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Review of

Moral Education: Beyond the Teaching of Right and Wrong

by Colin Wringe, Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2006

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An Update Certainly: Is it a Restatement?

Well researched contributions to moral education are always welcome, comprehensive treatments will arouse much interest, and truly interesting meta-analyses of the field are certainly to be prized. The challenge in reading Wringe's exceptionally lucid contribution, therefore, is to determine what has been accomplished in this comprehensive survey of *the field* of moral education. The question is not whether his contribution is worthy within the field—that much is certain—but rather whether its comprehensiveness transcends a mere surveying and is in fact the kind of meta-analysis that will offer a trend-setting restatement of aims in the field. Now it would be irresponsible for this reviewer to make any extravagant claims about Wringe "revolutionizing" the field, but it is certainly worth exploring the question of why this book's is at least "interesting" in its restatement of moral education. The book's significance turns on this question: does Wringe offer only a timely update of past and current questions, or in doing so has he also restructured the field's awareness of itself?

Moral Education in Crisis?

Wringe begins his book from the position that a response is needed to those who say contemporary morality—especially among youth—and moral education is in crisis. Those who maintain that such a crisis is real no doubt both *blame* schools for such an apparent decline and also *assign* to them responsibility for recovering society's moral fortitude. Moral Education is no independently standing subject, but schools do perform acts of moral education whether intentionally or not; moreover, Wringe knows that misconceptions about the school's role and powers to educate morally inherently accompany all iterations of this problem that are left at the school's doorstep. Moral education, according to Wringe, must leave behind laundry lists of good behaviours and "right thinking" that will keep kids out of trouble and remedy any sort of social wrong like petty crime or anti-social behaviour. Specifically, Wringe asserts that moral education should transcend approaches that trumpet conformity for its own sake, and should focus on its role in a world where interpretations and judgments are required.

Wringe makes the case that moral education should start by openly addressing its aims with those who are to be educated. If the question "Why act morally?" is truly one of the great problems in

moral education, then he is quite smart in proposing that it has much educative potential as both a *framework for* and the *content of* moral education. Two options immediately suggest themselves: should moral education attempt to reduce delinquency within the current social system, or, as Wringe suggests, should it to offer learners an enhanced version of social franchise as decision makers? From the view of those directly facing the "why" question in practice, these options offer a point from which to begin dialogue between learners and teachers (and indeed across society at large) on whether moral education is simply viewed as an means of social control, or whether it should view itself as a transformative force in society.

Wringe's approach to these questions, and the muscle of his meta-analysis, is framed upon and woven throughout a survey of the major approaches to morality and the range of ideas on how they relate to moral education. In the last five chapters he applies this surveying into a discussion of two very salient aspects of morality as it affects youth (and adults!) today: sexuality education and citizenship. What is the role of the teacher in a philosophically defensible contemporary moral education program? Are there indoctrination issues? What about authoritative flimsiness on the other side of indoctrination? Is (teacher) neutrality even possible?

Its Pedagogical Use

As a treatment of major philosophical questions within the context of moral education, and as a systematic review of its literature, Wringe's book stands as a potential candidate for textbook selection in teacher education courses. Its merit is most apparent in its synthesis of many strands of thought, including consequentialism, utilitarianism, deontology, caring, communitarianism, happiness, rights, and virtues. Wringe does a very good job of discussing the problems and benefits within these views and how they intersect: for example, he observes that universal deontology cannot be completely defensible in light of communitarianism and care theory, but that this criticism does not anoint communitarianism or caring with infallible goodness—decay, ossification, and conservatism can also result from communities gone awry or caring that becomes too limited by self-interest with one's own kind. The volume's theoretical framework is also valuable for those moral educators who would wish to respond to conservative critics, especially in areas of sexual morality and citizenship (p.136). On the other hand, it would provide the conservative-minded with a view a sophisticated critique of their positions.

I recommend this volume as a textbook with an observation that there are limitations in the ways it could be used. The most salient limitation is the fact that it does not deal with the substantive changes and growth that is present *within* the thinking of the several thinkers surveyed. It treats them rather synchronically—which is typical of surveys because of the scope and space they are provided—but consequentially loses the organic quality present within the works of thinkers whom it touches. This limitation is redeemed, to be sure, because of the strength found in its comparative treatment of (a) the aforementioned several strands in moral education, and (b) the various schools of thought within each strand. It therefore stands as very good textbook for comparative analysis of moral theory, but only so long as one is able to critique Wringe's interpretation of (1) each theorist surveyed, (2) each strand surveyed, and (3) the relationship between each strand.

