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Book Reviews/Comptes Rendus

Thompson, Dennis L., (editor). *Moral Values and Higher Education.* Albany, N.Y.: Brigham Young University, 1991, pp. vii, 179. Reviewed by Jerrold R. Coombs, University of British Columbia, Department of Social and Educational Studies.

In his introduction to this volume of ten essays, Thompson cites the opinions of a number of influential educators and social commentators to advance the view that contemporary American society is beset by moral confusion and the erosion of shared civic values, and that universities are failing in their responsibilities by not doing more to develop responsible moral values in students. Although not all of the essayists accept this view, all do focus squarely on the question of what universities can and should do with regard to the promotion of social morality. In the course of answering this question, they also come to grips with such basic and contentious issues as: the nature and fundamental purposes of universities, the desirability of universities taking a stand on moral issues in society, and the extent to which the organization, curriculum and ethos of the universities encourages morally responsible action on the part of faculty and students.

Coming from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, the contributors, who are mainly university teachers and administrators, bring considerable differences in tone and style to their essays; some are mainly hortatory, while others are quite analytical. The editor's introduction does a good job of calling attention to the various strands of argument and the areas of agreement and disagreement among the contributors.

On the central question of what universities should do about developing moral values in its students, the contributors offer a fairly wide range of views. At one end of the spectrum are Jeffrey Holland and James Billington who accept the premise that society is in moral difficulty and argue that universities ought to do more to inculcate moral values in students. Holland makes an impassioned plea for regarding the development of moral character and civic values as part of the basic purposes of higher education. Universities, he claims, have a duty to promote the shared civic values required for a healthy society. Holland's essay, however, leaves many crucial questions unanswered. We want

to know, but are not told, why the duty to inculcate shared values falls on universities as opposed to other institutions such as public schools; how the values to be inculcated are to be determined in a pluralistic society beset by serious moral disagreement; from whence the university's authority to promulgate morality derives; and how universities could promulgate moral values without indoctrinating students.

Acknowledging that universities are properly designed to inculcate intellectual standards and critical faculties rather than moral norms, Billington nonetheless contends that universities have an important role to play in checking the erosion of shared values in society. He identifies three ways in which universities can do a better job in this area: 1) imparting to all students basic knowledge about the Western tradition and the values implicit in it through the study of a common set of "great books;" 2) providing role models in the form of faculty who are committed to personal values as well as to intellectual discipline; 3) requiring everyone to take two or three courses which cover the core teachings of one great religion or other value system, and apply the teachings to contemporary personal and social problems. What is most remarkable about this essay is how unaware of the well known objections to such proposals Billington appears to be. He seems unaware, for example, of how unlikely it is that studying the Western tradition or some religion or value system will make a significant difference to students' moral values. Nor does he seem to appreciate the moral hazards in focussing on the Western tradition in a culturally pluralistic society.

At the other end of the spectrum stands Terrance Sandalow, who is skeptical of both the university's ability to inculcate moral values and its right to do so. Sandalow points out two significant difficulties faced by universities intent on transmitting a prescribed morality to its students in a pluralistic society. First, those who want universities to transmit values are divided into two camps: conservatives who believe that universities should instil in students an ethic of individual responsibility, i.e., honesty, respect for authority, etc.; and liberals who want universities to inculcate a commitment to making social changes that will remedy various social and economic ills such as racism, poverty, pollution, and the threat of war. This split causes difficulty, according to Sandalow, because there is no objective way for universities to choose between these options. A second difficulty is that a university is not likely to be successful in promulgating values that are different from those obtaining in other social contexts. But Sandalow is not entirely consistent in his views concerning the likelihood of

success in imparting moral values. He allows that universities can contribute to the development of character traits or virtues such as courage, patience and perseverance, which he believes to be compatible with pluralist values because they are necessary to the success of any sustained moral undertaking. It is not clear, however, why he thinks universities can be more successful at developing these virtues than at developing other moral values.

What universities should concentrate on, according to Sandalow, is developing the knowledge and capacity for disciplined thought on which moral judgment depends. Relevant knowledge, which includes knowledge of the issues to be judged and of the ideas that others have had about moral issues, can be gained by studying law, ethics and humanities. Relevant thinking abilities include the ability to develop sound arguments and the ability to free oneself from such hazards to clear thinking as self-interest, provincialism, and inability to tolerate uncertainty. While Sandalow's arguments against inculcating moral values are carefully developed, his views on the nature of good moral thinking are neither clear nor well supported. It is unclear, for example, why self-interest and provincialism are to be regarded as hazards to clear thinking rather than shortcomings of moral sensitivity or commitment. It is also unclear how knowledge of what others think about moral issues is to be taken into account in sound moral thinking.

Advancing a view somewhat similar to Sandalow's, James Laney suggests that the humanities, properly taught, would help students develop a wider and more humane vision of the good life and the good society, and provide them with the tools for critical judgment of people and institutions. But studying the humanities can have the desired effect, he believes, only if universities rekindle the ethos of the humanities which has been lost in increased concern for career preparation among students and increased emphasis on academic specialization on the part of the faculty. This ethos regards thinking critically about the fundamental assumptions and values operating in society as a central function of universities. Laney's recommendations that we attempt to teach people to think critically about moral values through the study of humanities is fairly standard fare. More interesting is his contention that we need a change in the ethos of universities if we are to be successful in educating morally responsible persons. If this is true, making moral education a significant function of the university will be a very difficult task indeed.

Although Abraham Kaplan rejects the thesis that society is experiencing unprecedented moral confusion or erosion of moral values, he maintains that

higher education has an important role to play in the moral education of students. This role is not simply to inculcate moral values, or teach knowledge relevant to informed moral choice. He argues that the customary or traditional morality in which people are raised is inadequate because it is unthinking. Because responsible morality is seldom the application of known solutions to already formulated problems, moral agents must reinterpret customary morality continually in order to make it applicable to new circumstances. The university's role is to teach students how to be responsible, reflective moral agents by providing them with the materials, tools and skills for moral reflection. This will enable them to replace customary morality with reflective morality.

Kaplan marshals both negative and positive arguments to support his position. On the negative side, he argues that the major moral epistemologies antithetical to his position, namely moral absolutism, emotivism and subjectivism, are false and dangerous. Unfortunately, his arguments are too brief and sketchy to convince anyone who is not already convinced. On the positive side, he argues that value judgments are objective, and that a value decision may be assessed by considering its consequences for the whole system of values of which it is a part. Here too the argument is unsatisfying, for Kaplan does not tell us how to determine the acceptability of the consequences in relation to the relevant system of values. This omission is of some importance, for if we interpret him to mean that a moral judgment is unjustified whenever its consequences would conflict with some part of our prior value system, moral reflection would seem to have little significance for reforming customary morality.

As a whole, this collection of essays may be valuable for persons just beginning to think about the role universities should play in the development of moral competence. For persons desiring a deep and careful analysis of the various possibilities, however, it is a disappointment. The basic concepts and issues discussed in this volume have been far more carefully analysed and criticised in the considerable body of work on moral education in secondary schooling that has been produced in the past twenty-five years. Unfortunately, none of the contributors to this collection seems to have any acquaintance with this work.