

Transmitting Moral Wisdom in an Age of the Autonomous Self

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ALTHOUGH THERE REMAIN a few skirmishes here and there, the reports from the front lines are decisive: the battle over the question “Whose values?” has ended. For almost two decades this culture war has raged on, pitting a platoon of character educators, parents, and citizens against those (in schools and out) who are either highly suspicious or skeptical of the character education agenda. In the end, the primary stakeholders in our schools answered this thorny question for themselves: local educators, parents, and civic leaders came together in communities as diverse as Chattanooga and Chicago to reflect upon, identify, and affirm a set of core values. Even a cursory look at these lists reveals that moral principles such as honesty, compassion, and respect are the sorts of attributes that parents want their children to learn in school, practice every day, and cherish forever. With remarkable clarity and unity, schools and communities across the United States have put the “Whose values?” question behind them.

Today the debate has shifted to an equally thorny question: “How should educators transmit these core values to our children?” I use the

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idea of “transmission” purposefully, recognizing that the term has little contemporary currency, and for many conjures an extrinsic, cold approach to learning that deflates the agency of the student in the learning process. I disagree with this conception of the term “transmission” and I am going to make the case in this chapter that transmitting moral knowledge and ideals is essential for the moral health of our American society.

My sense is that we no longer use the term “transmission” because some fear it will lead us down a slippery slope to that most villainous of educational terms: indoctrination. Indeed, from Lawrence Kohlberg’s seminal article “Indoctrination Versus Relativity in Value Education” in 1971 to Alfie Kohn’s writings throughout the 1990s, scholars and progressive educators have worried that the real agenda of character education is to indoctrinate our children.¹ For example, in his 1997 *Phi Delta Kappan* article, Kohn writes:

Let me get straight to the point. What goes by the name of character education nowadays is, for the most part, a collection of exhortations and extrinsic inducements designed to make children work harder and do what they’re told. Even when other values are promoted—caring or fairness, say—the preferred method of instruction is tantamount to *indoctrination*. (429, emphasis added).²

Kohn is not alone in his sentiment. I do not believe I use hyperbole when I suggest that there remains a significant group of progressive educators and scholars who continue to fear that should the grip of character education ever take firm hold in our schools, our next generation of children will become blindly obedient to authority, patriotic to a fault—and worst of all—pious and religious.³

1. See Lawrence Kohlberg, “Indoctrination versus Relativity in Value Education,” *Zygon* (1971): 285–310.

2. Alfie Kohn, “How Not to Discuss Character Education,” *Phi Delta Kappan* (1997): 429–39.

3. See Michael Apple and James Beane, eds., *Democratic Schools* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1995); James Beane,

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In order to prevent our schools from taking that perilously short stroll from transmitting values to indoctrinating students, progressive educators suggest that sovereign moral autonomy ought to be the endpoint of a moral education. Teachers should encourage young people to “author” their own moral constitutions. As Mark Tappan and Lynn Brown write: “In a very real sense students in a character education program are simply not encouraged to learn anything from their own moral experience, because such a program denies students any real moral authority in their own lives.”⁴ In contrast to the perceived dogmatism of character education, Tappan and Brown suggest that teachers ought to provide opportunities for students to reflect upon and tell their own moral stories (through poems, essays, plays, videos, and so on). By doing so teachers would be helping their students to “resist and overcome social and cultural repression” as well as to develop morally. Tappan and Brown concede that this emphasis and focus is rare in schools, but argue that it “would be even more difficult, if not impossible, to attain in an educational setting where all students are *indoctrinated* into a fixed set of traditional values, virtues, and rules of conduct”⁵ (p. 199, emphasis added).

Putting aside the inflammatory rhetoric of personal liberation, I glean from the writings of progressive educators that students should be honest and caring *only* when these values constitute their moral identity.

