Do you see that boy with him?  Jane has a book in her hand.  They can all read from the book.

Jane has two girls with them.  They must see how fast they can.

John has the book, and he keeps it clean.  The name of the boy is John.

Do you see two girls with him?  They can keep the book clean.
None of the Above?

It is an odd mark of our time that the first question people ask about character education is whether public schools should be doing it at all. The question is odd because it invites us to imagine that schooling, which occupies about a third of a child’s waking time, somehow could be arranged to play no role in the formation of a child’s character.

Try to imagine a school that did manage to stay out of the character education business, refraining from promoting virtues such as honesty and respectfulness. Even if the school survived the chaos that would ensue, could we expect that the character of its students wouldn’t be affected (adversely, in this case) by the message that such an abdication of responsibility would impart? For better or worse, every school envelops its students in a moral climate. The choices that the school makes—or fails to make—about what sort of moral climate to create inevitably leave lasting marks on the students who live and learn there. Moral education, in the title phrase of one early book on the matter, “comes with the territory.”

Still, questions of whether—not how—today’s public schools should attempt to educate for character keep popping up. And in their variety, they tell us something about the roundabout journey.
of public schooling in the United States. For the sake of this narrative, we will consider whether that journey helps to accomplish one of schooling’s few totally uncontested aims: teaching kids how to read.

A Perennial Best-Seller
From 1836 to 1922, McGuffey’s Eclectic Readers were by far the number-one school reading text in most parts of the United States. In their many editions, the readers sold more than 120 million copies. They presented, without hesitation or qualification, the moral and ethical code that their original author, the Reverend William Holmes McGuffey (a Presbyterian minister), believed essential for all children to learn. As exemplified through the dramatic story-problems of these slim volumes, the McGuffey code may be simply stated: A child should be respectful, honest, diligent, kind, fair-minded, temperate in food and drink, and clean.

It may surprise some that the readers still sell about a hundred thousand copies a year, mostly for use in home-school or traditional community settings (such as among the Amish). For the most part, however, the morally centered lessons of McGuffey have been replaced by a different sort of reading text. Some of today’s storybooks for students evoke the personal feelings of growing up; some convey the charms of pets; some insightfully delve into problems with friends or family; and some are terrifically funny, with irresistible titles such as How to Eat Fried Worms and Snot Stew. Yet as well-written, brilliantly illustrated, and personally enlightening as these new books may be, they are not stocked with unambiguous and comprehensive ethical guidance.

This historical change in school reading texts has been neither accidental nor isolated. As a general trend during the 20th century, academic expertise came to prevail over character as public schooling’s clear priority. Increasingly, schools became places where children were sent to learn skills first and foremost. The dominant assumption (which had become explicit by the latter part of the 20th century) was that children themselves should figure out—perhaps with some help from family or religious sources, but more likely through their own autonomous rational choices—what to do with the skills they had acquired. Educators wondered—and were pointedly asked—why public schools should presume to muck about with values anyway. And, as public schools increasingly filled with students from diverse backgrounds, determining whose values to teach became more problematic. It all seemed a questionable distraction from the hard and urgent task of skill building.

Where We Lost Our Way
In any historical narrative, events always trump opinion. Although a reborn character-education movement had sprouted in the early 1970s, it was seen as a throwback to a bygone era and thereby marginalized (one of its own leaders wistfully referred to it as “the great lost tradition”). But by the end of the century, in the wake of ceaseless alarming reports from the disheveled, dispirited, and sometimes violent front lines of our nation’s schools, the values-free approach to schooling began to seem less progressive, less inevitable, and less wise. Columbine High School was but one data point, albeit an especially vivid one, on the blood-and-graffiti-splattered high school map of the 1990s. When the mayhem invaded tony suburban communities as well as urban centers, mainstream media took notice. A 1993 front-page New York Times story reported: “Gang membership grows in middle-class suburbs,” showing up in everything from larceny and vandalism in schools to “razors, bats, and bottles, and now to guns.” Other forms of scandalous behavior, nonviolent but still terribly disruptive, paralyzed many schools as well. Cheating in particular became epidemic. Among many well-publicized incidents during the early 1990s, students at Taylor Allderdice High School in a prime Pittsburgh suburb collaborated in a systematic cheating ring, buying and selling homework from one another, stealing tests, and smuggling reference books into exams.

