

Democratic Education and Social Learning Theory

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THE ROLE OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE THEORY OF DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

In a passage that anticipates a large contemporary literature about the aims of public education, Amy Gutmann asserts that common schools help children to develop “the capacities for choice among good lives” so they can participate “in collectively shaping their society.” State control and the principle of non-repression prevent adults from limiting children’s deliberative scope. Though parents and community may legitimately predispose children toward some conceptions of the good life and away from others, they may not “sanction imposition of non-critical consciousness on children.”¹

This account, which is echoed in many subsequent accounts of democratic education and defenses of common schools,² depends on a number of important premises about moral development which are not closely examined, but which contribute significantly to the conclusion about the necessity of common education. One key premise is that opportunities to compare and criticize different modes of life will lead students to choose among them on rational grounds. A more general underlying premise is that moral development is the development of the capacity for moral reasoning.

Critics of the liberal democratic program and democratic education in particular have focused on political issues such as state neutrality, pluralism, and the legitimacy of public authority in education.³ Little attention has been paid to democratic theorists’ assumptions about moral development. Yet Gutmann’s premises about what moral development is and where it leads are not uncontested. On the contrary, they represent key tenets of one of several research programs in this field, namely the cognitive developmental approach growing out of the work of Piaget and Kohlberg. As Kenneth Goodpaster observes, Kohlberg’s program confers moral legitimacy on a certain type of educational program, which happens to be the one Gutmann is arguing for.⁴

Given Gutmann’s evident reliance on cognitive developmental assumptions, an adequate assessment of democratic education would appear to require consideration of alternative understandings of moral development. This essay examines the major alternative to the cognitive developmental approach, social learning theory, as a contending account of moral development that might generate conclusions quite different from Gutmann’s. The second section sketches traditional social learning theory, reviews one influential criticism, and identifies a parallel difficulty with the cognitive developmental approach. Section three introduces an updated model, developed by Joan Grusec and Jacqueline Goodnow, which is shown to avoid the difficulty of the traditional approach and provide a more comprehensive view of children’s moral development. Section four applies the Grusec-Goodnow model to

a famous pedagogical example — Jane Elliott’s brown-eyes/blue-eyes exercise — and shows that it accurately describes Elliott’s strategies and explains reported changes in the students’ beliefs and behavior. Section five concludes the inquiry by outlining implications of contemporary social learning theory for democratic education. If one accepts the Grusec-Goodnow model, it is considerably more difficult to argue that common schools are either the only or the best way to prepare children for citizenship in a democratic society.

SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL POLICY

Social learning theory, pioneered by Albert Bandura and developed by H. J. Eysenck and Justin Aronfreed, among others, attempts to explain the process by which a person who adheres to a certain moral principle or value induces someone else to adhere to it too. The person who acquires the value is said to have *internalized* it if she acts on it independently, without external inducement or surveillance.

The process has mechanistic overtones. Social learning theory grows out of the behaviorist tradition from which it borrows as a central premise the Law of Effect — the principle that human action is a response to environmental stimuli. Thus a person espouses a preferred set of moral principles rather than others because, in Thomas Wren’s words, “its adoption has resulted in more reinforcing events.”⁵ The basic idea is that a child’s early experience of disapproval and punishment, on the one hand, or praise, approval, and reward on the other, builds up associations between certain kinds of conduct and positive or negative affect. When a person has reached moral maturity, recognition that a course of conduct falls within one category or another stimulates expectations of pleasure or pain. The individual is thereby impelled to seek one course of conduct and to avoid another. What we refer to as conscience is nothing more than these anxious or pleasurable anticipations.⁶ In Eysenck’s felicitous phrase, conscience is “conditioned anxiety.”⁷

As Paul Crittenden points out, this version of social learning theory is conspicuously deficient as an account of moral development because it offers no place for self-regulation or judgment.⁸ The basic motivational structure of the conscientious person is not qualitatively different from that of a young child who seeks reward or fears punishment. “Internalization” just means that the anticipation of pleasure or pain has been sufficiently strengthened to serve as motivation without actual consequences. True, as Aronfreed emphasizes, there is a cognitive aspect of values, but the role of judgment is not to think about the intrinsic goodness or badness of an action, but rather to assign it to the correct category of action so the appropriate affect is engaged.

