

---

# Can Goodness Be Taught?

---

Pádraig Hogan

## SOME INITIAL DIFFICULTIES

For some time now an intruding cautionary voice has been telling me that it is foolhardy, and even futile, to tackle the question posed in the title. The question has recently been thrown up again in a pressing way by the controversies over 'lifeskills' and 'values clarification' programmes in Irish post-primary schools. The cautionary voice has kept me silent, but alert, on this issue for a few years. It suggests moreover that if wiser counsel prevailed, I would simply accept the question as unanswerable. To close the question in this way however is to do less than justice to the searching spirit of those Greeks who originally raised it publicly, and, on the other hand, to turn a blind eye to the difficulties which the question is increasingly placing in the path of today's teachers.

Christianity in one form or another has invariably been a central feature of the Western cultural heritage. What is not sufficiently acknowledged however is that this may not be so for the future. During the present century the pervasive influences of a secular world order and the dazzling effects of an international communications and entertainments technology have already altered decisively the major constituents of the Western cultural heritage itself. It is not so much that mankind has increasingly become averse to all moral influences, but rather that any body of moral teaching which is seen to spring primarily from long established authority and tradition is likely nowadays to encounter widescale rejection or indifference, particularly where the sensibilities of the young are concerned.

As early as the late nineteen thirties, this tendency was well described by Martin Buber in his distinguished essay 'The Education of Character'. There Buber wrote: 'But to deny the presence of universal values and norms of absolute validity - that is the conspicuous tendency of our age.'<sup>1</sup> Buber was acutely conscious of the

---

1. Martin Buber, 'The Education of Character' in *Between Man and Man*, translated from German by Ronald Gregor Smith (Fontana, 1969), p. 137.

---

Pádraig Hogan is a native of Caltra, Co. Galway and lectures in the Department of Education in St Patrick's College, Maynooth, Co. Kildare.

special difficulties confronting moral education in an age of radical pluralism:

But as soon as my pupils notice that I want to educate their characters I am resisted precisely by those who show most signs of genuine independent character: they will not let themselves be educated, or rather, they do not like the idea that somebody wants to educate them.<sup>2</sup>

One of the points that stands out most clearly in my own mind over the best part of a decade of dealings with student teachers, school principals and post-primary teachers, is the extent to which Buber's observation here has been repeatedly confirmed in the experience of teachers of religion in Irish post-primary schools. The view is now widespread among teachers of religion, and is being increasingly shared by school principals, that, where the teaching of religion and morality are concerned, one cannot make the same assumptions about an assembly of pupils in a classroom as one might make about a congregation which has voluntarily assembled in a church. What this expresses, apart from any special difficulties posed by present-day pluralism, is the distinction between an educational interest and an institutional interest in moral or religious tradition. The failure to make this distinction *in schools*, in addition to inviting the charge of indoctrination at one level, tends to foredoom the efforts of teachers at another. The practical conclusion to be drawn from these points is that a tradition of religious or moral teaching is, properly speaking, introduced into a schooling context on a quite different set of considerations from that on which the same tradition might be engaged by a community of believers or disciples.

This need for a different basis has not been adequately acknowledged in either educational or religious circles. Indeed it has received little attention to date in strictly religious circles whereas in educational quarters, particularly post-primary schools, it is a need which has expressed itself in a sometimes hesitant but largely welcoming attitude towards new approaches in the general arena of moral education. Consider for instance the favourable reception by so many post-primary schools of the various curricular developments in this arena during the last decade, such as 'lifeskills', 'values clarification' and 'health education' programmes. The thrust of these programmes was not, of course, specifically religious, but teachers gleaned from them an abundance of suggestions as to how moral issues might be approached in a religion class. It is fair to say that many of these suggestions are currently being availed of by teachers of religion.

Critics of these new approaches have been quick to charge that

2. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

values-clarification and lifeskills programmes lack any substantial moral content, that under a kind of democratic guise, they present pupils with an *a la carte* morality, that they sometimes make of the pupils' more personal experiences matters of public discussion; that they convey to pupils the impression that morality is actually some kind of personal connoisseurship, to be mastered by values-clarification courses; and not least that parents are being kept in the dark about what the critics allege is a new and insidious movement.<sup>3</sup> That many of these programmes, as originally designed, have shortcomings can be granted – the omission of conscience as a central feature of any moral education being an obvious lacuna. That the programmes, as practised in Irish schools, have shortcomings is much less obvious. That they represent a clandestine event in Irish schools is a charge without evidence. (This latter is in fact a charge which has made a fruitful debate on the merits of 'values clarification' more difficult as it has been widely resented as a slur by teachers, by schools managements and by parents who have supported the new programmes in their schools.)