Affect in the Curriculum (New York: Teachers College Press, 1990); Rheta DeVries and Betty Zan, *Moral Classrooms, Moral Children: Creating a Constructivist Atmosphere in Early Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1994); Deborah Meier, *The Power of Their Ideas* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995); George Noblit and Van O. Dempsey, *The Social Construction of Virtue: The Moral Life of Schools* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996); David Purpel, *The Moral and Spiritual Crisis in Education* (New York: Bergin & Garvey, 1989); Gregory Smith, *Public Schools That Work: Creating Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

4. Mark Tappan and Lynn Mikel Brown, “Stories Told and Lessons Learned: Toward a Narrative Approach to Moral Development and Moral Education,” *Harvard Educational Review* 59:2 (1989): 182–205.

5. *Ibid.*, 199.

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This conception of moral identity focuses primarily on the authenticity of moral feelings and self-expression (“what feels good is good”). In addition, these educators repeatedly assert that something is terribly, terribly wrong if a student is honest or caring because these are the values that his or her parent, teacher, mentor, rabbi, or minister think important. The transmission of values from one generation to the next is dismissed by progressive educators as traditional or hegemonic or patriarchal in nature. In short, the moral umbilical cord must be severed cleanly and completely. Mikhael Bakhtin, a favorite theorist for many educational progressives, sums up this point of view when he writes: “[O]ne’s own voice, although born of another or dynamically stimulated by another, will sooner or later begin to *liberate* itself from the authority of the other discourses” (emphasis added).⁶

As Alasdair MacIntyre would put it, this strident emphasis on attaining moral autonomy, liberation, and transformation (at all costs) is a “grave, cultural loss.”⁷ It seems odd to me that to gain autonomy or to “own” your moral voice means having to liberate yourself from the sources of your core values—parents, mentors, religion, or mediating institutions such as Scouting and sports. Even John Dewey, whose philosophy of education remains an inspiration and ideal for many contemporary progressive educators, understood the need for transmission of values. In his classic book *Democracy and Education* Dewey writes: “Society not only continues to exist *by* transmission, by communication, but it may fairly be said to exist *in* transmission” (emphasis added).⁸ As Dewey suggests, the purpose of this chapter is to explore how vitally important it has been for each generation to transmit its moral wisdom to the next generation.

6. See Mikhael Bakhtin. *The Dialogic Imagination*. C. Emerson and M. Holquist, trans. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981): 348.

7. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

8. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1916): 4.

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Below I argue that parents, teachers, and schools transmit core values to their children and students in a myriad of creative ways and contexts, and that this traditional form of character education often “sticks to the bones” of our children and young people whereas more progressive strategies may miss the mark. More specifically, I consider two classical forms of a character education that require a process of moral transmission. First, I examine how parents and educators transmit values to their young by using and reinforcing a set of maxims and wise sayings that have motivational and moral significance. Second, I examine how educators transmit the values of honesty, trust, and integrity to older students through school-based honor codes. My purpose in examining these two traditional forms of moral education is to shed some light on their saliency and effectiveness in transmitting core values and ideals. I also explore how teaching maxims to children and implementing an honor code in high schools does or does not constitute a form of moral indoctrination. Finally, I anticipate and confront the question that I suspect concerns all progressive and character educators: Does transmitting moral maxims and the concept of honor to our young inhibit or impede their ability to develop their own sense of moral autonomy?

Maxims to Live By

For the past several years I have asked literally hundreds of people of all ages to share with me a maxim or “wise saying” that has been passed on to them. For example, my best friend told me that as he grew up his father said to him repeatedly “A job worth doing is a job worth doing well.” To this day, my friend still hears the voice of his dad as he approaches an important project. Indeed, while I wrote this chapter my twelve-year-old son, Tyler, told me about a maxim that he learned while talking to his friend, Chris. They were discussing how hard it would be for anyone to break the school record for the mile run. Chris turned to Tyler and said, “Maybe so, but winners never quit, and quitters never

win.” Not surprisingly, Chris told Tyler that his soccer coach uses that saying all the time.

I define a maxim as a concise formulation of a fundamental principle or rule of conduct. Scholars have often commented that the appeal of these wise sayings owes much to their compact, memorable nature as well as to their usefulness and timelessness. Although some maxims contain a pronounced moral purpose (“You are only as good as your word”), other maxims clearly do not (“Absence makes the heart grow fonder”). My own research focuses on how parents, family members, and teachers transmit wise sayings to children that have (potentially at least) moral and motivational power.