Another way to express this objection is that social learning theory allows no role for higher-order motivation. According to Aronfreed, motivation is generated by the “quality and magnitude of the affectivity associated with the conduct.”⁹ There is no role for what William Alston calls “self-intervention” — that is, intentional effort to “change one’s motivational processes from what they would otherwise have been.”¹⁰ In cases of moral conflict, there is no basis for rational review of competing values; the outcome of the conflict is decided by the relative strength of the

affectivities involved. This view echoes Skinner's assertion that "a person is not an originating agent," but rather an intersection of genetic and environmental influences.¹¹ The fully formed conscience, according to Aronfreed's account, would have no standpoint from which to evaluate motives.

Given the gaps in this version of social learning theory, it is not surprising that Gutmann would not incorporate it into her argument for democratic education. A person whose rules of conduct are brought about by conditioning exercises no real control over herself and hence is unfit for a share in collective self-government. The cognitive developmental approach apparently avoids this difficulty, since the child's developing powers of reason increase her capacity to criticize behavioral standards promoted by others and thus lead, in theory at least, to a progressively greater capacity for self-determination.

There is, however, a major disadvantage to the cognitive approach: namely, the existence of a gap between reasoning and action. As Bill Puka points out in his defense of Kohlberg, the influence of reasoning on "decision outcomes" is "partial and somewhat indirect"; the relation of reasoning to choice "remains to be uncovered."¹² Denis Krebs and Kathy Denton contend the problem is more serious: in real life, sophisticated moral reasoning may be used to disguise one's actual motivation in order to make action more socially acceptable.¹³

The lack of a connection between moral reasoning and action poses a serious problem for Gutmann. Even assuming that Gutmann is correct and democratic education increases sophistication of children's evaluative reasoning, there is no clear link between reasoning and action. Without such a link, it is unclear how moral education in schools promotes autonomy or helps to ensure children an "open future." Common education, in short, would seem to contribute very little to children's moral agency; at most it ensures that their actions are conditioned by a set of influences not chosen by parents. Contrary to advocates' claims, common education is not uniquely suited to prepare children to be self-governing citizens rather than subjects manipulated by the will of others.

These difficulties do not in themselves disqualify the cognitivist approach as an account of democratic moral development. To seal the objection, one would have to show that the leading alternative succeeds in bridging the gap between moral reasoning and action. Do contemporary versions of social learning theory allow for self-intervention and moral judgment? Does more recent research in this tradition overcome the objections of Wren and Crittenden? That is the question addressed in the next section.

THE ROLE OF MORAL JUDGMENT IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY

Grusec and Goodnow's model summarizes research on how parenting strategies affect the way children internalize values.¹⁴ Internalization is represented as a two-stage process. Children first perceive parents' values, and then decide whether or not to accept them. Cognitive elements figure in both stages. The question is whether this cognitive dimension fills the gap identified by Wren and Crittenden — whether it qualifies as self-intervention.

Stage 1 includes the child's reception of parents' messages and her assessment of their importance. Cognitive factors play a role from the start. The message must be expressed clearly, consistently, and sincerely, and these characteristics depend in part on what the child understands, observes, and remembers.

There are two ways parents can emphasize the importance of messages: through "use of power assertive interventions and dramatic modes of presentation that may draw the child's attention"; and by indirect presentations that "require the child to decode the parent's position and thereby aid comprehension." The latter requires cognitive effort by the child, and this is reinforced by a final requirement. The parent must help the child understand not only the immediate rule or request, but also the "meta-rule or implicative structure" — the logical interconnections between higher and lower-order values, between general principles and specific choices and patterns of conduct.¹⁵

The child's reason figures prominently throughout Stage 1. But does this cognitive involvement amount to the exercise of moral judgment? *Elements* of moral judgment are obviously involved. Coherence and sincerity are essential characteristics of valid moral claims, and the child must grasp their implicative structure in order to act on them. But these are not the whole of moral judgment. One can envision non-moral or immoral norms with a clearly described implicative structure promoted in a coherent and sincere way. Besides, the child is influenced by non-rational factors such as power assertion and "dramatic presentation." To this point the child's reasoning is not sufficient to rebut Wren and Crittenden.