Whatever about the substance of the critics' claims, what their criticisms notably lack is an acknowledgement that there *is a problem* posed by the question in our title. More specifically, the critiques of 'values clarification' and 'lifeskills' have shown little appreciation of the intractable predicaments which this unresolved question widely gives rise to in Irish post-primary schools. Thus, although we may be venturing in the following pages into territory where the prudent – like the angels – hesitate to tread, that remains the territory which must be negotiated and through which, if possible, a secure pathway needs to be built.

#### UNEARTHING A FEW CLUES

Perhaps the most promising and economical way to begin our venture is to avail ourselves of two very useful insights from the Greeks. The first of these insights we owe to Plato and, simply stated, it tells us that the question 'can goodness be taught?' cannot

3. The main criticisms of these new programmes have been made by Doris Manly in *The Facilitators* (Brandsma Books, 1986); Joseph McCarroll in *Is the School Around the Corner Just the Same?* (Brandsma Books, 1987), and in various articles in the periodical *The Ballinrillick Review*. Advocates of a values clarification approach include Frank Dorr 'Health Education in School', *The Furrow*, January 1987; Ann Breslin, 'Values Clarification as a Methodology in Moral Education', *Irish Educational Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 1988; Jim McKernan, 'In Defence of Education for Living in Post-Primary Curriculum', *Oideas*, 32, Earrach 1988. The Educational Studies Association of Ireland held an important symposium of the issue at its Annual Conference 1987 (Carysfort, unpublished). Dr Jim McKernan (UCD), and Mr Eugene Donoghue (Health Education Bureau) spoke in favour of a values clarification approach and Fr Brendan Purcell (UCD) and Mr Joseph McCarroll (Clonliffe College), argued against the approach.

properly be tackled unless we tackle in a *practical setting* the question of what goodness is. This mention of a practical setting brings us to the second insight, which we owe to Aristotle. It can be put as follows. Our moral character is influenced much more by what becomes habitual in our everyday lives than it is by the contents of a programme of moral instruction; more by ethos as an emergent quality than by ethos as an enforced quality.

Taking these two insights together, their educational import is far-reaching indeed. What they suggest is a decisive but also a cautious 'yes' to the question posed in our title. They warn us away from detailed syllabi and from mass-produced textbooks. They urge instead attention to locally achievable, if initially modest, goals. In specific terms these combined insights call for the building up and maintenance of a shared ethos where the practice of exploration and reflection, of listening and deliberation, of discernment and informed choosing, has itself become habitual. For teachers this represents a prospect which is singularly inviting but also singularly daunting. We shall return to this point in the next part of our enquiry, but first let us consider a possible objection. The objection is that any teaching style which departs from a direct instruction in doctrines invites confusion on the part of the learners. This objection needs to be referred to the teaching style of Jesus, particularly when he addressed those heterogeneous and potentially clamorous groups described in the Gospels as 'multitudes':

All these things Jesus spoke in parables to the multitudes: and without parables *he did not speak to them.*

(Mt. 13:34; Mk. 4:33-34, italics mine)

The distinction between 'multitudes' and 'disciples' is as relevant now as it was then. Accordingly the perceptiveness of Jesus is worthy of our closest attention as teachers. We need only add that the classrooms of today contain 'multitudes' on a scale without precedent.

#### CONSCIENCE AND THE CLAIMS OF TRADITION

What happens, however, *after* the ingenuity of the teacher, through dramatic or other means, succeeds in bringing pupils to listen to the voice of a moral or religious tradition which seeks to address them? Characteristically what happens next is that the pupils' whetted spiritual sensibilities reveal themselves in continuous and challenging questions. In this regard one of the merits of values clarification programmes is that they regularly succeed in arousing interest in moral questions in a way that direct moral instruction repeatedly fails to do. Every act of clarification in moral issues however involves *some exercise of moral judgement*, even if only a tacit one,

on the part of those involved in working out the clarification. This exercise of judgement moreover necessarily involves the conscience of the individual – either by sharpening it, and thus educating it, or by dulling or seducing it, and thus miseducating it.

A further point needs to be noted here. The crucial involvement of conscience in any educational effort to explore a moral concept or a religious teaching is neglected not only by those values clarification programmes whose design omits any reference to conscience in moral choice. Conscience is equally neglected, and its rights are even violated, by any programme of moral instruction which seeks, either overtly or covertly, to align the pupils' conscience with a particular body of precepts. Such attempted alignment suggests that conscience itself is more a matter of submissive acquiescence than a matter of circumspection in discerning the universal; more a matter of prompt obedience than of reflection and sincerely informed choice.