The growing perception of violence-racked and cheating-tainted schools in the early 1990s helped spawn a revived and robust character education movement. Organizations and web sites spread the word, and centers—more than 150 by my count—sprang up to produce and distribute curriculum materials for classroom use. The character education movement, given a boost by widespread, continuous reports of youth misbehavior, became an established part of the education landscape in the space of a few years, a surprisingly rapid
**feature**
MORAL MANDATE DAMON

**Words to Live by, for Centuries, across Nations and Religions: This Rule Is Golden**

**Bahá’í World Faith**
And if thine eyes be turned towards justice, choose thou for thy neighbour that which thou choosest for thyself.
—Epistle to the Son of the Wolf

**Brahmanism:**
This is the sum of duty: Do naught unto others which would cause you pain if done to you.
—Mahabharata 5:1517

**Buddhism**
Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.
—Udana-Varga 5:18

**Christianity**
Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets.
—Matthew 7:12, King James Version

And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise.

**Confucianism**
Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you
—Analects 15:23

Tse-kung asked, “Is there one word that can serve as a principle of conduct for life?” Confucius replied, “It is the word ‘shu’—reciprocity. Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire.”
—Doctrine of the Mean 13.3

Try your best to treat others as you would wish to be treated yourself, and you will find that this is the shortest way to benevolence.
—Mencius VII.A.4

**Hinduism**
One should not behave towards others in a way which is disagreeable to oneself.
—Mahabharata, Anusasana Parva 113.8

This is the sum of the Dharma [duty]: do naught unto others which would cause you pain if done to you.
—Mahabharata 5:1517

**Islam**
None of you [truly] believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself.”
—Number 13 of Inam
“Al-Nawawi’s Forty Hadiths.”

**Jainism**
In happiness and suffering, in joy and grief, we should regard all creatures as we regard our own self.
—Lord Mahavira, 24th Tirthankara

**Judaism**
Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.
—Leviticus 19:18

What is hateful to you, do not to your fellow man. This is the law: all the rest is commentary.
—Talmud, Shabbat 31a

**Sufism**
The basis of Sufism is consideration of the hearts and feelings of others. If you haven’t the will to gladden someone’s heart, then at least beware lest you hurt someone’s heart, for on our path, no sin exists but this.
—Dr. Javad Nurbakhsh, master of the Nimatullahi Sufi Order

**Zoroastrianism**
That nature alone is good which refrains from doing unto another whatsoever is not good for itself.
—Dadistan-i-dinik 94:5

Whatever is disagreeable to yourself do not do unto others.
—Shayast-na-Shayast 13:29

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A man should wander about treating all creatures as he himself would be treated.
—Sutrakritanga 1.11.33

The Truth itself is not believed, from one who often has deceived.
development in a field that normally adopts changes slowly. It may be that the movement already has had some effect, for as Joel Best pointed out (“Monster Hype,” Education Next, Summer 2002), evidence shows that school violence has begun to decline in recent years.

I witnessed one facet of the resurgence of the character education movement in the federal government’s adoption of it during the Clinton administration. At a 1993 White House conference that I attended, Secretary of Education Richard Riley expressed approval of the movement’s aims, but cautioned that such moral uplift was a matter for family and church, not the federal government. By 1996, however, in his State of the Union address, President Clinton proclaimed, “I challenge all our schools to teach character education.” That year the Department of Education established the “Partnerships in Character Education” program to support the president’s challenge. The Bush administration has continued and expanded the size of the program several fold.

