

Perspectives

Should Bioethics Be Taught?

George H. Kieffer
University of Illinois
at Urbana-Champaign
Urbana 61801

As the world about us grows ever more complex, our apprehension regarding the changes creates confusion. The knowledge we gain through biological advances seems only to add to our agitation. The social institutions and values that worked in the past when life seemed much simpler no longer provide guidance on many contemporary issues. Two options are before us—either to sit passively and let events proceed without direction and thus allow social policy to be developed by default, or to vigorously respond to the challenges posed by our newly acquired knowledge.

The first course—a social policy of bumbling and fumbling—is no longer ours to choose. People are profoundly disturbed by reports that abortion will be among the most explosive political issues in the 1980 elections at all government levels. What this debate illustrates is that our society has already shifted so far in favor of using biomedical technologies that relying on chance to determine their impact on our personal and institutional values is reckless and irresponsible. Nor can we, even if we wanted to do so, abandon our biomedical technologies because of the threat they pose to our values for we then would lose their life-enhancing benefits as well. And so, we have no options; we must squarely face our problems.

There are, however, two ways to confront the issues. We can either assign the problems to experts who

are in better positions to understand their complexities and let them make judgments for us; or we can, as a community, involve ourselves in seeking and developing a social framework for resolving the new problems. Regarding the first option, Woodrow Wilson gave us this advice during his 1912 presidential campaign:

... What I fear is a government of experts. What are we if we are to be scientifically taken care of by a small number of gentlemen who are the only men who understand the job? Because if we do not understand the job, then we are not a free people. . . .

Clearly, President Wilson disagreed with the first option and expressed a view widely held today. Will average citizens tolerate loss of freedom as the price they must pay for permitting experts to make their value judgments for them? In our democracy, public policy still reflects the choices of individual voters. It is both the burden and glory of democracy that citizens must make the final choices. If the quality of those choices depends on the quality of the public debate that precedes the decisions, then laypeople, educators, medical professionals, scientists, government leaders, ethicists, and theologians must become actively involved. This is the challenge of our age.

Public schools as institutions designed to prepare future citizens for intelligent participation in socie-

ty's affairs are in a position to help with the task. Immediately, though, we face the fundamental question—Should public schools be involved in education that focuses on making value judgments? The issue is important because for some time now programs incorporating values education have been part of public education at all levels—but not without vigorous opposition.

Objections to Moral Education

Some religious groups have objected to values education programs and insist that the introduction of secular values into public education violates the separation of church and state. Biomedical questions are particularly vulnerable to this charge. Some groups contend, for example, that the abortion issue should not be discussed at all in public schools because abortion is, in the judgment of some religious groups, the cold-blooded murder of the innocent unborn. For them, the issue is settled on the basis of God-given moral commands.

It may be that questions that generate fierce and widespread public controversy, such as the abortion issue, should be excluded from the public schools because these institutions are supported by and belong to all taxpayers equally; and taxpayers may hold positions that are quite different from those expressed by teachers. Controversial moral issues

may properly be presented in public schools if, and only if, teachers can assume objective, neutral stances and give fair and equal treatment to all sides of a controversial question. There is uncertainty, however, as to what this may entail.

Others object to moral education focusing on value-based problems because these programs are often used to indoctrinate rather than to educate. Personal (or sometimes institutional) moral views all too easily intrude camouflaged as moral instruction. A case in point is that form of indoctrination that calls for a return to the moral standards of our forebearers. In this value-training program, children are required to learn the universal and eternal standards of right and wrong—those absolute principles from which we derive our religious beliefs and to which we can anchor our search for answers to ethical questions. A related form of indoctrination filters sensitive and controversial issues through the personal biases of the teacher. Teachers in this group enjoy moralizing on any problem, and they offer their students only two options—the teacher's view or none at all. Moral indoctrination, whatever its form, is counterfeit moral education, and it must be rejected completely.

A third group disapproves because we live in a morally pluralistic society. As a universally accepted code of moral standards does not exist, they feel that any education attempting to focus on value problems is destined to be ineffective. People must make individual choices and must live with the consequences of their decisions; no single guides exist to help students make these choices.

The last group views talking about ethical issues as nothing more than that—talk. Simply discussing a relevant problem does not necessarily stimulate sound reasoning that leads to a morally defensible course of action. Many classroom discussions of value questions provide verbal catharsis, but fail to clarify the issues. The observation that few teachers,

especially those trained in the sciences, are professionally prepared to direct effective discussions that stimulate moral reasoning fortifies this argument against the inclusion of ethical issues in the classroom. An added hazard here is that failing to provide students with guidance, help, or direction in making moral choices, can lead to the false assumption that people develop values in a vacuum and thus one position is as good as any other.

Response to the Objections

The basic unsolved problem of moral education, including teaching bioethical issues, is the dilemma of indoctrination as contrasted with relativism. Education that emphasizes a single moral viewpoint is indoctrination because the individual is denied the freedom to make moral choices; moral education that promotes a personal moral bias cultivates relativism. The conscientious teacher genuinely concerned with the growth of ethical decision-making abilities in students will want to avoid either extreme.