The answer which is taking shape to our question – Can goodness be taught? – can now be roughly summarized along the following lines: Our efforts to teach goodness are likely to come to grief unless they take the form of a conscientious and collaborative effort to discern *what goodness is* in any particular set of circumstances. The fact that as teachers we can involve ourselves with our pupils in getting such searching efforts underway is precisely the most promising – and the most daunting – prospect which was mentioned in the previous section and which now calls for closer attention. The promising aspect lies in the possibility of building *with our pupils* an ethos where critical discernment habitually mingles with generosity of spirit in an adventurous interplay with religious or moral tradition. The daunting aspect lies not merely in the demanding task of bringing about this ethos and interplay, but, more ominously perhaps, in the awareness that the spiritual and moral sensibilities which become nourished in this event – and in a special way those of 'weaker' pupils – may find themselves in conflict with established moral tradition or established religious authority. History provides us with more than a few famous examples of the point that it is the very success of the moral educator's efforts which invariably irks the representatives of the established pieties.

This open-ended interplay then, this opening anew of the question 'What constitutes goodness?' with each group of pupils, seems a radical, or iconoclastic answer to our question 'Can goodness be taught?' It seems to imply that there is some goal such as 'moral autonomy' which is independent of established authority and tradition. Perhaps if this thorny point could be resolved, the practical business of *bringing about* the kind of interplay mentioned might



then just be promising and demanding, which it is, rather than daunting, which it should not be. Let us therefore attempt this resolution, albeit in a summary way, in the concluding section.

#### THE AUTHORITY OF TRADITION

The choice of the term 'interplay', above, to describe the kind of approach which is appropriate to moral education, is in no way a casual choice. Firstly, from the side of religious or moral tradition, the word interplay calls attention to the shortcomings of the word 'transmission', which is more commonly used in this context. What is sincerely addressed to the pupils in an educational interplay calls for their sincere *response*. Secondly, from the side of the pupils, this response is not merely ungenerous, but indeed is mistaken, if it believes itself to be the expression of a radical moral autonomy. The notion of radical moral autonomy is itself an illusion. Every dismissal of the claims of authority and tradition is itself *indebted* to a contrary tradition; for instance a critical Enlightenment tradition, a revolutionary or nihilist tradition, or even an *avant-garde* sub-cultural tradition.

This fact of our inescapable indebtedness to, or dependence on our forgotten and remembered cultural influences is all too rarely acknowledged, but it is precisely what makes every act of understanding, every interpretation and every judgement a human *interplay*, as distinct from a biological or physical process. Thirdly, the interplay as a *play* - of thoughts, arguments, possibilities and so on, - takes wing as it were, and gives rise to an absorbing ethos *of its own*. This experience is variously familiar to us from our involvement, even as spectators, in memorable field games, or stage plays; from reading a good book; from participating in a thoughtful discussion; from the attempt to write an article such as this; and not least from the instance of the class which ends with the bell taking both pupils and teacher by surprise.

The word interplay then is not a semantic decoration, but, in the senses described, show how we are already *actually* related to tradition in our everyday dealings, and also provides a clue as to how we might, *educationally*, make such a relation and such dealings more fruitful and enduring. This interplay therefore serves to identify experience which is properly educational, and to distinguish it from that which is not. But how is the question of traditional authority to be tackled in the interplay? This is a rather urgent question for anyone who is a teacher, and such urgency appreciates frank answers. Such an answer, which is at the same time a thought-provoking answer, is provided by the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer:

Thus the recognition of authority is always connected with the

then just be promising and demanding, which it is, rather than daunting, which it should not be. Let us therefore attempt this resolution, albeit in a summary way, in the concluding section.

#### THE AUTHORITY OF TRADITION

The choice of the term 'interplay', above, to describe the kind of approach which is appropriate to moral education, is in no way a casual choice. Firstly, from the side of religious or moral tradition, the word interplay calls attention to the shortcomings of the word 'transmission', which is more commonly used in this context. What is sincerely addressed to the pupils in an educational interplay calls for their sincere *response*. Secondly, from the side of the pupils, this response is not merely ungenerous, but indeed is mistaken, if it believes itself to be the expression of a radical moral autonomy. The notion of radical moral autonomy is itself an illusion. Every dismissal of the claims of authority and tradition is itself *indebted* to a contrary tradition; for instance a critical Enlightenment tradition, a revolutionary or nihilist tradition, or even an *avant-garde* sub-cultural tradition.

This fact of our inescapable indebtedness to, or dependence on our forgotten and remembered cultural influences is all too rarely acknowledged, but it is precisely what makes every act of understanding, every interpretation and every judgement a human *interplay*, as distinct from a biological or physical process. Thirdly, the interplay as a *play* – of thoughts, arguments, possibilities and so on, – takes wing as it were, and gives rise to an absorbing ethos of *its own*. This experience is variously familiar to us from our involvement, even as spectators, in memorable field games, or stage plays; from reading a good book; from participating in a thoughtful discussion; from the attempt to write an article such as this; and not least from the instance of the class which ends with the bell taking both pupils and teacher by surprise.