Maxims constitute civilization’s “memory bank.” Humanity has preserved these wise sayings because they encapsulate a fundamental principle that transcends the conventions of a particular culture or society. The frozen word order and archaic lexicon of many maxims (“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”) also mark their timeliness and sense of moral authority, which extend beyond the speaker. Indeed, maxims uncover the voice of a second party—the commanding voice of one’s elders, sages, or sacred ancestors. Consequently, whether maxims are seen as embodying universal truths or the norms of a society, they undeniably distill expressions of wisdom, or what Meider and colleagues call “apparent truths that have common currency” within a particular culture or society.⁹

Young people usually encounter a maxim by hearing it from another person—often a parent, relative, or teacher—within a specific social situation. In most cases, the person speaking or transmitting the maxim is attempting to exhort, persuade, inspire, offer caution, or to make a point. How many of us, during childhood, have heard our mothers say to us and our squawking siblings, “Two wrongs do not make a right”? As young people, we discovered the meaning of this exhortation

9. See S. Meider, S. A. Kingsbury, and K. B. Harder, *A Dictionary of American Proverbs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

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by our mothers' repeated use of the maxim. It is very likely that our mothers neither intentionally explained the meaning of the maxim, nor told us how they learned it, nor why it was so meaningful to them. Although the use of the maxim occurred mostly within the context of sibling conflict ("He hit me first!"), we eventually extended the meaning and use of this particular maxim to situations that had nothing to do with sibling rivalry. Today, we may even use the maxim in exactly the same context as our mothers did, now with our own children and grandchildren.

A growing body of research indicates, interestingly, that some cultures emphasize the "proverb tradition" more than others. Strong evidence demonstrates that proverbs within the African-American culture have a long and distinguished history as important "cultural keepsakes." Rarely taught to children in any formal context, these nuggets of truth are commonly discovered by the young while interacting with family and elders. In Prhalad's splendid book, *African-American Proverbs in Context*, he recalls how he came to appreciate the power of this linguistic form:

I fell in love with proverbs at an early age. I began collecting sayings from calendars and asking older people what they meant by some of the things that they said . . . [W]hen I was taken on walks through the woods and shown the beauty and mystery of plants, I might be told a proverb as a part of that experience. Or a story might be told about an enslaved ancestor who performed an incredible feat, with a proverb accompanying the narrative.¹⁰

Prhalad contends that adult-child interactions in general, and the in-home setting in particular, are the most fertile contexts for proverb and maxim use within the African-American community. Analyzing data from a number of sources, he concludes, "[W]hen informants are asked

10. Anand Prhalad, *African-American Proverbs in Context* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996): 122.

where they learned the proverbs that they use, most of their examples involve a parent using the proverb to them.”

Much of Prhalad’s fieldwork focuses on individuals he calls “proverb masters.” His research indicates that these individuals share several characteristics: (1) they usually grew up in a home where there was a “proverb master,” often an older relative such as a grandmother, from whom they learned to interpret and apply proverbs; (2) they tend to have been and remain very emotionally connected with that person; and (3) they usually assume the position of bearer and active guardian of the African-American cultural tradition. Significantly, Prhalad posits that these men and women begin their “apprenticeship” early in life, imitating the proverbs of their parents and grandparents, and then sharing their wise sayings with other children on the playground.

Prhalad also documents how children often hear and learn particular maxims and wise sayings from their teachers. For example, Prhalad acquaints us with Mrs. Dorothy Bishop, who teaches at Golden Gate Elementary School in Oakland, California. During his fieldwork at the school, Prhalad was astonished at the number of times that Mrs. Bishop used different proverbs to motivate her students. In addition, anecdotal evidence indicates that teachers frequently use maxims in their classrooms as devices to inspire (“Nothing ventured, nothing gained”), to caution (“What goes around comes around”), or to redirect the behavior of their students (“If you cannot say something nice, say nothing”).