The Inner-Directed Society

Yet the original question—whether, not how, to educate for character—remains essentially unanswered, a condition that creates doubt and debate among educators and the public. Far from worrying about how to preserve children’s autonomy, however, skeptics now complain that character education is not forceful enough in presenting children with the stark and incontestable contrast between right and wrong. In a recent book, with the perhaps understandably overwrought title The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age without Good or Evil, James Davison Hunter criticizes character education for its failure to promote morality with sufficient strength and clarity. The problem, according to Hunter, a professor of sociology and religion at the University of Virginia, lies in the psychologically oriented pedagogy that character educators turn to in teaching values to children: “Dominated as it is by perspectives diffused and diluted from professional psychology, this regime is overwhelmingly therapeutic and self-referencing; in character, its defining feature is a moral framework whose center point is the autonomous self.” By focusing on the child’s everyday behavior and feelings, moral values get watered down and lost.

Indeed, a recent research review by Marvin Berkowitz and Melinda Bier of the University of Missouri (at St. Louis) found that the most common topic in today’s character education programs is “social-emotional content”—in particular, what they call “personal improvement/self-management and awareness (self-control, goal setting, relaxation techniques, self-awareness, emotional awareness).” Exactly what part of a child’s moral development might be stimulated by relaxation or emotional awareness training is a mystery that neither science nor philosophy has shed much light on. My guess is that such feeling states have little to do with the acquisition of childhood morality and that, as Hunter complains, a pedagogy built primarily around the self’s sentiments may distract children from the real challenges of forging character.

The Right, the Wrong, and the Strictly Instrumental

The contemporary character-education movement has thus been misled by the trendy notion that children’s positive feelings are the key to all sorts of learning, moral as well as academic. Many educators now engage in silly activities and exercises focused on an obsessive attention to children’s self-esteem, a focus that has foisted warehouses’ worth of nonsense on students. (One assignment given my youngest daughter in her elementary school days was to write, “I’m terrific,” 20 times on a 3x5 card—which she dutifully did, all the while wondering aloud what in fact she was terrific at.) When the drive to boost children’s self-esteem interferes with moral instruction, it goes beyond silly to harmful.

Once when I was a guest on a National Public Radio show, a parent of a 5th-grade student called in to discuss an incident
that was highly upsetting to her but all too familiar to me. That week her son had been sent home with a note informing her that he had been caught taking money out of fellow students’ backpacks. The mother quickly got on the phone to the boy’s teacher to tell her she was appalled, that she couldn’t bear the thought of her son stealing from his friends. “What can we do about this?” asked the mother. To her astonishment, the teacher responded by asking her to say and do nothing. “We were obliged to inform you of what happened,” the teacher said, “but now we wish to handle this in our own professional way. And to start with, we are not calling this incident ‘stealing.’ That would just give your child a bad self-image. We’ve decided to call what your son did ‘uncooperative behavior’ —and we’ll point out to him in no uncertain terms that he won’t be very popular with his friends if he keeps acting this way!” The parent reported that the boy now ignored her efforts to counsel him about the matter. She worried that he had “blown the whole thing off” without learning anything from it at all.

In its “professional” judgments, the school had translated a wrongful act (stealing) into a strictly instrumental concern (losing popularity). The school did so in order to save the child from feelings (shame, guilt) that it assumed could cause the child discomfort and thereby damage the child’s self-image. The school was right on the first count and mistaken on the second. The child probably would have felt embarrassed if forcefully told that he had committed a moral offense—and such an experience in firsthand shame and guilt is precisely what researchers have found to be a primary means of moral learning. There is no credible scientific evidence that supports the idea that a child’s self-image can be harmed by reprimands for wrongdoing, as long as the feedback pertains to the behavior rather than to the child’s own intrinsic self-worth.

Confusing Ourselves and Our Students
Over the years I have often been asked to help resolve trouble in schools torn apart by cheating scandals. In each case, the resistance of teachers to discussing the moral meaning of the incident with students was palpable. I explain to them that the moral issues are many, but by no means hard to understand. Cheating is wrong for at least four reasons: it gives students who cheat an unfair advantage over those who do not cheat; it is dishonest; it is a violation of trust; and it undermines the academic integrity, the code of conduct, and the social order of the school.

