Which Self? Whose Morality?


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In the wake of international violence, rampages on high school campuses, and repeated calls for reclaiming the civic virtues and family values, a book on the formation of the moral self is welcome. Given the complexity of moral issues and the democratic concern to avoid imposition, how educators can educate for morality is at issue. Can a moral self that both builds upon and critiques local forms of religiosity be formed in public institutions? Van der Ven’s book wends its way through a labyrinth of arguments for a public morality of the good, the right, and the wise.

Van der Ven opens his book with a clear statement of his orientation. Building on the work of Don Browning (1991), van der Ven proposes that practical theology as an ‘empirically descriptive and critically constructive theory of religious practice’ (p. xi) will frame his study. He attempts to shift the locus of Western society’s moral deliberations from theory to educational praxis. On the significance of moral education to contemporary culture, van der Ven concisely elucidates this thesis:

The aim of this study, however, is not to make a moral diagnosis per se of what ails Western society. Rather, I seek to translate the widespread moral concern throughout the West into the quest for moral education. I interpret the moral questions just mentioned from the point of view of developmental, learning, and teaching processes as they take place in the family, schools, associations, and congregations; and I describe, analyze, and evaluate these processes as carefully as possible. (p. 2)

His concerns are essential and engaging. After identifying and examining the central theses of van der Ven’s book, we intend to estimate the accomplishment of his position.

Moral Communication as Common Denominator

Van der Ven’s moral communication involves both narration and argument in first-order (intracommunal) and second-order (intercommunal) communication. Each is interrelated because intercommunal communication may result in conflicts that are subsequently belabored at the intracommunal level as individuals traverse communities. Subsequently, first-order emphases may be required to comport to second-order emphases within the community.

Informal Moral Education

The child or student receives informal moral education through interactions with family and acquaintances in the extended community. By informal van der Ven means educational processes occurring in groups and networks that are not primarily set up, organized, and formalized for that purpose. By interactions van der Ven means discipline (habituation and self-regulation; induction) and socialization (internalization of the values and norms that determine this community).

Formal Moral Education

Formal moral education means the formal educational processes occurring within a structure whose purpose is the systematic and methodical coordination of educational activities. To explicitly legitimize its educational structures, procedures, and processes, van der Ven uses four cognitive approaches:

Transmission: pace Ricoeur’s three-stage model of the good, the right, and the wise. Transmission is introducing the child more consciously to moral and religious traditions.

Cognitive development: emphasize the intrinsic structure of the student’s development of moral judgment. Thus, transforming Kohlberg’s hard stages of moral development (preconventional, conventional, and postcon-
vitional) to van der Ven’s soft stages (pre-moral, conventional, and convention-critical).

Clarification: the experimental approach in which the aim is to help the child clarify her own values as compared with multi-culturalism.

Emotional formation: focus on the emotional formation of the child-moral psychology.

Further, it emphasizes the dialectical relationship between the informal of the past to formal of the present.

**Seven Modes**

Between informal and formal moral education come six modes. Each mode is constituted by elements that van der Ven finds to be important in the informal (discipline and socialization) and formal (transmission, development, clarification, and emotional formation) conceptions of moral education. The modes are not themselves moral theories. They are van der Ven’s systematic contribution to this project. Each of these modes consists of a set of features which van der Ven claims hang together in some strong way. The modes are intended to have a genuine utility and coherence, rather than being sets of features stipulated in some arbitrary, ad hoc way. Finally, the culmination of the two basic modes of informal and four modes of formal moral education culminate in a fifth mode of formal moral education: character formation.

**Responses**

We have several responses to van der Ven’s proposal. This is a carefully reasoned book addressing the issue of a public ethic powerful enough to shape formational/educational processes. We laud van der Ven for steering between individualist and communitarian, institutional and pluralist models of morality and moral development. His emphasis on a dialogical self and his proposal for a form of multiculturalism that encourages the enrichment of traditions need to be heard. We hope with him that moral communication between traditions that truly takes the other’s perspective could transform moral communities.