In his recent memoir *Teachers of My Youth*, the distinguished philosopher of education, Israel Scheffler, reflects on the value one of his teachers placed on reciting and memorizing particular biblical passages:

In memorizing and reciting, we had used not only our eyes and ears but our vocal cords, not only our receptive apparatus but also our motor equipment—getting the feel of producing the words. [I]n becoming ours, these words would occasionally arise in our minds spontaneously; they would appear and sing freely, without waiting for an invitation. *They still visit me to this day and I am grateful to Mr.*

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Leideker for having such a stress on what is now often scorned as an outmoded pedagogical procedure (emphasis added).¹¹

Clearly, reciting a maxim aloud repeatedly or writing it in a copybook are two time-honored memorization strategies used by generations of elders and teachers. Whether they are Prhalad's proverb masters or teachers such as Mr. Leideker, elders have historically borne the responsibility to transmit these words of wisdom to their young.

Let me state my point emphatically: *While teachers should strive to have their students invest personal meaning in a wise saying, relying solely on affective or associative attachment to a set of maxims or proverbs without memorization strategies is ill-advised and shortsighted.* Drill and practice are essential components of a successful performance, whether it is on the athletic field, in the concert hall, or in a civic-minded and ethical life. If isolated from other strategies that guide students to connect what they are memorizing to their own experiences, drill does kill. Memory research confirms that information is more quickly and firmly embedded in memory when it is tied to meaningful experience, emotion, and personal motivation. However, I suggest that character educators should employ in their schools and classrooms the traditional method of challenging their students to memorize maxims and to develop creative strategies that help their students connect a particular maxim to their own experiences, feelings, and motivations.

Let's assume a high school teacher wants her children to learn the Christopher Brothers-inspired proverb, "It is better to light a single candle than to curse the darkness." Utilizing a number of strategies, she might guide her students to connect the meaning of the proverb to their own ethical experiences and moral identities. When have they stood up to confront a wrong or an injustice instead of simply turning the other way? She might also explain why this proverb is important to her (perhaps why she is a member of Amnesty International), or she might

11. Israel Scheffler, *Teachers of My Youth: An American Jewish Experience* (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995): 98.

offer examples of historical and contemporary moral exemplars who have embodied the proverb (such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn or Mother Teresa). Finally, she should develop an assessment tool to determine whether her students have developed the ability to grasp the meaning and importance of the proverb. Her assessment, however, should also include whether her students have successfully memorized the proverb.

Why is memorization of a maxim an important teaching outcome? I think E. D. Hirsch and his colleagues had it just right when they argued that there exists a cluster of maxims and proverbs that “every American needs to know.”¹² Just as stakeholders debated and eventually agreed on which core values should serve as guideposts for their character education programs, my own view is that local communities and educators should discern which maxims are most critical or important for children to learn.¹³ The point I want to underscore is that educators and elders have a historical responsibility to intentionally transmit a set of cultural keepsakes to our young. Although approaches and curricula have changed dramatically, for several millennia elders have provided their young with an apprenticeship into responsible adulthood. The challenge for us today is to weave a character education that emphasizes personal meaning as well as the time-honored method of memorizing maxims that have moral and motivational power.

12. E. D. Hirsch, J. Kett, and J. Trefil, *The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1998).

13. With support from the John Templeton Foundation, a number of communities and schools have begun to help their students identify a set of core maxims. For example, under the leadership of Donald Biggs and Robert Colesante, high school and elementary students in Albany, New York, recently interviewed adults and mentors in Albany to learn which maxims and wise sayings are used in the African-American community to transmit the importance of working hard and setting goals. See Robert Colesante and Donald Biggs, *The Fifth Albany Institute for Urban Youth Leadership Development: Teaching and Advocating for the Work Ethic*. Final report to the John Templeton Foundation, 2000.

A Code of Honor to Live By

Considerable anecdotal evidence suggests that today educators are struggling to find effective ways to transmit and inculcate a set of core values beyond the elementary school years. Clearly, most character education programs that emphasize core values are designed for K-6 students. By the time students enter high school, what we commonly call character education has often been conflated or watered down to mean nothing more than the prevention of harmful behaviors: alcohol and drug prevention, violence prevention, pregnancy prevention. These prevention programs focus largely on what high school students should avoid and rarely (if at all) do these initiatives reinforce or emphasize the constellation of core values that served as ethical touchstones during the elementary school years. There are some glaring exceptions to this rule. In this chapter, I would like to focus on the few private high schools in the United States that have an honor code system that forms the moral center from which all other activities related to character education spiral out. Although none of these schools advertise or even suggest that their honor code serves as a panacea or prophylactic to the array of harmful behaviors highlighted above, they proudly defend their honor code system as one of the primary pedagogical vehicles by which school officials, older students, parents, and alumni transmit the institution's core values to new and returning students.