In Stage 2, the child accepts or rejects the parent's message, based on three factors: (a) the child's judgment of the propriety of parental intervention, (b) the child's motivation, and (c) the child's perception of the value as "self-generated" rather than imposed from outside.

In what sense does a child judge the propriety of parents' intervention? Non-moral considerations include the suitability of parents' action to the child's age, mood, and temperament and the child's estimate of whether it is well-intentioned or not. Other elements, however, do involve moral judgment. Is the action suited to the type of conduct involved? Judith Smetana notes that even quite young children recognize different domains of action, and moral exhortation about conduct in the domain of social convention or personal discretion strike children as unfair and incongruous.¹⁶ The child must also ascribe "truth value" to the parents' position. Is the conduct they promote really valuable in the way that they claim?¹⁷ In both cases, the child's moral judgment comes into play.

The Grusec-Goodman comments about motivation have behavioristic overtones, but these turn out to be superficial. The child's inclination to resist must be weakened, and to accept, strengthened. But the stick and carrot are not the traditional external reinforcers that critics of behaviorism point to as a threat to autonomy. On the contrary, the primary Grusec-Goodman strategy for weakening resistance is to *avoid* threatening the child's autonomy, for example, by minimizing "power assertion," using humor, and relying on "indirect messages" rather than direct

exhortation. Reason is the preferred strategy if parents want to avoid power struggles.

The carrots — sources of positive motivation — are also very unlike the external reinforcers preferred by behaviorists. They include “empathic arousal” — concern for others helped or harmed by one’s conduct — and anxiety about potential harm to oneself. A warm relationship which encourages identification with parents also contributes to motivation, as do parents’ prior concessions to the child, which invite reciprocity. The child, in short, is responding not so much to what parents do as to her own thoughts and feelings, which parents are able to elicit only indirectly.

The third factor affecting acceptance involves the child’s perception of the origins of the value. The child who sees the value as originating in herself rather than the parent will be less inclined to resist. Parents can reinforce this perception by minimizing overt pressure and by letting the child do some of the cognitive work, for example, by asking what the consequences of conduct are likely to be.

The Grusec-Goodnow model offers a picture of social learning theory very different from that presented by Wren and Crittenden. The child’s cognitive involvement has expanded far beyond the classificatory role assigned by Aronfreed. The internalizing subject is now expected to make judgments on issues ranging from message consistency and parents’ sincerity to the domain of the conduct and the “truth value” of parents’ assessment. Affective elements such as empathic arousal and prudential anxiety also play a role. These elements are not imposed, however, but rather elicited through the child’s perception of the effects of conduct on self and others. Power assertion by parents aids internalization only when used initially to attract the child’s attention; thereafter, its use inhibits internalization by provoking resistance. In short, recent research represents internalization as a process of persuasion culminating in a child’s conscious decision to abide by a norm for what she considers good reasons. The norm can not be forced on her or sneaked past her rational faculties by conditioning.

How does the phenomenon this model describes — children’s internalization of their parents’ values — differ from socialization, in which norms of a society or a specific subgroup may be acquired with very little cognitive filtering? Grusec and Goodnow point out that internalization is promoted not just by parenting strategies but also by environmental characteristics and social reinforcement. Parenting strategies, however, are of particular interest because they represent intentional moral education, which social reinforcement may not, and because parents promote *resistance* to social reinforcement, especially from peers. In a society in which parental values were widely reinforced and opposed values discouraged, the cognitive threshold for value transmission would be a lot lower. The Grusec-Goodnow model, then, is tailored specifically for *counter*-socialization — training of the child to resist social reinforcement. This is precisely the kind of moral education Gutmann envisions for common schools, which are supposed to help students avoid unreflective acquisition of values imposed through social pressure.

