Education and the Growth of Conscience by Mannes Tidmarsh, O.P.

Consciences are neither born nor made, they develop. Development in living beings is the outcome of interaction between the individual and the environment; specifically, in the case of moral development, between the individual person and the culture. The child is born with the potential ability to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' in terms other than those of immediate personal satisfaction to which the infant is limited, but the growing child can make assessments only in terms of the values which he is taught. He has, as part of his human make-up, the tendency to pursue the perceived good and to shun the perceived bad. What he actually perceives as good and bad depends largely on what the society into which he is born teaches him so to perceive. This is not to say that the individual's capacity for moral judgment is wholly dependent on the influence of external agents; the ultimate structure of conscience is unique because no two environments are entirely alike and no two individuals are entirely alike.[1]

Though it has been said that moral development is the result of interaction between the individual and the culture one must be yet more precise. The child receives his values not from 'the culture' or from 'society' in a large and undefined sense but from a fairly circumscribed group of persons: parents and siblings, other adults in the family circle, school teachers and companions. This means that values are never transmitted to the child in a 'pure' state, they are always, in some way, modified by the person who mediates them. And the 'mediator' himself is not only the product of a similar historical process but currently is a member of a number of groups or sub-cultures: family, work group, religious sect, recreational groups, all of which may modify the values he has acquired or influence their application to actual situations. Nevertheless, the variations thus introduced all fall within certain limits and one can speak of a common element underlying them. The degree to which a sub-culture may share in the overall values of the larger culture may be minimal but it seems to be logically necessary that there must be some clearly discernible basic area of agreement if we are to speak of 'sub-cultures' rather than of purely disparate cultures.

[1] The ability to assess situations in moral terms is only one part of 'conscience', used loosely: this cognitive ability must be complemented by the conative ability that enables action to follow upon moral decision. The discussion in this paper is concerned solely with the development of the cognitive ability, that is, with the development of 'conscience' in the strict sense.

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In modern industrial societies the compulsory systems of formal education have increased the importance of the school and of the school-teacher as socializing agents. It may be noted that the type of influence brought to bear by the school and by the individual teachers in it need not be the same. There may be little or no 'spirit' in a school and a minimum of shared values among the staff; or there may be a strong unity of general outlook underlying individual views. One might expect the Catholic school, where most of the staff are themselves likely to be Catholics, to be one in which the influences of the school and of the individual teachers are in harmony, thereby increasing the potency of formal education as a factor in the development of moral values. If this assumption be justified it would provide some justification for a further common assumption about Catholic education; that it provides a better moral training than a secular school. Now 'moral training' may mean a number of things: it may refer solely to a strict disciplinary system, it may mean that in a Catholic school a child is taught about and helped to develop a concept of sin, it may mean that the child by mixing with other Catholic children is protected from some forms of bad influence, it may mean that the child is helped to develop a genuine self-discipline and it may mean that the child is helped to form adequate moral concepts. If 'moral training' is to mean anything at all it must mean at least this last.

It is now becoming possible to test whether the Catholic child does, in this crucial sense, benefit from his Catholic education. It should be stressed at this point that the experimental techniques available are, as yet, fairly crude and the findings they have produced are tentative, but a start has been made in the field. It has been a slow start. The relevant research stems very largely from Jean Piaget's work published in his *Development of Moral Judgments in the Child* (1932). In this book Piaget detailed the results of research using his so-called 'clinical method' in which he told individual children, ranging in age between five and thirteen years, short stories having some moral point and then, by classifying their replies to subsequent questions about the stories, he determined the degree of their 'moral maturity'. For Piaget, who was strongly influenced in his thinking by both Kant and Durkheim, 'maturity' consists essentially in moral autonomy, freedom from adult constraint and a recognition of the rights and claims of others. This state, he maintains, is achieved by a definite progression of stages:

1. The stage of moral heteronomy which is linked to childish egocentricity: up to about the age of six years the child sees actions as wrong only because his parents tell him they are so and punish him if he does them and he is unable to put himself in the place of other persons to take stock of their claims and viewpoints.
2. An intermediate stage supervenes at around the age of seven when the appeal to authority begins to weaken with the growth of peer

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respect and the rule is seen as having some value in itself.
3. The stage of moral autonomy or maturity is reached when the child internalizes and accepts as personally relevant the heretofore imposed values and standards and makes allowance for the equitable claims of others.

