

Wanted: Moral Education for Secular Children

Editorial by Paul Kurtz

Secularism and humanism are among the most powerful intellectual and ethical streams of modern civilization. Their influence is felt all across our planet. These streams have been growing ever since the Renaissance: the emergence of modern science, the Enlightenment, the democratic and secular revolutions of our time, and the development of consumer economies that provide goods and services for ordinary men and women. Pitted against secularism and humanism are vociferous opponents: authoritarian fundamentalists, as well as postmodernists whose antiscientific and antihumanistic protests rail against any possibility that science or morality might be objective. In this context, secularists, humanists, and naturalists face a pivotal and deeply practical challenge: how to develop educational curricula and institutions that can provide moral guidelines for our children. The emergence of universal education in the nineteenth century has advanced secular, scientific, and humanistic education enormously; it has contributed to the democratization and the increased prosperity of modern societies. But it is not a total answer.

The time has come for secularists to provide alternative secular curricula, for implementation within or alongside of the schools, in which the best scientific, historical, aesthetic, and humanistic education is made available. By this, I don't mean that we should seek to replace or abandon the public schools, but simply to supplement the education they provide by offering particular programs and courses of learning. I submit that there's an urgent need to do so.

Especially since the pioneering work of John Dewey, many in the United States simply assumed that education would teach students how to think critically and how to become good citizens who appreciate the civic virtues of democracy, while it prepared them for careers in which they could achieve some realization of their talents.

Much of this promise has been realized. Public education has done much to help build democratic societies, not only in the United States but worldwide. Children from all walks of life and diverse racial, ethnic, national, and religious backgrounds could be exposed to the fields of learning and knowledge in order to develop the skills and virtues necessary to survive and function in society. I was brought up in Irvington, New Jersey; my brother, my sister, and I attended Union Avenue Elementary School and Irvington High School. At that time, my fellow students came from many different backgrounds. They were Irish Catholics, Anglo Protestants, Italians, Germans, Jews, Poles, and many others. We learned to live together, to respect each other's differences, and to share common values. Unfortunately, in those days, black and Hispanic children were absent from our schools, but, after a long struggle, they gained admittance under the principles of universal education.

But today, right-wing religious forces have targeted the public schools and attempted to whittle down or reduce what they call the "secular humanist influence." They have subjected school boards and curriculum committees to inquisitorial attacks. They have sought to impose traditional Bible principles in the schools, private and public alike. They have attempted to mandate the teaching of creationism or Intelligent Design in science classrooms and to castrate the teaching of evolution. They have attacked sex education courses. They have attempted to redefine history so as to present America as a "Christian" or "Judeo-Christian nation," not a product of the Enlightenment. In their own parochial or religious schools, they have sought to substitute indoctrination for inquiry . . . to substitute rote learning in the three (sometimes four) Rs for the

questioning mind. We can no longer assume that our students are receiving the best education that our advancing secular, scientific, democratic world has to offer. For example, religion should not invade the schools, given the multiplicity of denominations in our society; instead it should be a private matter, best left to the parents in their diverse churches, temples, synagogues, or mosques. On this and many other contentious issues, education has become a battleground today. We secular humanists have no choice; we, too, must battle to give our children the best possible education.

Unfortunately, it is often difficult to teach critical thinking and cultivate moral growth in schools. Parents committed to the authoritarian model may feel threatened by any questioning of their revered values and fearful that free inquiry in ethics will undermine the religious outlook they seek to impose on their children. Yet we cannot allow the misgivings of frightened authoritarians to limit what our children can learn about morality. So high are the stakes, in my view, that we should take nothing for granted; and we should be prepared to take matters into our own hands in such areas as moral education. Central to a new Enlightenment is the need for a new curriculum in this area. We need to provide our own courses for secular and humanist children and grandchildren, and for anyone else in the community who is interested. The Fieldston School, which was founded in New York City under the auspices of the Ethical Culture movement over a century ago, brilliantly provided ethical education for the children of its day. We need to continue in that great tradition.

What should we teach our children? Surely, how to think critically, how to develop mature moral values, how to appreciate the aesthetic dimensions of life, and how to prepare for a life of challenge and fulfillment. Developing and implementing this curriculum should be a top priority for secular humanists, especially in the varied Centers and Communities that we are creating nationwide and worldwide.

A recent book provides helpful guidelines in this regard: *The War for Children's Minds*, by Steven Law (Routledge, London and New York, 2006). Law, a lecturer in philosophy at the University of London, distinguishes two approaches to morality that battle for supremacy in the contemporary world. First is the authoritarian tradition, usually but not always religious. It holds that "deference to authority" is essential and stresses moral commandments that children simply need to accept and obey. The primary emphasis is on obedience to ancient creeds and codes. Second is the liberal tradition, which encourages young people to be responsible and to think for themselves. This approach stresses personal autonomy and freedom of thought. It is part of a new morality that has become influential since the Enlightenment: an effort to improve the lives of individuals in the current world.