The Grusec-Goodnow model avoids the difficulties that Wren and Crittenden pointed out in older versions of social learning theory. Children’s internalization of

values is linked to their moral judgment. Contemporary social learning theory thus provides resources that the cognitive developmental approach lacks. But is this approach really viable in the classroom? To test the relevance of the model to the school setting, the next section examines a famous and well-documented classroom activity, Jane Elliott's brown-eyes/blue-eyes exercise.

BROWN-EYES/BLUE-EYES: CHILDREN'S INTERNALIZATION
OF ANTIDISCRIMINATORY VALUES

The brown-eyes/blue-eyes exercise is a lesson in discrimination: first the blue-eyed students are treated as inferior, then the brown-eyed students. The children experience both the pain of subordination and the intoxication of dominance. After the exercise, the return to equality is euphoric. The children, it is hoped, understand the terrible harm and loss caused by discrimination.

The exercise was first conducted in Jane Elliott's third-grade class in the Riceville, Iowa Community Elementary School in 1968 and repeated yearly until Elliott left teaching in 1986. In February 1970, it was filmed by ABC News producer William Peters.¹⁸ In a book-length study of the exercise, Peters makes clear that Elliott's aim was internalization of a specific value. The Sioux prayer, "keep me from ever judging a man until I have walked a mile in his moccasins," sums up the lesson she intended. Elliott was aware of racist attitudes in the community, and did not expect her teaching to be reinforced there.¹⁹ On the contrary, she wanted children to be able to resist social pressure to condone bigotry. Brown-eyes/blue-eyes was an experiment in countersocialization.

Stage 1 of the Grusec-Goodnow model involves children's perception of the value and its importance to an adult mentor. Elliott's third-graders readily understand the content, but not the importance: "They felt sorry for black children; they didn't think it was fair for them to be treated differently. And they had had enough of the subject. Dr. King's death had been adequately disposed of. I could easily have stopped right there" (CD, 16). To overcome this "attitude of sympathetic indifference," Elliott uses several Grusec-Goodnow strategies: indirect presentation (asking children if they know what it was like to be black and if they would like to find out); power intervention (initiating the exercise and continuing it despite children's discomfort); and dramatic mode of presentation (interrogating blue-eyed children and pointing out their faults).

Stage 2 of the model involves the propriety of the intervention, the child's motivation, and the child's perception of the value as self-generated.

The film clearly shows that the children accept the propriety of Elliott's intervention. Rapport is strong; the exercise is explained at their level; the moral lesson is not forced on them. Since the lesson is drawn entirely from children's experience, they have no reason to doubt its truth value. There is no question of it being imposed from outside; in summing up what they have learned, Elliott links every comment to their actions or feelings.

Motivation, a perennial classroom concern, figures prominently at three key points: at the outset, when children agree to the project; after the first day, when in-

group children are uncertain about returning and switching roles; and at the end, when the children accept the lesson, throwing down the collars identifying the out-group and symbolically rejecting discriminatory conduct. Grusec-Goodnow strategies figure prominently at all three points.

At the outset, Elliott avoids exhortation, minimizing the threat to autonomy. The exercise is introduced not by a command but by a question. At first, the children are hesitant, but Elliott's explanation kindles enthusiasm. Peters comments that the exercise "sounded like a game" and was seen as an "escape from the ordinary routine of a school day" (CD, 20). The children have been offered something in exchange for their cooperation. Reciprocity plays a key role in Elliott's approach to classroom management.

During the exercise, delight in dominance motivates the in-group. The out-group is trapped and need not be motivated. The in-group children are evidently powerless not to return the next day when roles are reversed. Though children later wrote that they wanted to quit school, slap, kick, and tie up dominant-group classmates, and blow up the teacher, their social circumstances made resistance impossible.