The dilemma of indoctrination versus relativism can be avoided if the reasoning process is emphasized. Moral philosophers generally consider a number of common intellectual skills essential to ethical reasoning. These include the ability to imagine alternative solutions for a particular problem and to foresee the consequences of particular actions, and empathy for the feelings of others. The skills themselves and their development constitute the framework within which bioethical issues can be effectively considered (Kieffer 1977, 1979).

How, specifically, can we implement an effective program to help young people learn reasoning skills for dealing with value problems? First, we can help them to come to understand concepts such as justice, equality, rights, and duties. In pursuing such elusive concepts, ethicists have developed some criteria for determining the “rightness” or “wrongness” of a decision. One of these is the *clarifying question*; the

following are examples of clarifying questions:

1. Would I feel the same way if the roles were reversed?
2. As an objective observer without a personal interest in any of the outcomes, which solution seems most fair?
3. If my solution were adopted by everyone, what would the consequences be?
4. Is there a “no lose” solution to this problem? (No-lose problem solving is a method where conflicting parties agree on a solution that everyone considers fair. This approach is based on the moral principle of justice in which all persons are considered equal.)
5. If a certain policy were chosen, would individuals have to be forced to accept it, or can they somehow be allowed freedom to choose?

Other clarifying questions could be added as experience is gained, and these could also serve as tools for developing skill in handling moral problems.

Anyone seriously committed to moral education insists that the objective is to help individuals develop a sense of autonomy or independence in thinking about moral issues and acting upon them. We would also want each student to develop the attitude that every individual has worth, is deserving of respect, and is entitled to certain opportunities. Such attitudes foster a respect for others that minimizes the tendency to label them as inferior, and hence to treat them as expendable. In empathizing with others, we come to recognize our common human condition and grant to others the dignity, respect, and fairness we want for ourselves. This ability, according to some moral philosophers, is the most important single skill in moral reasoning and behavior. It is also helpful in working through biomedical problems.

Making our own thoughts and feelings known is an important part of moral education, too. A willingness to expose our thinking (including ethical bases) to the judgment of others can lead to closer examination of our

individual conclusions. We can, through this process, test the validity of an ethical judgment. Our positions must be clearly articulated and morally defensible. In addition, we must be able to defend our opinion on ethical grounds against alternative views. If such validity cannot be established, a reappraisal of our own judgment can lead to formulating another, perhaps more satisfying, position. Interaction with others can provide valuable insights that can be useful in framing our positions.

Shaping our world along moral lines will require that we be sufficiently open-minded to discuss and weigh different positions and that we accept readily alternatives that have more ethical validity. But, even if this “best-case” scenario is not realized, participation in a community of moral people provides an opportunity to learn what others take seriously and to respect their views. We may disagree about what values should be granted priority, but we can agree that the values of others deserve consideration and respectful treatment. A vast difference exists between respecting alternative positions based on sound moral reasoning and evidence and rejecting as morally wrong any course with which we do not agree. In establishing ethical validity, foolish, unexamined positions are exposed, and, simultaneously, a respect for different views is preserved.

Values in Science Education

The objective of the foregoing discussion has been to shed some light on the confusion surrounding indoctrination versus relativism. Effective moral education is neither of these. Suppose, for example, someone were to say to you, “By teaching students to be competent at science, you are imposing values on them.” Being perfectly honest you would have to admit that you do teach values. But you would quickly clarify the values you “impose.” Science teachers do not make students believe a particular fact or set of facts about science. They educate students in science—in how to do

science. This education includes the merits of reason, respect for relevant facts, insistence upon objective evidence, and the like. These are values. Values are inherent regardless of the discipline. The objective of values education is to help students make up their own minds on moral questions based on reasoning. Rational methods exist to decide ethical questions; morally responsible people will use certain kinds of reasoning to arrive at decisions. In other words, there is a methodology for ethical decision-making, just as there is a methodology of science, or literature, or firefighting.

Controversy and Public School Education

Even though methods of ethical reasoning can be taught, *whether* and *when* they should be taught are still controversial questions. Should issues that arouse widespread, sometimes emotional, reactions be included as part of public school instruction? If they are to be included, a fair presentation of conflicting sides of the question should be required. Even with the provision of “fairness,” some people would remain opposed to their inclusion on the grounds that presenting multiple viewpoints encourages the idea that multiple answers to moral questions exist. Free discussion is perceived as undermining the religious or moral training of some students. The problem here is not that an ethical methodology is taught but that its application to real value-laden problems creates conflict. Rather than addressing this problem directly, I would like to pose a larger question: Shall young people be given an opportunity to discuss controversial issues in public schools?