Van der Ven is right in thinking that we have need of informal and formal moral education. However, why do informal and formal models only culminate in character formation? It seems that character formation should be the teleological underpinning of moral education, not simply a culminating mode of formal moral education. For individuals such as MacIntyre (1984), this telos is established in the context of a moral tradition, particularly in one that advocates virtuous character traits. Although van der Ven does acknowledge tradition as an element of moral criteria, he does not incorporate this perspective into his theory of the formation of a moral self. Instead, he fragments the individual’s moral formation into seven modes. This partitioning of moral education into seven modes may result in a further fragmentation of the individual’s moral formation. Just as Western culture is currently fragmented and conflicted in its moral traditions, so also van der Ven’s individual runs the risk of becoming fragment ed and conflicted in his or her moral formation.

Van der Ven’s model of morality seems thin and too constrained. As it stands, his model seems inadequate for any robust human morality—too abstract, too spare, and somehow not rich enough to capture the reality of a living morality. Walzer (1994), utilizing a distinction between thick and thin moral discourses, argues for the importance of thick moral discourse in public discourse recognizing the hegemony of thin discourse in current public moral discourse. Religions tend to be more particular, whereas theories of moral development more general or universal. Walzer argues for a recovery of thick discourse; van der Ven, we suggest, opts for a thinner one.

Since the Enlightenment at least, religion and morality have been distinguished. Van der Ven maintains that morality is part of a large whole, namely religion. Religion is for him a text, an integrated culture. Morality is the subtext and functions as an integral part of religion, and religion can transpose the meaning of morality from its particular point of view. The focus of religious practices is on that which is moral, and it can borrow morality from nonreligious sources.

Although morality is a subtext of religion, it is not apparent to us how religion substantially shapes the way van der Ven finally construes morality. Using Habermas as guide he defines morality as the purposive, the good and the right. It is assumed that each of these applies equally to all religious groups and to humanity in general. On the other hand, he quotes Ricoeur (1975) approvingly when the latter indicates that religion and morality both follow a question-and-answer format, yet ask different questions and give different answers. At an immanent level, religion integrates, orients, and criticizes morality. Van der Ven agrees with Ricoeur that there
can be no Christian morality, but then he suggests that there is a special Christian grammar. Van der Ven would like it both ways: Religion is an insertion into morality, and morality is recapitulated in religion. We are less confident that a rapprochement has been achieved.

For example, van der Ven asserts without much argumentation that the essence of morality is freedom and that morality must break through tradition insofar as social habits hinder this freedom. This would suggest that the definition of freedom within a moral domain determines how freedom is defined in a religious community. How then is religion the context of morality?

Moral education, according to van der Ven, should help the child become aware of the moral and religious traditions of his or her community. Who then arbitrates the conflicts between communities? Can the public school truly educate a student in the particularities of their religious tradition whether Christian, Jewish, or Moslem? He argues that the extrinsic features of religion are not his focus, but the intrinsic structure of moral issues, which, it can be assumed, are similar regardless of tradition. So again religion is reduced to morality. Van der Ven seems not to recognize the ideological nature of his model of public morality as Western liberalism. Although religious particularists may find much in this public morality that is consonant with their faith tradition, it is not clear that this particularity is honored in the final analysis. Van der Ven accepts, with some modification, Kohlberg's stage theory of moral development (See D'ueck, 1995 for a critique), a model that seems firmly rooted in the tradition of the Enlightenment with its implicit assumption that religious particularity is heteronymous.

Van der Ven hopes that moral education will culminate in the formation of the virtuous character, that is, character as seen in Sophocles' Antigone and Jesus' struggle in Gethsemane. We concur. In the end, however, it seems we are given again a version of morality that emerges from Plato and Aristotle; is updated with symbolic interactionism, Habermas' communicative theory, and Ricoeur's hermeneutics; and then is illustrated with occasional examples from the Judeo-Christian tradition. In the end, this model privileges the perspective of the objective other, of a morality that transcends and obviates religious particularities.

References

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