I am still shocked at the number of teachers who say, in front of their students, that it is hard to hold students to a no-cheating standard in a society where people cheat on taxes, on their spouses, and so on. Some teachers sympathize with student cheaters because they think that the tests students take are flawed or unfair. Some pardon students because they believe that sharing schoolwork is motivated by loyalty to friends. In my experience, it can take days of intense discussion, and some arm twisting, to get a school community to develop a no-cheating standard that is solidly supported by expressions of moral concern.

In our time, a hesitancy to use a moral language remains the most stubborn and distracting problem for character education. Teachers worry that words that shame children may wound their self-esteem; that there are no words of moral truth anyway; that it is hypocritical to preach moral codes to the young when so many adults ignore them; or that in a diverse society one person’s moral truth is another’s moral falsehood. Yet adult expressions of clear moral standards are precisely what guide character formation in the young.

The conviction that moral standards are not arbitrary, that they reflect basic human truths and therefore that they must be passed from generation to generation is a necessary prerequisite of all moral education. This was a point that sociologist Emile Durkheim made in his great 1902–03 lectures, “Moral Education,” the foundation for most modern approaches to the subject. Even those who started their moral education work from a different direction, such as Harvard psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg, came around to this view once they tried their hand at the actual practice of teaching children good values.

Back to the Future
The contours of what we must do are clear: Public schools must accept the mandate of educating for character. Since they shape student character no matter what they do, schools may as well try to do a good job at it. Schools must present students to be kind and helpful to others; but, whatever you do, give honest, earnest purpose to it.
with objective standards expressed in a moral language that sharply distinguishes right from wrong and directs students to behave accordingly. Sentiments such as “feeling better” cannot stand as sufficient reason for moral choice. A school must help students understand that they are expected to be honest, fair, compassionate, and respectful whether it makes them feel good or not. The character mandate that adults must pass on to children transcends time, place, or personal feelings.

The cauldron of day-to-day practice, of course, always contains a steamy mixture of disparate elements. What schools actually do with character education cannot be summed up in one easy generalization. At the classroom level, education is a pragmatic, seat-of-the-pants enterprise in which teachers tend to throw whatever they have at students, and character educators are no exception.

For clues about what we can do, let us return for a moment to the James Hunter critique quoted earlier. The complaint was that character education “in a time without good or evil” provides children with the following moral logic: To the question “Why should one not be bad, say, through stealing or cheating?” follows the reply, “How would it make you feel if someone did that to you?” As I suggested earlier, Hunter is correct that the moral logic here is not sufficient, because stealing or cheating is wrong no matter how anyone feels about it. But Hunter’s complaint is too sweeping and in its overreach misses a valuable opportunity to educate children about the foundations of moral behavior and belief.

The Heavy Metal of Character

Suppose that the teacher took the response, “How would it make you feel if someone did that to you?” an extra step—backward through the ages of moral tradition—linking what Hunter takes to be a mere touchy-feely sentiment to one of the great moral maxims of all time: the Golden Rule. The version most familiar in Western society—“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”—is in fact a general precept shared by most of the world’s religions (See box, p. 23). While asking the child to take the perspective of another who would be hurt by a harmful act, a teacher could draw the student’s attention to the great moral traditions that have proclaimed the importance of doing so, connecting the student’s personal sentiments with the earlier wisdom of civilizations. The teacher could introduce students to the glorious panoply of worldwide philosophical thought that has celebrated this principle. A lively classroom discussion could ensue from exploring why so much profound thinking across so many diverse times and places has focused on this classic maxim.

Pointing out the rich religious and historical traditions behind a maxim underlines its deep importance in human life. It informs students of the universal and timeless truths underlying moral stricture. It does not imply proselytizing for a particular religious doctrine, because the universality of core moral principles can be easily demonstrated. This kind of instruction is needed pedagogically not only because it elicits historical interest, but also because it adds a dimension of moral gravity and objectivity to what otherwise would stand only as a simple statement of a child’s personal feelings.