The easy response to those who insist that fair and equal treatment be accorded to both sides of a moral question is that there may not be only two positions, such as the secular and the religious. For example, great diversity of opinion can be found between and among the over 250 religious denominations in this country; this diversity exists among

secular groups as well. Which positions will be presented and by whom poses a problem that has no truly acceptable solution.

Insistence on a morally neutral position when discussing controversial issues is equally unrealistic. When schools avoid important issues—as they have in the past, under the guise of neutrality—education becomes detached from the realities of life. Values education cannot be isolated from other areas of study. Such concepts as equality, justice, honesty, responsibility, and empathy for others certainly are illuminated in the study of history, literature, and science—as well as in vocational training and athletics. The choice between right and wrong and good and evil is interwoven into all that we do and all that we learn. Aspects of moral actions and decision-making surround our students throughout their waking hours. They see rules made and broken; they experience justice and injustice. They live in a world where humans say and do some very human things. Our students are searching for answers to what is right and what is wrong as they try to make sense of their world; and our reluctance to discuss these matters will not make them disappear. To insist that value issues be omitted from the public school curriculum reduces that curriculum to abstraction and sterility. Such a curriculum can provide little assistance to a society struggling to find solutions to value-related problems. Schools are involved, and the real question remains—how can schools perform this function with intelligence and sensitivity?

The issue underlying the question of whether controversial problems ought to be discussed in public schools has more fundamental implications for our democracy. Ultimately, the question is whether or not First Amendment freedoms apply to students in schools. Various court rulings have established that this First Amendment freedom does pertain to students in our schools, and clearly banning controversial

questions (including bioethical issues) does violate the constitutional right to free speech and expression. Thus teachers have the right to introduce controversial issues, including moral ones, for students to consider and discuss. The wise teacher will, of course, be sensitive to the community within which s/he teaches, the suitability of topics to the age and maturity level of students, and the relevance of certain issues to the curriculum.

Conclusion

We live in a pluralistic society with many religious and ethnic groups and no unanimously prescribed set of values or code of morality, but we know that moral education has an intellectual component. We also know that if moral education is to be effective, it cannot be detached from its applications—actual moral issues. Whether we have the wisdom to define what a good citizen in our society should know and be able to

do and the courage to translate our answers into an education program remains to be seen.

Should bioethics be taught? My response is: They must be taught, and with enthusiasm. Schools can contribute to the moral education of young citizens. We must deal with bioethical issues in our schools because:

1. They have a sense of urgency about them.
2. They are real life problems; and
3. They have long-range societal implications.

Students are entitled to learn about their world. And society can legitimately expect that students upon graduation should be reasonably well prepared to participate in its affairs. To refuse to discuss morally controversial issues is to imply that no disagreement exists, or, worse yet, that the issues are irresolvable. Neither of these judgments will equip young people for active and productive lives in the real world.

As I see it, the goals of bioethical

teaching should be to prepare the student/citizen to (1) understand the science and technology related to science and society issues; (2) make informed policy decisions; and (3) adopt an appropriate life style.

If the public schools are to produce citizens able to play constructive roles in society, then moral and ethical reasoning must be incorporated into the curriculum. Many morally laden issues are growing out of advances in biological knowledge and the application of that knowledge in biomedical technology. These issues provide educators with an excellent opportunity to engage students in considering real questions that will affect all of us in the years to come.

References

- KIEFFER, G.H. 1977. Ethics for the "new biology." *The American Biology Teacher* 39(2):80.
- _____. 1979. Can bioethics be taught? *The American Biology Teacher* 41(3):176.

What's Basic About Biology?

Jan L. Nagalski
Southeastern High School
Detroit, Michigan 48214

Within the past several years, SAT scores of high school graduates have significantly declined. Some school critics equate these test score declines with slipping quality in American public education. What is needed to reverse this trend, the critics claim, is a change in the entire educational approach. They suggest a "return to basics."

Interest in curriculum reform is widespread. Among its supporters are many employers who insist that recent graduates are becoming increasingly less prepared for employment, often to the extent that they cannot complete job application forms. Similarly, some college and university instructors complain that recent high school graduates pos-

sess inadequate skills to perform college studies. In concert with these claims, parent and other special interest groups have pressured local school districts to institute curriculum changes. The simplistic promise of a "back to basics" curriculum has appeal for many who are disenchanted with the products of today's schools.

Though many people find it easy to agree on the concept of teaching the "basics," few can agree on what the "basics" are. What skills, for instance, should be taught? In which class? What should be expected of content area courses? These and other questions generate considerable controversy. Because the issue is unresolved, no wholesale imple-

mentation of "back to basics" curricula has occurred.

But, what if your school district decides to implement a "back to basics" program? What will your community decide to stress as basic skills and basic knowledge? What will be sacrificed from the present curriculum? Let us examine the areas that many people include in their list of basics. Also, let us consider the biology class to illustrate the effect of a "back to basics" curriculum on a content-area subject.

Should a student learn to read before graduation? If ten people were asked this question, probably all ten would answer "yes." Similar results might be anticipated for a