As an example I point to his treatment of the controversy between Lawrence Kohlberg and Carol Gilligan. Wringe can be fairly criticized for being overly sympathetic with Gilligan's criticism of Kohlberg's theory. While Gilligan can be credited with opening the prevailing academic sympathy toward feminism and caring as legitimate voices in moral theory, her use of Kohlberg's work as an exemplar of masculinist individualism is flimsy (McDonough, 2005). Wringe's treatment of the does not substantially approach the many critiques of Gilligan's method, nor does it acknowledge the increasing social sophistication in Kohlberg's later work with just communities in prisons and schools—a major piece of Kohlberg's later work that Gilligan simply ignores. As he does not take a comprehensive view of Kohlberg's theory and essentially gives merit to the narrow view that

differentiates Gilligan from Kohlberg, his work falls into the habit of (synchronistic) over-simplification. While binary structures are quite instructive for drawing a reader's attention to the range of views within moral education, their downside lies in potentially misleading the reader to the impression that the thinkers at each end of the binary are its representatives *in toto* and have no other redeeming or complementary qualities.

Religion's Contribution to Moral Education

The trickiness with binary structures also lingers in his treatment of religions. While Wringe acknowledges that he is no expert on religious-based morality, he does make a fair assessment of the place religions give to morality and moral instruction. One of the major strengths of his treatment lays in his acknowledgment that religions have done many good things for morality (despite the fact that certain points of view reject or are highly suspicious of religion) and that they will have a significant role to play in future moral education developments (p.164). This recognition is a welcome and important inclusion because of (1) religion's strong contribution to the history of morality, (2) the fact that a secular society is not religiously sterile because it constitutes the meeting place of many religious traditions, and (3) the fact that many learners will bring religious questions and content to their moral education. His question of whether an apparent decline in religion necessarily means a decline in morality is an excellent starting point for the framework and content of moral education along this line. Wringe is to be commended for acknowledging and giving weight to this important aspect of morality; however, there are some points in his treatment that prompt further questions.

In concert with the synchronistic habit he displays in his survey of the secular moral literature, Wringe characterizes religion as an unchanging source of moral absolutes that is opposite a secular society. His view across secular morality and moral education is comprehensive in scope, but his treatment of religion does not go to the same effort to reveal that major world religions are themselves pluralistic entities that have and currently are undergoing similar trials in order to understand modern moral education. His presentation of religious belief systems is potentially misleading because it leaves the impression that they are ossified entities—to that effect overlooks the political and institutional side of religions and the moral problems that are *internal* to the human aspect of these organizations. Are there substantial moral differences within religious groups? How do religions cope with a modernizing world? How does one interact morally *within* one's religion or culture? This series of questions outlines a large gap in the book. Religions and religious morality are often caricatured in academic and popular works, and so some substantive means of being able to discuss moral tensions within religions would be a welcome way of transcending such depictions. Perhaps upcoming editions of the book could address this gap with greater depth and scope.

Where is the Self-Reflexive Voice?

The author's position in relation to the material he covers is a final matter of interest. It is not apparent if Wringe writes from his own point of view or if he attempts to write from a neutral perspective. In fact, Wringe's own views on whether neutrality is even possible remain unstated. He appears to take a disengaged stance within liberalism, and from certain perspectives might be seen as (consciously or unconsciously) asserting that neutrality is possible in moral education. To test this idea, consider how someone with a different commitment might write a survey like he has done. Would a communitarian, a feminist, or someone with a deep religious commitment follow this style and format? As moral education is consistently battling with questions about neutrality, it is curious that he is not more open about his theoretical framework.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Overall, Colin Wringe is to be commended for producing a thoughtful and meaningful contribution to moral education. He astutely captures the urgent dilemma of a teacher who is caught between indoctrination and permissiveness. He has the courage to reject relativism and nihilism, along with approaches that attempt to inculcate behaviour that is instrumental to a few elites but would damage the autonomy of many others. He is also to be commended for challenging moral theory that is Euro-centric and structured on "deficiency" models that label moral actors from the outset—in the latter case he offers a valid theoretical framework to challenge current interpretations of divorce rates and broad definitions of marriage as signs of moral decline (see p.135 and ff). His "rethinking" of moral education will go a long way toward debunking reductive views, challenging bigotry, and confronting fear of social difference. I heartily recommend this book as a convincing mixture of moral theories on the question of how everyone shares responsibility for moral education, and I encourage readers to take it on as the next step in their thinking about the role of morality and moral education in our society; his remark that "successful moral education is an *engagement*, not an *instruction*" (p.173) is a convincing invitation to rethinking and participating in these important questions.

References

McDonough, G.P. (2005). Moral maturity and autonomy: Appreciating the significance of Lawrence Kohlberg's just community. *Journal of Moral Education* 34(2), 199-213.