If a child’s moral education is limited to stimulating self-reflection about his personal feelings, not much has been accomplished. But if the child’s moral education begins with a consideration of moral feelings such as empathy and then links these feelings with the enduring elements of morality, the child’s character growth will be enhanced by transforming the child’s emotions—which do play a key role in behavior—into a lasting set of virtues.

An essential part of moral education is reaffirming the emotional sense of moral regret that young people naturally feel when they harm another person or violate a fundamental societal standard. Every child is born with a capacity to feel empathy for a person who is harmed, with a capacity to feel outrage when a social standard is violated, and with a capacity to feel shame or guilt for doing something wrong. This is a natural, emotional basis for character development, but it quickly atrophies without the right kinds of feedback—in particular, guidance that supports the moral sense and shows how it can be applied to the range of social concerns that one encounters in human affairs. A primary way that schools can provide students with this kind of guidance is to teach them the great traditions that have endowed us with our moral standards.

The Golden Rule is a prototypical moral maxim with both a long historical legacy and widely recognized contemporary

God gives a great deal of money to some persons, in order that they may assist those who
usefulness. (It is explicitly taught and practiced in the field of business management, a fact that many high school students would very likely be interested to learn.) There are legions of maxims in the living lore of our common culture, and many, like the Golden Rule, bear a moral message: "Two wrongs don't make a right" (ancient Scots); "You are only as good as your word" (early American); "Honesty is the best policy" (Cervantes, Ben Franklin); "It's better to light a single candle than to curse the darkness" (old Chinese proverb). As education policymaker Arthur Schwartz has written, each of these "wise sayings" encapsulates a store of wisdom that has been handed down to us through countless conversations across the generations.

What these ancient maxims suggest is that societies distant from us in time and place have something important to tell us regarding our efforts to educate young people for character. Among other things, they remind us that neither we nor our children need to invent civilization from scratch. Our journeys in moral learning begin with the aid of our rich cultural traditions and the living wisdom found therein. We are inheritors of a wealth of moral knowledge, a set of universal truths drawn from the forge of human experience over the centuries. In our transient lifestyles and throw-away relationships, in our modernist commitment to the autonomous self, we sometimes forget this. But in our role as guardians of the young, we must share the obligation to pass on to our children that which civilization has given us.

All this, of course, flies in the face of "constructivist" approaches to education favored in recent decades. Supposedly, children learn nothing useful through memorization; and, we have been warned, rote learning leads only to boredom and rejection, going "in one ear and out the other." But as I have written elsewhere, such fears are simplistic as well as unsupported by evidence. The contrast between the "discovery learning" of constructivism and the practice-and-drill of traditional learning is a false opposition. Children benefit from both, they require both, and the two complement rather than fight each other in the actual dynamics of mastering knowledge. The usefulness of memorized bits of wisdom that are stored away and used at later times, when they are better understood in the light of lived experience, has been fully supported by developmental theories ranging from the social-cultural to the biological.

One of the other principles of psychological development is that children learn best when they confront clear and consistent messages in numerous ways and in multiple contexts. In the character arena, young people need to hear moral messages from all the respected people in their lives if they are to take the messages to heart. A student learns honesty in a deep and lasting way when a teacher explains why cheating undermines the academic mission, when a parent demonstrates the importance of telling the truth for family solidarity, when a sports coach discourages deceit because it defeats the purpose of fair competition, and when a friend shows why lies destroy the trust necessary for a close relationship. The student then acquires a sense of why honesty is important to all the human relationships that the student will participate in, now and in the future.

And the past plays a part in moral learning. We do not invent our ethical codes from scratch, nor should we expect that our children could. Our inherited moral traditions are the essential elements of civilized society. When presented to students through a lively pedagogy of received wisdom, such as may be found in common maxims and precepts, these moral traditions can provide a compelling historical dimension to character education. For too long our public schools have hidden away the historical dimension, keeping the traditional foundations of moral instruction out of sight. It is time to remove this unnecessary handicap and build the moral futures of our children on the best wisdom that the past and present can offer.

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