At the postsecondary level, and largely through the efforts of the Center for Academic Integrity, a growing number of colleges and universities are initiating campus-wide programs to identify a set of fundamental values that underpin the standards of academic integrity. These core values include honesty, trust, respect, fairness, and responsibility. Recently, the Center has disseminated data collected by Donald McCabe and his colleagues showing that college campuses with academic honor codes do indeed have lower levels of student dishonesty than schools with other sorts of initiatives designed to uphold the im-

portance of academic integrity.¹⁴ Taken together, the anecdotal and empirical evidence is compelling and clear: *honor codes are effective in transmitting a set of core values to students*. The question I explore below is *why*.

What is an honor code? In high school settings only, at the most simplistic level, a school's honor code is nothing but a cluster of words that explain a school's policy related to honest and dishonest conduct. In most schools this policy is limited to academic work, while some honor codes may extend to all domains of personal and social responsibility. Whether a high school student reads about the code in the school handbook, learns about it during the admission or orientation process, or hears about it from faculty or fellow students, for most new students the honor code is likely to represent (at least in the beginning) nothing more than an official injunction against lying, stealing, or cheating related to academic work. Most administrators and faculty involved in honor education agree that personal interactions and experiences with the concept of honor is almost always required before new students begin to feel a sense of personal ownership related to the school's honor code.

There are several discrete approaches by which an honor code system is transmitted to students. For example, on some campuses a school's honor code has a strong tradition or history, and this story is transmitted to new students in a wide variety of ways—from historical narratives in the student handbook and school website to personal narratives during convocation where an administrator, faculty member, current student, or recent alumnus exhorts the students to uphold the “[fill in school's name] honor system.” Almost all schools (both secondary and postsecondary) hold a ceremony or honor convocation at the beginning of the academic year where the school formally asks each student to take an oath (either in writing or verbally) stating that he or

14. See Donald McCabe and Patrick Drinan, “Towards a Culture of Academic Integrity,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (October 15, 1999): B7.

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she will live by the fundamental values embodied in the honor system. When a strong honor system is in place, the honor code is reinforced and upheld by faculty members throughout the academic year.

Perhaps most important are the interactions of newer students with student leaders, who serve as the strongest defenders and advocates for the honor system. In many cases, these student leaders have the primary responsibility to educate the entire student body about the honor code system. Educators often remark that the depth of commitment that these students express and model in relation to the values of the honor code is critical in helping other students to understand that the honor system is not a cold structure but a “felt ideal.” Perhaps the motto of the cadets who serve on the honor code committee at West Point says it all: “The more we educate, the less we investigate.”

Finally, there are some students who come before the honor board or council itself, having been accused or found in violation of the honor system. In the publication *A Handbook for Developing and Sustaining Honor Codes* by David Gould (which focuses solely on honor systems at the high school level), a student from Saint Andrew’s High School, Boca Raton, Florida, offers his own unique perspective on what is learned when a student appears before a school’s honor council:

The experience of being brought before the honor board is far more powerful than that of being brought before the dean of students, for example. Here, a student must not only face his or her bad decisions, but he or she must also do so in front of a panel of peers. Having never come before the Saint Andrew’s honor board, I do not know the range of feelings that might surface during a hearing, but as a member of the honor board, *I can infer from students brought before the board that shame might be a predominant emotion.* A group of peers, some of whom might be in this student’s classes, have said that what he or she did was wrong and his or her actions did not meet the expectations of the student body. The power of such an experience should not be underestimated. I have known or heard of several students who, as ninth or tenth graders, were brought before the honor board and who subsequently become so dedicated to honor that, as eleventh or twelfth