What motivates children ultimately to accept the lesson? Empathetic arousal and prudential anxiety clearly play a role. The children know they have been hurt by discrimination. But why do they take out their hostility on the collars that symbolize bigotry rather than on each other and on Elliott, the instigator? Reciprocity and warmth both play a role here. The children had agreed to the exercise and could not blame Elliott or each other for its consequences. Moreover, the warmth in the classroom before and after the exercise is palpable. Elliott loved her job, enjoyed the children's company, and delighted in their "sense of wonder at anything new." She delayed the filmed exercise to ensure that she had established a good relationship with each child. Without exception, their pictures showed her "with a broad smile" (CD, 11, 51, 54). Children evaluated discriminatory conduct against a background of warmth and acceptance; their moral insight depended heavily on the contrast between the two. When students hugged each other after the exercise, Elliott asked, "Does that feel like being home again?" (CD, 95). If she had not been able to say that, the exercise would have turned out differently.

Internalization theory promises a link between adult teaching strategies and children's behavior. Elliott's exercise fulfills this promise. One student asked grandparents not to use racial epithets. Others challenged teachers' racist comments. At a class reunion, former students reported resisting racist attitudes in adulthood (CD, 41, 108, 123-134).

The brown-eyes/blue-eyes exercise shows that the Grusec-Goodnow model can be generalized to educational contexts outside the family. Under certain conditions teachers can do what parents try to do: inculcate their own values in children, in the process enhancing rather than bypassing students' critical faculties. The school can be a site of countersocialization. As Gutmann's account of democratic education envisions, it can foster students' autonomy by enabling them to act in accordance

with their own moral judgment, rather than accepting family, group, or community norms uncritically and acting in whatever way receives the most social reinforcement.

Social learning theory, then, can easily be adapted to the aims of democratic education. But could Gutmann and others embrace this approach without undercutting the results they are arguing for? That is the question addressed in the concluding section.

CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS OF
SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY FOR DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

Gutmann is not entirely unaware of the shortcomings of the cognitive developmental approach. Moral education based only on reasoning, she acknowledges, will not necessarily lead children to the right conclusions: “Children first become the kind of people who are repelled by bigotry, and then they feel the force of the reasons for their repulsion. The liberal reasons to reject bigotry are quite impotent in the absence of such sensibilities.”²⁰ Gutmann does not say how children might develop the appropriate sensibility, but the Grusec-Goodnow model provides one possible means. Embracing social learning theory, however, would be problematic for other aspects of democratic education.

According to Gutmann, state-sponsored education is needed to counterbalance parental influence, which, if left unchecked, would effectively disable children’s critical faculties. If the Grusec-Goodnow model is correct, this result is unlikely. Parents can “predispose” children to adopt their own values only if they appeal to reason and promote their values in a way that respects children’s autonomy. State intervention is not required to shield children from parental manipulation.

Second, democratic theorists identify common schools as propitious for processes that contribute to moral development, such as perspective-taking and promotion of empathy. Although these are both included in the Grusec-Goodnow model, they are part of a larger structure that is not obviously better suited to common schools than other educational contexts. Not surprisingly, the model figures prominently in religious schools, such as those described by David Hanson,²¹ Alan Peshkin,²² and Anthony Bryk, Valerie Lee, and Peter Holland.²³ True, the brown-eyes/blue-eyes exercise takes place in a public school, but the remedial class Elliott taught in 1970 in all-white Riceville is very unlike the inclusive settings common school advocates envision. If reason-based value transmission takes place in these non-inclusive settings, it is not clear what advantage common schools provide.

Third, the model requires explicit teaching of specific moral content. In plural societies, it is unclear that the teacher as public official can legitimately transmit any but the least controversial values in this way. Arguably these values are most strongly supported by social reinforcement and thus least in need of transmission. The model is designed for *counter*-socialization — for public institutions, a dubious undertaking. Even if school officials may *allow* teachers to engage in countersocialization, as they did in Riceville, they cannot legitimately *require* them to do so. Except in the case of charter schools, which can select faculty members who

share a common philosophy, public schools are not in a position to plan a coherent program of countersocialization. If common schools cannot inculcate norms that enable students to resist social pressure, they are not a promising vehicle for promoting autonomy.