The word interplay then is not a semantic decoration, but, in the senses described, show how we are already *actually* related to tradition in our everyday dealings, and also provides a clue as to how we might, *educationally*, make such a relation and such dealings more fruitful and enduring. This interplay therefore serves to identify experience which is properly educational, and to distinguish it from that which is not. But how is the question of traditional authority to be tackled in the interplay? This is a rather urgent question for anyone who is a teacher, and such urgency appreciates frank answers. Such an answer, which is at the same time a thought-provoking answer, is provided by the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer:

Thus the recognition of authority is always connected with the

idea that what authority states is not irrational and arbitrary, but can be seen, in principle, to be true. This is the essence of the authority claimed by the teacher, the superior, the expert.<sup>4</sup> Gadamer's reputation as one of the most distinguished of living philosophers rests partly on his cogent restoration of worthiness and dignity to the notions of authority and tradition, thus challenging the various contemporary legacies of a critical Enlightenment spirit. His arguments are therefore especially worthy of our attention. In particular, the point that needs to be emphasized is the continuing necessity on the part of teachers and pupils to come, uncoerced, to be of one mind. In the absence of such participatory leadership on the teacher's part, in the absence of the kind of ethos recommended in the preceding pages, authority claims which can be seen in principle to be *true* by a community of believers who already share a voluntary avowal of faith, may well be seen to be *in principle unconvincing* by those multitudes of pupils who do not readily share such an avowal.

It was a growing awareness of the difficulties encountered by moral and religious education in Irish post-primary schools - and of the controversies arising from some of the new attempts to deal with the difficulties - which prompted the present article. By way of summary and conclusion then, the central suggestion of my argument is as follows. Moral and religious traditions, particularly in an era of mass education and radical pluralism, must be encountered in *schools* on properly *educational* foundations. The energies that this shift of emphasis releases, the resourcefulness which it encourages and the dramatic engagement which it makes possible, does not mean that the doctrinal contents of a particular tradition must be set aside. Rather it means that it is through a singular kind of interplay that these contents now become characteristically encountered *in schools*: a continually renewed interplay with well-chosen and well-presented examples of life's predicaments and experiences, both hypothetical and real. Innovations of this kind have indeed been a feature of Religion teaching in a growing number of Irish schools in recent times. When properly conceived and carried out such teaching in no way interferes with the more explicitly doctrinal and devotional encounter with religious tradition in a church. It recognizes however the difference between multitudes and disciples.

Some religious authorities, both within and outside of schools, may be reluctant to grant that the encounter with religious tradition in schools should be exploratory rather than didactic in character.

4. Hans-George Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975), p. 249. Translated from the second edition, 1965, of *Wahrheit und Method*, by Garrett Barden and John Cumming.



The issue must be seriously faced however and not merely because of the negative point that a failure to do so will yield a dismal harvest. More positively, decisive ecclesiastical and parental support for such a shift might make the task of teachers in tackling the question posed in our title not only promising and demanding, as described in this article. It might also make it fulfilling in an enduring sense for both teachers and pupils alike; a consummation devoutly to be wished.

---

**The human reality of chronic poverty.** Statistics and trends, however well defined, remain abstract. They cannot convey to people who have never experienced poverty, the suffering of the traveller by the roadside, the isolation of the single parent and the elderly person who lives alone, the despair of the unemployed, the humiliation of the imprisoned and the homeless. This human reality includes:

- the sense of humiliation that is felt from knowing that one is shut out from the normal activities of society;
- the constant and often impossible battle of wits involved in 'making ends meet' when the basic weekly income is insufficient for the bare necessities;
- the resentment swelling to outrage, felt by so many at the vulgar display of wealth that takes place so tauntingly close to a growing constituency of despair;
- the chronic exhaustion which grips those who are constantly scrambling to survive on a treadmill of fatigue and anxiety;
- the dreariness of a monochrome existence, unbroken by opportunities to make choices in life and denied all chances of planning for a brighter future;
- the displacement of individuals across the greater Dublin area, who because of the frustration of travel, find it impossible to maintain family relationships;
- the dislocation of families and whole communities by emigration;
- the stress on family relationships too often leading to alcoholism, drug abuse, homelessness, violence and family break-up;
- the bitterly clear understanding that 'a rising tide does not lift all boats';
- all of this barely mitigated by a forlorn hope that some day, somehow, some things may change for the better.

—*Pre-Budget Submission*, Catholic Social Service Conference, 1989, p. 2.