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graders, they were chosen by faculty and students to join the honor board (emphasis added).¹⁵

The student's use of the term "shame" is critical here. The concept of honor, and how the ideal of honor is transmitted, cannot be fully understood or operationalized unless we understand the relationship between honor and shame. Damon has written that shame is a moral emotion that can form and shape our hearts and minds.¹⁶ This sort of shame is not toxic, certainly not in the way that shame is talked about most of the time in our contemporary culture. Instead, the avoidance of shame is often a powerful and positive moral motivator.¹⁷

The Greeks knew this well. *Aidos*, a term common to Greek plays and philosophy, denotes sensitivity to and protectiveness of one's self image. This moral emotion is not just a bodily sensation such as fear or anger; instead, *aidos* is an intense negative appraisal of the self. The moral emotion of *aidos* is felt when an individual believes he or she has committed a wrong.¹⁸

Within the context of classical Greek society, several components needed to be in place for a person to feel ashamed. First, there needs to be an audience. Unlike the feelings of guilt or embarrassment, feelings of honor and shame are inextricably bound up with a respected group of people. The etymology of the term "honor" clearly illustrates this reciprocal relationship. The term comes from the Latin *honor*, meaning an honor (such as receiving an honorary degree) awarded to

15. David Gould, *A Handbook for Developing and Sustaining Honor Codes* (Atlanta: Council for Spiritual and Ethical Education, 1999): 55.

16. William Damon, *The Moral Child* (New York: Free Press, 1988).

17. The concepts of honor and shame can only be understood within their historical context. In addition, honor and shame have historically meant something quite different for men and women. For a feminist analysis of shame, see Barbara Eurich-Roscoe and Hendrika Kemp, *Femininity and Shame: Women, Men, and Giving Voice to the Feminine* (New York: University Press of America, 1997).

18. I am indebted to Douglas Cairns's magisterial examination of the *aidos* concept. See Douglas Cairns, *Aidos: The Psychology and Ethics of Honour and Shame in Ancient Greek Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

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someone. Thus, the concept of honor historically was not something you have, but something given to you (by those you respect and whose respect you seek). For example, in *Richard II* Shakespeare writes, “Mine honor is my life. Take honor from me and my life is done.” At their fundamental core, the concepts of honor and shame are bound up with our obligations to others and our concern for the opinion of others.

Second, in Greek culture the emotion of shame emerges only when an individual has fallen short of a moral ideal that establishes what kind of person an individual is or would like to be. This is an important point to reinforce. Greek society placed great emphasis on the “excellences of persons” and on striving to attain such excellence in the right way, at the right time, for the right reasons. Thus, shame occurs only when an individual has strong desires to be a particular kind of person—and fails. Perhaps this may explain why a person of honor does what is right even in the absence of potential sanctions or the possibility of getting caught.¹⁹

Last, Greek society emphasized education as essential to honor. The elders knew that educating their young to have right desires was far more important than legislating laws and sanctions. For the Greeks (as well as for those in contemporary times), there are three time-tested methods used by educators to effectively transmit a moral standard of honor against which an individual or school wishes to be measured: (1) the ideal of honor needs to be clearly established, reinforced, and defended; (2) fundamental values of honor must be consistently modeled by teachers and elders; (3) ample opportunities for the young to practice (and eventually habituate) the values linked with the ideal of honor must be provided.

What is most important to recognize in terms of moral development theory is that a person’s attachment to the ideal of honor is both a cognitive and affective achievement. Aristotle calls this state *hexeis*, a

19. This perspective is frequently advanced by scholars in response to Plato’s question about the Ring of Gyges: Why would anyone not use the ring (which made the wearer invisible) to “take what he wanted from the market without fear?”

settled disposition that is long-lasting and therefore hard to change. That is, individuals who have internalized the virtues of honor (perhaps student leaders of the honor system) choose to uphold the honor code not because they fear being shamed or disgraced by their peers, but because they have acquired a personal, often emotional and visceral, revulsion against dishonest actions. This may help us better to understand the meaning of the phrase “for the love of honor.” Even individuals who are less emotionally attached to the concept of honor have a set of sturdy cognitive hooks to grab. They may realize that they can never be proud of anything they got by cheating, or they may reason that cheating is unfair to all people, or perhaps they comprehend that a person who cheats in school now will find it easier to cheat in other situations later in life, perhaps even in one’s closest personal relationships.²⁰

