery of subject matter in preparation for employment, and narrow conceptions of morality. However imposing the obstacles, it seems to me worth the effort to try to overcome them: the kind of education we provide our children has a significant impact on the future.

In any historical period, there will always be a need for efforts to close the gap between what is exemplary and actual in the spheres of personal and public morality. That perspective is useful to keep in mind to avoid the trap of imagining one's own age as the worst of times.

Nevertheless, I must admit that in the course of working on this project, I have felt an increasing sense of urgency. In the United States and elsewhere, moral values like civility, compassion, and a commitment to the common good were being openly challenged and undermined. It had seemingly become acceptable for political leaders and citizens to adopt

attitudes and behaviors that reflected our worst selves. At play were a growing willingness to distort the truth even in simple factual matters, the belittling of those who think, look, or talk differently, and the dismissal of the value of learned opinion and research. This provides our children with terrible lessons, lessons that undermine the value of education.

Although of importance and value at any time, I think we can agree that moral education is clearly needed now. My focus is on the United States, but the broader message of the relevance and content of moral education has no borders. My hope is that this book can help engender dialogue among parents, educational policymakers, school administrators, teachers, and concerned citizens and reconfirm the transformative potential of education to make ourselves, our nation, and our world better. On the broadest level, I am hoping this book can make some contribution to a movement to establish a common sense of decency that will guide our body politic.

Seal Beach, California
2021

From Chapter 2

The Pervasive Presence of Values in Schools

In reality, however, an analysis of what goes in schools, as we shall see, leads to the conclusion that they are necessarily awash in values, including moral ones. One significant reason for this is that they are group settings which exist to promote learning. So much of what goes on in schools consists of interactions between students, between teachers and students, between teachers and teachers, between administrators and teachers. This makes schools strikingly fertile ground for developing moral behaviors and attitudes: how individuals treat each other or are expected to treat each other represents a major aspect of the moral domain. And certainly the messages schools and teachers

convey to students about their expectations regarding interactions with others are moral messages. Such messages, for example, can be implicit, or explicit, or emerge from example and role-modeling.

Unfortunately, these messages can sometimes in practice conflict with what is normally regarded as appropriate moral action. Precisely because situations involving the moral realm are so ubiquitous in educational settings, the school and its faculty must consciously exercise care in what they say and do. Theodore and NancySizer provide educators a list of probing questions about their actions in this regard:

If we care about our children's values—how as a matter of *habit* they treat others and how aware they are of why they do what they do—we must look into a mirror. Do we teachers, as a matter of habitual practice, bluff? Do we sort unfairly? Do we treat students harshly in the name of order rather than as a way to promote student growth? Do we grapple over worthy things? Do we act in a manner that reflects the values which we wish our students to assimilate? What do our actions tell our students about our purposes? About our principles? Have we adopted a style which is insistently moral without becoming moralistic? Do we administrators and policy-makers impose regimes and instruments which are arguably thoughtful and fair?

Say, for example, a teacher grades unfairly or allows a student to insult a classmate. These examples, in effect, send the moral message that it is permissible to so act, even though these actions are not morally permissible. Avoiding inappropriate moral messages does not happen as a matter of course, but requires reflection and purposefulness.

To understand in more detail how moral messages are necessarily present in abundance, I will discuss in turn a number of components that go into the process of learning in a group setting, with some attention to how these components may change as students grow older. My focus here will be on grades PS/K-12. Among the components discussed will be how teachers and the school make learning possible, motivate a commitment to it, define its nature and

content, measure it, and attend to activities and spaces outside the classroom such as hallways, cafeterias, and athletics.

From Chapter 3

A Framework for Implementation

What we have seen so far is a myriad of examples and ways the moral dimension broadly understood plays an important role in the life of schools, not only emerging from what is necessary for a school to fulfill its purposes, but also simply arising naturally out of the interactions and situations that commonly occur in schools on a daily basis.

However, the means for attaining or moving towards a satisfactory approach to moral education are by no means simple or straightforward. If there is no right way to teach all students to read or write or be motivated to learn, there is certainly no one right way to educate morally. Not only do individual students differ, but the makeup and culture of each school is different, and so what may work in one school or community will simply not be effective in another. What I will do in this chapter is to lay out some considerations and strategies that will be helpful for schools in implementing this aspect of education.