Conservative critics of liberal humanist morality charge that it has led to a breakdown of moral standards and discipline, an increase in crime, teenage pregnancy, drug abuse, and promiscuity. But this need not be so. Encouraging children and adults to think for themselves need not necessarily lead to moral permissiveness or anarchy. Liberal humanists need not be subjective relativists, nonjudgmental in the face of all outrages. Indeed, Law argues that liberal humanist schools and curricula need to "warn . . . pupils of the perils of extreme moral skepticism." Among the methods we may use in judging moral issues are examining their consequences and noting the logical inconsistencies between our principles. We need to draw upon scientific techniques to examine the factual bases of what we believe. Critical thinking always functions within a given set of preexisting values and principles, but it can still help us to modify our values and principles. Law advocates that we cultivate good habits and a focus on character education for children. In particular, we should cultivate the habit of thinking critically about one's own beliefs

and attitudes. By encouraging independent thought, we can help children to grow in intellectual maturity. The morally educated child is not simply responding to external commandments but attempting to internalize empathy and conscience. This is especially important in democratic societies, where students of every cultural background, secular or religious, must master the values of citizenship together.

It is important to develop new curricula for teaching moral values and vital that parents themselves play a vital role in teaching moral principles and values to their children. In their book, *Teaching Your Children Values* (Simon and Shuster, New York, 1993), Linda and Richard Eyre focus on this aspect of moral education. They say that values should be taught to children at every age level and that each parent has a role in deciding which values should be imparted. The Eyres focus on values that encourage children to be happy and productive persons. Among the values they promote are honesty, courage, "peaceability," self-reliance, self-discipline, moderation, fidelity, loyalty, dependability, respect, love, unselfishness, sensitivity, kindness, friendliness, justice, equality, mercy, and forgiveness. I think that we can say that many of these values are humanistic; they are cherished by great numbers of our fellow citizens, whether secular or religious. If we wish our children to lead happy lives, to lead meaningful lives of significance and worth, to be able to pursue the professions or jobs of their choice, and to select their partners responsibly, then certain principles of character should be structured by good example within the family. Often this is difficult if the family is broken or dysfunctional. Nonetheless, parents have a responsibility to do the best they can for their children.

I have argued that the common moral decencies are widely shared, no matter the ethnic, national, or religious origins of the people who practice them. It seems to me that such basic virtues as integrity, trustworthiness, benevolence, and fairness are generally understood. In addition, other broadly accepted principles and values can enable children to achieve some measure of excellence in their lives, so that they can realize their talents and so that qualities of decency and even nobility can shine through. Similarly, there are the aphorisms of goodwill, as I have called them, that demonstrate how important positive attitudes toward ourselves and others are if we are to live together in communities.

Alas, the default position of most secular humanist, atheist, and freethought organizations is that they have left to the public (or private) schools the entire project of educating their children and simply assumed that it would be done well. While there are excellent schools and fine teachers in many parts of the country, it is often difficult to achieve a fully rounded, high-quality education. Moreover, banal and demeaning values often permeate the mass media: popular television, movies, music, radio, the Internet, and literature read by children. These values can herald violence, greed, vindictiveness, and immorality. I am not in any sense arguing for censorship, only arguing that we need to cultivate within our children an appreciation for a qualitative life, to raise the level of taste and appreciation, and to instill some capacity for reflective moral thinking and growth. This is especially true if our children are to realize their highest potentials and develop the capacity for being considerate of the needs of others, if they are to grow up capable of loving others and of being loved.

Witness how authoritarian religions today seek to indoctrinate their children from the earliest ages-whether by rote memorization in the madrassa schools of the Muslims or by indoctrination into dogmas and creeds within Judeo-Christian denominations. We secular humanists need to nourish wholesome moral values and principles, which we can then help to grow within our children. More than that, we need to develop institutions, schools, textbooks, and curricula to

provide the learning materials and the teachers to instill an appreciation for the good life and some recognition of our moral obligations and responsibilities. Indeed, moral education and cognitive growth should have first place in our agenda for the future. This should apply at the pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, grammar school, high school, and college levels, indeed, throughout life. Morality is part of what it means to make choices, value and cherish important qualities, and make responsible judgments. Secular humanism, if it is anything, espouses a set of normative values and principles. Thus, it is not about simply metaethics, independent of life, but its values and principles are concrete and are related to praxis. I call this eupraxsophy: practical ethical wisdom. Although secular humanism is a "method of inquiry" that is committed to using objective methods for testing truth claims, over and beyond that, it also provides us with moral values and principles that have been tested by the crucible of experience and which we can share with others in living the fullness of life within the communities in which we interact.