A QUESTION OF ADEQUATE AIMS

(1996)

PERSONAL PREFACE

I wrote this paper as my contribution to the 25th anniversary issue of The Journal of Moral Education in 1996. Since its first issue in 1971 until now this journal has been the only English refereed journal in the field of moral education. As such, it has been the central academic forum for sharing work in this field, having matured now to the point of serving this function world-wide for a genuinely international body of contributors and readership. From 1981 until the date of this publication I served as Assistant Editor, responsible for all North American submissions, working closely with the Editor, Monica Taylor, in England. However, I had decided that it was time for me to step down from this position. Thus for me the opportunity to write this paper also represented a significant personal turning point in how my energies were allotted across the many different kinds of work in which most academics engage.

However, equally important to me was the opportunity this paper gave me to do something that most academics seldom have, if ever (unless they are either far more courageous or foolhardy than I). This unique opportunity stemmed directly from the nature of the invitation to contribute a paper to the kind of special issue that Monica wanted to produce to commemorate the anniversary. Monica has been the driving force behind the journal’s growth in both readership and stature. Her idea for this special issue is an example of her innovative editorial style. She asked twelve senior people working in the field of moral education in five different countries to reflect on their varied experience and to propose new directions they considered important for the field to take. But she did this in an unusual way. Limiting us to only 3,000 words, she insisted that we stop being so cautious about what we said or how we said things (an occupational hazard for academics, but especially for philosophers). In her words, we were invited to “offer punchy, possibly controversial, ‘think’ pieces, giving an informed overview of the state of the art and suggesting future directions.” Further, she exhorted us to make “strong assertions, claims and suggestions” and “without the usual degree of argument or referencing support.” In writing my contribution I experienced this invitation much like a horse that all its life has been penned up and then is let out into a huge pasture without reins or saddle.

The task I faced in living up to Monica’s instructions was not an easy one, as I soon found out. She had asked the contributors to address “some” of a set of five questions. Since I could not imagine addressing more than one for reasons of space,
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I decided to focus on the first one. As a philosopher, this choice seemed obvious and therefore easy. The first question (or set of questions) was “What is moral education? What is distinctive about it? What are its aims? What have they been? What should they be?” Believing as I do that all of the other questions pertaining to more practical assessments depended in some way on this first one, I could not avoid it. Nor did I want to, as I saw it as a very direct way of exploring the changes in my current thinking as they impacted moral education. Thus the title, “A Question of Adequate Aims.” Doing this in only 3,000 words, however, was not so easy because I consider careful attention to nuance and qualification necessary for convincing argument. As I also found out though, the exhortation to be “punchy” countered this concern quite effectively.

The publication of this paper was a major turning point for me, the first public recognition of a significant development in my thinking. The nature of this paper afforded me the opportunity to take a turn more definitive and more sharply than I otherwise might have done. It represents a clear first step in the direction that would be manifested and more fully worked out in subsequent papers (especially Chapters 7, 8, and 9 in this book). As such, it identifies a distinct move away from the perspective of liberalism in terms of how I understood and approached some kinds of moral/political problems, one that also involved paying more attention to how I located myself in those problems and in my work on them.

This development first shows up in this paper. But it had emerged gradually over several years in the context of different kinds of activity. One of these was the designing and teaching of a course on gender, entitled “Gender, Ethics, and Education: Philosophical Issues.” Through this experience, particularly the insights I gained from the study of Connell’s (1987) excellent treatment in his Gender and Power, I learned how to think of gender as a social construction of power relations between men and women. In doing so, I was also forced to accept that my individual liberal self was only part of the picture, and not even the primary operative part that I played in the historical project of oppression of women. In addition, I was also reading extensively in the area of feminist ethics, finding much of what I read both exciting and challenging. I was particularly impressed by my exposure to the work of Young, as is evidenced briefly, but significantly, in this paper by my use of a chapter in her collection Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory (Young, 1990b). It is that use that stands as the visible sign of the new direction of my thinking.

The structure of this short paper emerged from my desire to urge my colleagues in the field of moral education to consider as a significant problem the limitations in how we had been thinking of the aims of our educational efforts (implicitly, for the most part). With very few exceptions, they shared my heretofore blind acceptance of liberalism as sufficient for all concerns pertaining to the conceptualization and justification of aims. To get to the point of being able to problematize this allegiance, however, I found it necessary to illustrate the wide range of ways of thinking about moral relationships extant in approaches to moral education over the preceding