

Values education

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where you sit on the political spectrum. "The right has its causes — creationism and sexual restraint. The left is ever alert to sexism and racism in textbooks. In the midst of this welter of controversy, educators may seek a position of neutrality," he noted. "They may suggest that academic freedom requires isolation from moralist criticism and that the aim of education is only values clarification, not values indoctrination."

O'Brien next offered what he termed "three mild suggestions," in the form of three propositions, which he then delineated. "The first proposition is that moral education in the schools is impossible; the second is that moral education in the schools is unavoidable; and the third is that moral education is not moral education. I believe all of those," he stated impassively, "with my whole heart and soul!"

His remarks drew laughter, yet they were intended to make three thought-provoking points — recapitulated here at the risk of rendering them overly simplistic.

Point A: Teaching moral philosophy to young students is a waste of time since, as Aristotle pointed out, the young lack the requisite experience afforded only by maturity, and are therefore not susceptible to lectures on ethics. In a sense, as O'Brien pointed out, one has to be moral before one can absorb moral lessons.

"Morality, one might say, is an acquired taste" or skill, O'Brien observed. "And until the nascent human being has acquired this specialized taste, he or she may think that ethics is just so much spinach."

"How does one acquire moral skills?" he queried. "Well, clearly not by going to lectures on ethical philosophy. Or even, I'm sorry to say, well-meaning school lessons on values. It is highly unlikely that one becomes courageous by reading books about courage ... Moral virtues are a matter of what they call training, not education. One learns to be courageous by performing courageous acts. It is a *habit* of courageous acts that we are interested in."

"Learning morality is therefore like learning athletic skills," he declared. "You learn to dribble by dribbling, not by reading a biography of Bobby Knight!"

Point B: Having argued that moral education in the schools is impossible because morality is a matter of training and habit while education is a matter of learning and knowledge, O'Brien then asserted that moral education is unavoidable; since some form of moral habit has to be a part of a student's reasoning apparatus even before kindergarten can go very well.

"So school performance, even in the most theoretical of subjects, requires a set of moral behaviors in order for the interchange of instruction and learning to occur," said O'Brien, who cited constancy, respect for authority, and the courage of one's convictions as desirable behaviors to inculcate in young students. "(1)n the very act of classroom exchange, we are continually relying upon and reinforcing a vast range of moral habits which, if not present, would make education impossible to ac-

complish?"

sies that swirl around the classroom teacher on the issue of morality, I'd like to believe that no one, on the right or the left, would object to instruction in the four square virtues ... In fact, I suspect that this, more or less, is enacted every day in all of our classrooms," said O'Brien. Controversy enters the picture, he added, when it comes to a point the ancients regarded as derivative: the critical or judgmental aspect of moral life.

Making decisions about certain actions as they relate to character was the course the ancient philosophers preferred, according to O'Brien. "On the sexual matters, for instance, that so dominate our moral disputes, the ancients would ask us to go back to the virtues in respect to pleasure, and ask us what sorts of characters we would like to have, relative to sexual pleasure."

O'Brien's points bears an interesting corre-

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**Dennis O'Brien, president
University of Rochester**

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Point C: Following a fascinating "parenthetical comment" about the role of popular music in instilling questionable values and views of education, O'Brien concluded by stating that moral education is not moral education, according to its typical definition as a matter of proscribed or approved actions or behaviors. "To put it bluntly, morality is not a matter of actions, sexual or otherwise; it is a matter of character," he asserted. What are known in classical philosophy as "the four square virtues" — courage, temperance, justice and wisdom — are actually four primary moral habits that mold character, rather than shaping "good" or "bad" actions, as such.

"Now, when one returns to the controver-

lution to an article by Secretary of Education Bennett, published in the July 3 issue of the National Review and entitled "Why Johnny Can't Abstain." In this discussion of sex-education curricula, Bennett cites the example of the "expected outcome" model of teaching about various "problem situations" in sexual ethics, in which teachers are told to encourage their students to explore all sides of the issue in question but refrain from making value judgments about the morally right course of action the students should pursue.

"(W)e should recognize that sexual behavior is a matter of character and personality, and that we cannot be value-neutral about it," wrote Bennett. "Neutrality only confuses children, and may lead them to conclusions we wish

them to avoid. Sex-education courses should teach children sexual restraint as a standard to uphold and follow."

Whether Dennis O'Brien would arrive by a different route at a similar conclusion may be a matter of conjecture, but O'Brien makes one point clear: some moral issues, he insists, are simply dilemmas. "There is no assurance ... that moral issues can be absolutely, always, consistently resolved ... and that, I think, is a part of moral wisdom," he concluded. "We do not live in an ideal world, and I would think that the inculcation of such moral wisdom ought to dampen the shrillness of some of our critics. So I urge you to teach such moral lessons with ardor in the classrooms of our land!"

Dr. Thomas Jones, principal of Brighton High School, who taught a subsequent workshop on "Improving Moral Reasoning: A Dilemma Discussion Approach," defined issues of justice or fairness — which he called the critical assessment or judgment dimension of the moral domain — as "the wisdom part of Dr. O'Brien's four squares." Even though Jones's approach to dilemma discussion closely paralleled the method deplored by Bennett in his article, perhaps moderator Neil Jaschik was right when he implied we're all more likely to agree than disagree.

An article published in the August 6 edition of the conservative Catholic weekly The Wanderer reports that members of the influential California State Board of Education have asked major publishers to include in textbooks more material pertaining to religion — specifically, teachings about the basic ideas of major religions and their ethical traditions.

Tom Jones, in his workshop, seemed to concur. "I am a strong advocate of teaching about religion in public schools, but I'm a firm opponent of teaching about religious doctrine in a public-school setting," he declared.

In his introductory remarks before the day's workshops began, Jaschik observed that we can't avoid the central issue of the conference "by pretending that value-neutral environments can be created."

"This is not a simple subject that will lend itself to simple answers, and I expect today will end with far more questions than newly found answers," he continued. "It is up to (educators) to begin the effort, however, because if we do not take up the challenge, those who choose to use the issue for their own ends will (do so), and that will be a tragedy for us all!"

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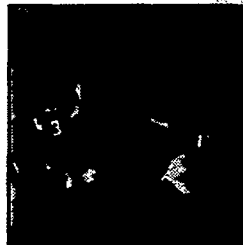
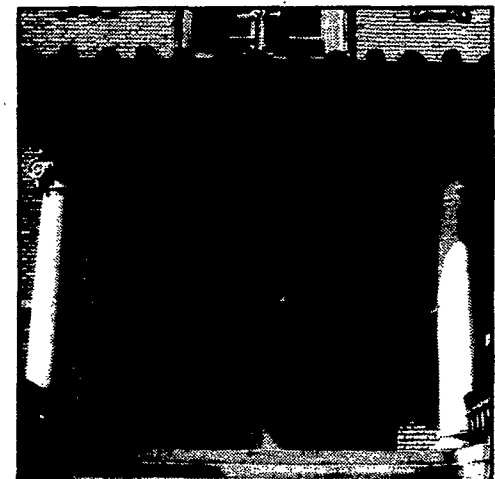
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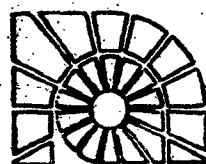
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