

THE "CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE," KANT'S RULE OF THE ROAD TO MORSE'S "ENDS OF EDUCATION"

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In her response¹ to my comments² on her "Ends of Education,"³ Dr. Jane Fowler Morse has sorted out my three major concerns⁴ with respect to her use of Immanuel Kant's "categorical imperative." Since it is impossible for me to address all the three concerns within this issue of *Educational Change*, I would like to confine myself, briefly, to the first of these and say something with respect to the others in future issues of this publication. I also invite reactions and comments from those of our readers and colleagues who have had the occasion to follow our exchanges or may wish to do so. The issues go to the heart of educational theory and practice.

Without considering the derivational or epistemological status of Kant's categorical imperative or the transcendental ideal, we can ask questions with respect to how such an ideal works in education. According to Dr. Morse "it [transcendental ideal] functions as a rule to guide action, rather than prescribing particular responses."⁵ Turning to our own pedagogical interests she states that "a transcendental ideal gives us a rule to check proposed or actual educational practices. Does it foster autonomy? Does it help children to reach their potential? Does it recognize a world community of all rational beings?"⁶ We should note that Morse's language clearly demonstrates a penchant for the phenomenal world or what John Dewey refers to as the "empirical details" or "intercourse with experience."⁷

In Dewey's account Kant's categorical imperative is regarded as a principle or ideal which works in much the same way as Morse says the "transcendental ideal" does in education. However, Dewey insists that moral principles and ideals cannot be separated from experience. For Dewey, when principles or ideals are isolated or separated from the give or take of everyday life they are set on a course to

self-destruction. Excluding from principles all connections with empirical details also excludes all reference to consequences.⁸ However, Dr. Morse's questions, "Does it foster autonomy? Does it help children reach their potential?" are questions of consequences and empirical details.

Raising such concerns takes us beyond Kant's deontological morality to one which clearly intersects with the concerns of the teleologist. Not to recognize this gives rise to a fragmented moral universe which drives human intentions into an unknowable secretive world and opens the door for all kinds of hypocracies and abuses. The adage that "the road to hell is paved with good intentions" expresses what common sense has recognized as a ready made gambit for both private and public deception. I suspect that Kant's idea of a "good will" is a recognition of such deceptions as well as a possible corrective; but, eliminating all connection to empirical and experiential details robs us of any way of determining the answers to Dr. Morse's questions and concerns.

Morse's article "Fostering Autonomy"⁹ suggests a metaphor which draws heavily on context and history. To place our principles "in that wild, weird clime out of space and out of time" keeps them pure, clear and distinct at the cost of de-contextualizing and de-historicizing them. These considerations should not dismiss Kant's categorical imperative but should enrich the analysis of lived educational and lived moral experience while insisting on the need for impartiality and sincerity. But impartiality entails taking account of the consequences as well as any other dimension of human action. In "The Nature of Principles" Dewey found that Kant's reasoning "turns out to be a method of recommending a broad impartial view of consequences,"¹⁰ and to ignore such a crucial dimension of human action is tantamount to taking sides and failing in impartiality.¹¹

Morse's account and example of preparing students for the Regents Competency Test shows that the consequences are critical considerations and determine the way the educator adjusts the context in

order to bring about the desired end, e.g. "improving their writing skills."¹² But the more difficult and troubling problem is deciding the appropriate end or ends. If we are able to decide on the ends, we might want to explore how these ends are related to Kant's transcendental ideal or the categorical imperative. Further, we might try to explore the status of these ends and the question of human freedom. I urge all our colleagues to join in this dialogue and help explore these issues through their own reflections and experiences.

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ENDNOTES

1. Jane Fowler Morse, "Reply to Roda's Comments on 'The Ends of Education,'" *Educational Change* (Spring 1997), pp. 82-87.
2. Anthony Roda, "Preface," *Educational Change* (Spring 1996), pp. iv-vii.
3. Jane Fowler Morse, "The Ends of Education," *Educational Change* (Spring 1996), pp. 1-26.
4. Briefly stated my concerns are: (1) how does the transcendental ideal (categorical imperative) function in education? (2) what is human freedom and what is the status that Kant and Morse accord to it? and (3) what is the relation between the individual's rights and the group's or society's rights within the conceptual framework that results from the analysis of (1) and (2)?
5. Morse, "Reply to Roda's Comments on 'The Ends of Education,'" p. 83.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Dewey's analysis of "The Nature of Principles" shows the tension between the abstract rule such as Kant's categorical imperative and the concrete actuality of each contextualized human act. The possibility of generalizing each individualized situation into a rule poses special problems for the categorical imperative. John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, (New York: The Modern Library, 1957), pp. 238-247.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 245.
9. Jane Fowler Morse, "Fostering Autonomy," *Educational Theory* 47, no. 1 (Winter 1997), pp. 31-50.
10. Dewey, *op. cit.*, p. 246.
11. This is merely to point out that a deontological principle of justice needs to be complemented with a teleological principle. To recognize this is the same as saying that consequences must be an integral part of an



adequate moral perspective. William Frankena, *Ethics*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1973), pp. 34-60.

12. Morse, "Reply to Roda's Comments on 'The Ends of Education,'" pp. 83-84.