Identifying the scope of moral education

This is, of course, a crucial first step; and the clearer and more succinct such an understanding is, the more it will be likely to set the stage for successful implementation and provide clarity of purpose. The language commonly employed in discussions of moral philosophy is a good framework for this task. All the examples and contexts of moral education I wrote about in the last chapter ultimately come down to a combination of what are called self-regarding and other-regarding behaviors and attitudes. In regard to the former, we have behaviors, attitudes, qualities that enable the agent, that is the individual student as doer, to have a worthwhile productive life or, as it is sometimes described, a flourishing life. Examples of such qualities are

resilience, perseverance, courage, integrity, respect for one's body and mind and personhood, and the drive to do one's best. Also included in this category are intellectual virtues; for example, the pursuit of knowledge and understanding guided by truth, openness to new ideas, and willingness to challenge one's own views.

As for other-regarding behaviors, these involve respecting others, treating them with dignity and fairness. This is the domain with which morality in the narrow sense is most commonly identified. In the broader sense, worthwhile other-regarding behavior also involves actively pursuing the good of others through compassion, kindness, generosity, service, civic engagement, stretching ultimately to a life, as they say, of making a difference or making the world a better place.

From Chapter 6

The Fruits of Change

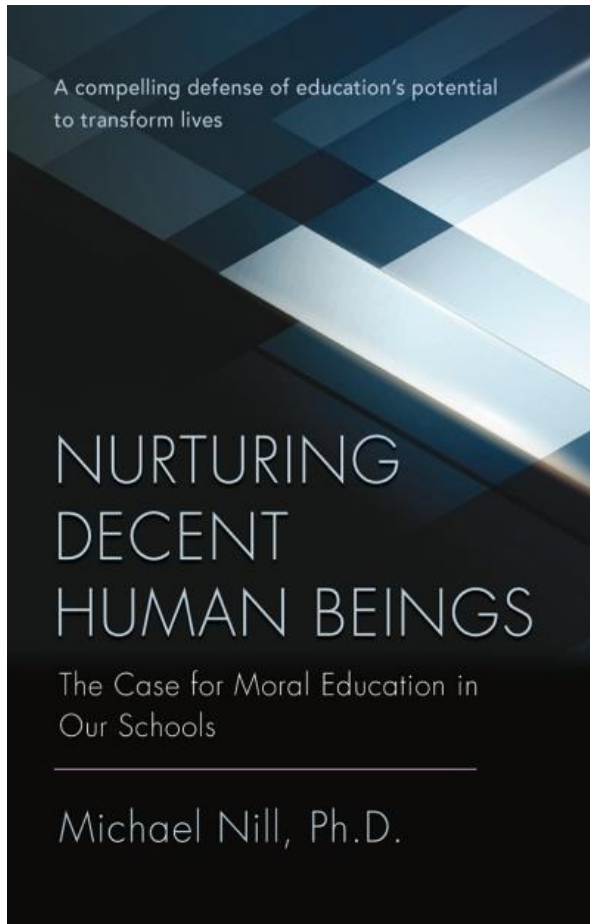
In the schools I have pictured, teachers will not just be acknowledged as subject-matter conveyers, but also be recognized for the kind of role they have in a child's life—a dedicated caregiver, a role model, an encourager, a builder of character, a helpmate on the student's path to a worthwhile life. While many teachers I have talked to see themselves in this way, we have unfortunately gotten away from openly acknowledging such notions; and this has led to a diminishment of the importance attributed to teachers and education.

Hence, we have seen less and less willingness among the public at large, as well as among politicians, to ensure that all schools have adequate resources and facilities and all faculty receive competitive wages. Reversing that trend would be an important potential benefit to arise from the acknowledgement of the larger purposes of education. And that public acknowledgement will ideally be shared by parents. I have suggested they not only be aware of the mission statement and core values of the schools their

children attend, but periodically be involved in their evaluation and revision.

I would also hope that as a byproduct of the acceptance of the larger purposes of education, the voices of educators would be more frequently heard and valued. I remember a time when it was considered worth considering what college presidents had to say about public matters. Certainly those in charge of schools are likely to have given much thought to what works in educating children and how we best guide students to want to lead worthwhile lives as adults. We need to give public space to these voices.

At the end of the day, the kind of education I have argued for will continue to further what education has always accomplished at its best. It changes lives. It gives children a sense of the possible, a sense of what it means to be the best one can be....



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