The Grusec-Goodnow model describes a kind of moral learning that equips children to resist social pressure and act on their considered moral judgment. The mechanism that produces this result, however, is not uniquely suited or even particularly well-suited to common schools. Thus social learning theory is unlikely to be embraced by democratic theorists such as Gutmann, Eamonn Callan, and Meira Levinson. Whether another account can be found to produce equivalent results with different means remains to be seen. Until it is, democratic education is vulnerable to the criticism that it offers no convincing account of how common schools contribute to students' moral agency and how they promote action in accordance with judgment rather than in response to conditioning.

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1. Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 39–44.
 2. See, for example, Eamonn Callan, *Creating Citizens: Political Education and Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997); Rob Reich, "Testing the Boundaries of Parental Authority over Education: The Case of Homeschooling," in *Nomos*, vol. 43, *Moral and Political Education*, ed. Stephen Macedo and Yael Tamir (New York: NYU Press, 2002), 275–313; and Meira Levinson, *The Demands of Liberal Education* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
 3. See, for example, William Galston, "Two Concepts of Liberalism," *Ethics* 105, no. 3 (1995): 516–534; Galston, *Liberal Purposes* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); William Galston, "Parents, Government, and Children: Authority over Education in the Liberal Democratic State," in *Nomos*, vol. 44, *Child, Family, and State*, ed. Stephen Macedo and Iris Marion Young (New York: NYU Press, 2002), 211–233; and Shelley Burt, "The Proper Scope of Parental Authority: Why We Don't Owe Children an 'Open Future,'" in *Nomos*, vol. 44, *Child, Family, and State*, 243–272.
 4. Kenneth E. Goodpaster, "Kohlbergian Theory: A Philosophical Counterinvitation," *Ethics* 92, no. 3 (1982): 491–498.
 5. Thomas Wren, "Social Learning Theory, Self-Regulation, and Morality," *Ethics* 92, no. 3 (1982): 409–424.
 6. This account is found in Justin Aronfreed, *Conduct and Conscience* (New York: Academic Press, 1968).
 7. H.J. Eysenck, "The Morality of Biology," in *Moral Development and Behavior*, ed. Thomas Lickona (New York: Holt, Reinhart, and Winston, 1976), 109.
 8. Paul Crittenden, *Learning to Be Moral: Philosophical Thoughts About Moral Development* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1990), 37–46.
 9. Aronfreed, *Conduct and Conscience*, 278.
 10. William Alston, "Self-Intervention and the Structure of Motivation," in *The Self: Psychological and Philosophical Issues*, ed. Theodore Mischel (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977), 76.
 11. B.F. Skinner, *About Behaviorism* (New York: Knopf, 1974), 168.
 12. Bill Puka, "An Interdisciplinary Treatment of Kohlberg," *Ethics* 92, no. 3 (1982): 469, 474.
 13. Dennis Krebs and Kathy Denton, "The Forms and Functions of Real-Life Moral Decision-Making," *Journal of Moral Education* 26, no. 2 (1997): 131–146.
 14. Joan Grusec and Jacqueline Goodnow, "Impact of Parental Discipline Methods on the Child's Internalization of Values: A Reconceptualization of Current Points of View," *Developmental Psychology* 30, no. 1 (1994): 4–19.

15. *Ibid.*, 14.

16. Judith Smetana, "Parenting and the Development of Social Knowledge Reconceptualized: A Social Domain Analysis," in *Parenting and Children's Internalization of Values*, ed. J.E. Grusec and L. Kuczynski (New York: Wiley, 1997), 162–192.

17. *Ibid.*, 14–15.

18. *The Eye of The Storm* (New York: ABC News, 1971). For an updated version, see *A Class Divided* (Washington, D.C.: PBS Video, 1985).

19. William Peters, *A Class Divided: Then and Now*, expanded edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 14–16. This work will be cited as *CD* in the text for all subsequent references.

20. Gutmann, *Democratic Education*, 43.

21. David Hansen, "The Moral Environment in an Inner-City Boys' High School," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 18 (2002): 183–204.

22. Alan Peshkin, *God's Choice: The Total World of a Fundamentalist School* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

23. Anthony Bryk, Valerie Lee, and Peter Holland, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).