I am aware that the portrait I have painted of Greek moral culture and the significance of honor and shame in that society is a historical ideal, and must be viewed against today’s society, youth culture, and educational priorities. Indeed, there are real questions (even compelling statistics) about whether kids can “police” themselves in a contemporary culture where the dominant student code appears to be “thou shall not judge others.” Data also suggest that students cheat to please their parents and to maintain (at all costs) a successful image. There is considerable data to suggest that teachers simply look the other way. All these factors challenge administrators, teachers, and students committed to implementing and sustaining an honor system at their schools.²¹

Let me emphasize that even when educators recognize that there has never been a honor system that works perfectly all the time (or always for the right reasons), instituting an honor code system in high

20. See Thomas Lickona, *Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991): 77.

21. See Kevin Bushweller, “Generation of Cheaters,” *The American School Board Journal* (April 1999): 24–32.

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schools and colleges is anything but a form of indoctrination. An honor system impels, prompts, and motivates students to reflect on what it means to live in a community that affirms and defends a set of ideals related to honor and integrity. In this way, high schools that implement and reinforce an honor system are laboratories of moral learning, and student fidelity to the school's honor code is a powerful voice that counters society's prevailing perception that all of us are unencumbered, morally free agents. The moment students begin to care about upholding the honor system, they can no longer make whatever decisions they want. They cannot be moved by mere impulse or inclination. The fundamental values that constitute the ideal of honor not only limit their freedom but guide their moral actions. Establishing and sustaining an honor code system is a powerful way to transmit a set of values and ideals that extend beyond a shallow and brutish conception of ethical behavior summed up as, "You stay out of my business and I will stay out of yours."

Conclusion

This chapter had three objectives. First, I sought to examine how parents, teachers, and schools use maxims to transmit core values to young children and how honor codes transmit the values of honor to high-school students. Second, I wanted to explore whether these traditional character education approaches constituted a form of moral indoctrination. Last, I hoped to shed some light on whether the use of maxims and honor systems inhibits or impedes a young person's ability to develop his or her own moral autonomy.

We need only look at Nazi Germany or Mao's China to agree with progressive educators that indoctrination has reared its ugly head in the twentieth century. Specifically, scholars have determined that indoctrination occurs in schools and classrooms when: (1) the intention of a teacher or school is to make students believe in something despite the evidence; (2) the teaching methods are coercive or clearly inappropriate.

ate; (3) the content consists of prescribed doctrines and ideologies and everything else is strictly prohibited; and (4) the consequence of the education results in a closed, intolerant mind.²²

My position is that the use of maxims and honor codes in our schools doesn't even come close to the threshold of indoctrination. I urge all progressive educators to stop using the term "indoctrination" when describing the objectives of character education. The term is an affront to the thousands of people—men and women, liberal and conservative, of all ethnicities and religions—who care deeply that American society, specifically our young people, may be experiencing moral vertigo. Instead, these educators should feel free to use the term "transmission." Character educators desperately want to transmit core values to our students. We are trying our best to pass on a substantial ethical endowment to our children. Even John Dewey emphasizes that this is the solemn responsibility of each generation. He writes:

The things in civilization we most prize are not of ourselves. They exist by grace of the doings and sufferings of the continuous human community in which we are a link. *Ours is the responsibility of conserving, transmitting, rectifying and expanding the heritage of values* we have received that those who come after us may receive it more solid and secure, more widely accessible and more generously shared than we have received it (emphasis added).²³

We must recognize, however, that there are real differences between progressive and character educators on what is meant by the term "moral autonomy." Among character educators, there is a prevailing sentiment that progressive educators want to encourage every young person to metaphorically climb his or her own Mt. Sinai and return with tablets on which he or she has written what is good and what is moral for him

22. I. A. Snook, *Indoctrination and Education* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972).

23. John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1934): 87.

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or her alone. Moreover, the authors of these personalized tablets should feel free to amend them at any time, for any reason.

Progressive educators, on the other hand, perceive that character educators want to impose a moral education that begins and ends with the Ten Commandments. Here is the fundamental fault line today—a battle between David (the radically emancipated self) and Goliath (the wisdom of the past).

Where can we begin to bridge this gap? It might be helpful, in a spirit of humility, to initiate a dialogue that explores more deeply Dewey's call to *conserve, transmit, rectify and expand the heritage of values*. Many of us would agree that character educators seem to emphasize—both in rhetoric and practice—the strategies of conserving and transmitting, whereas progressive educators largely seek to rectify and expand our common constellation of values. Would it also be interesting to listen to character educators describe how they make sense of Dewey's call to expand and rectify our heritage of values, and learn the ways in which progressive educators do try to conserve and transmit values? How might a discussion on child development theories draw us closer to consensus on some of these essential questions? Would it be helpful to address the perception of progressive educators that character education seeks to emphasize a small cluster of core values such as obedience, punctuality, regularity, silence, and industry?²⁴ These are all critical questions.

Foremost, we should all strive to be more attentive to the terms we use to describe the moral development. For example, using the term

24. It is important to recognize that for over a century U.S. public schools have been influenced by a dominant perspective of schooling that has de-emphasized the moral functions of feeling and desire. This position was perhaps most forcefully delineated by William T. Harris, the first United States commissioner of education. In an influential 1888 report of the Committee in Moral Education of the National Council of Education he listed the virtues above as essential to the moral training of students. See John Elias, *Moral Education: Secular and Religious* (Malabar, Fla.: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Company, 1989): 24.

“integration” instead of “autonomy” or “internalization” might better enable us to understand that moral development includes integrating motivational and emotional systems with a set of moral values and ideals transmitted to us. “Integration” also suggests that this process of moral development is fragile, ongoing, and demands constant attention, instead of something that is sudden and dramatic (such as Paul’s conversion experience on the road to Damascus). Moreover, the term suggests sensitivity to how unlikely it is that any of us are fully sovereign, radically autonomous moral beings. As Gus Blasi writes: “It is possible that the *integration* of moral understanding and motivation is not achieved at approximately the same age for the whole body of moral norms and virtues, but must be worked out separately for different issues” (emphasis added).²⁵ In other words, my best friend will always hear his father’s voice telling him that “a job worth doing is a job worth doing well.” Why is this voice any less *authentic* than his own?

There is also much work ahead for the field of character education. I agree with progressive educators that the language of moral energy and moral feeling, or what Carol Gilligan calls “felt knowledge,” is too often absent from character education literature and programs.²⁶ Young people have a strong desire to know the world rather than simply get along with it. Our emotions are a critical component of the moral life, and without them our moral lives would be flat and empty. None of us are pure Kantians who live by duty alone. Emotions anchor our moral lives, and to sever this connection is to weaken the motivational springs of moral behavior. As I have said above, whether it is the use of maxims or upholding an honor code, our moral actions often flow from our attachment, commitment, and desire to a set of moral ideals. Character

25. Augusto Blasi, “Moral Understanding and Moral Personality: The Process of Moral Integration.” In W. M. Kurtines and J. L. Lewirtz, eds., *Moral Development: An Introduction* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1996): 238.

26. Carol Gilligan, “Adolescent Development Reconsidered,” In *Approaches to Moral Education*, Andrew Garrod, ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993): 104.

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educators must find a way to more robustly integrate the fuel of emotion as a fundamental component of their programs and activities.

Here is where my own favorite maxim might help to bring these two educational perspectives together. The philosopher Charles Taylor once suggested that *strong convictions require strong sources*.²⁷ In other words, our convictions are forged within the crucible of personal experience and from the wisdom transmitted to us by family members, our religious tradition, our school traditions, and life lessons learned from a significant teacher or mentor. Unfortunately, these later sources of wisdom are too frequently neglected or overlooked, even in character education programs. Thus, the challenge for the next generation of character educators is to develop a pedagogy that inspires young people to integrate these sources of wisdom with their own moral experiences.

27. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).