Piaget held that there are two sources of moral development: parent-child and inter-child relationships, and he saw development as a process away from 'parental constraint' and 'moral realism' (which assesses the moral value of an act purely in terms of its outcome and disregards the underlying intention) towards respect for, and co-operation with, one's peers. In the course of the process the child's concept of justice also changes from a universal acceptance of the idea of immanent justice to one based upon equity. Punishment is seen by the young child as an inevitable, necessary part of the nature of things but the older child sees that authority should have regard to the circumstances of an act before deciding what punishment, if any, to impose. Piaget held this progression by stages to be more or less universal and age-linked.

His work has been criticized on the grounds of faulty methodology, inadequate analysis of concepts,[2] and unjustified generalization from results. That his sampling was inadequate seems generally to be agreed. Subsequent work has shown the importance of the intelligence of the subjects,[3] and of their ethnic[4] and socio-economic backgrounds;[5] all variables of which Piaget apparently took no account. He made chronological age the dominant factor in development whereas it is probably the least directly important. Again Piaget made much of the concept of 'parental constraint', presumably regarding it as a unitary trait, whereas it has been shown clearly by Hoffman[6] to be a complex variable which needs careful control.

Although there has recently been a growth of interest among pscyhologists in the development of religious beliefs in children, not much research has been concerned with the influence of religious affiliation on the development of moral concepts. The little work that has been done has for the most part been directed towards sixth-formers and university or college students and is not strictly relevant to the development of concepts, which by the middle teens are probably fairly stable.[7]

In 1962 Boehm, working in the eastern United States, carried out a series of experiments the overall objective of which was 'an investigation of moral judgments and conscience redevelopment and sub-cultural

[2]MacRae, D.: 'A Test of Piaget's Theory of Moral Development', *J. Abnormal and Social Psych.*, 49, 1954.
[3]Morris, F.: 'The Development of Moral Values in Children', *Brit. J. Educational Psych.*, 28, 1958.
[4]Sears, R., Maccoby, E. E., & Lewin, H.: *Patterns of Child Rearing*, 1957.
[5]Harrower, M.: 'Social Status and the Moral Development of the Child', *Brit. J. Educational Psych.*, 4, 1934.
[6]Hoffman, M. L.: 'Parental Discipline and the Child's consideration for Others', *Child Development*, 34, 1963.
[7]Dowd, Sr. M. Amadeus: 'Moral Reasoning in Teen Age Girls', *J. Cath. University of America*, 1948.
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differences due to religion, socio-economic class and mental level'. Using Piaget's 'clinical method' she interviewed in each experiment some 230 children ranging in age from six to twelve years (in the later experiments she dropped the upper limit to nine years as she found her tests recorded no significant development beyond that age), and attempted to assess their attitudes towards physical aggression, material values, lying and ingratiation with or independence of authority.[8]

In her first experiment she used children of average intelligence from the upper-middle and working classes. She found no significant differences between the two groups in their responses. 'Morality of co-operation' seemed not to be founded on a growing independence of authority as Piaget probably thought. In the next experiment she again used children from the two socio-economic classes but this time further subdivided the groups into children of high and of average intelligence. She found that the more intelligent children matured earlier (in Piaget's sense) in respect of their ability to distinguish between the underlying intention and the outcome of the action. Working class children, regardless of their intelligence level, showed earlier respect for their peer group and independence of adults (i.e. earlier maturity) than the upper-middle class children.

In the final experiment of the series Boehm further sub-divided her groups according to whether they went to a parochial (R.C.) school or to a public (non-denominational) school. [9] By now the experiment had become very complex, she was working with eight sub-groups, and the findings are correspondingly complex. In distinguishing between intention and outcome, Catholic children at the parochial schools, regardless of socio-economic class or intelligence level, matured earlier than children at the public schools. In the public schools, working class children of high intelligence matured earlier than those of average intelligence in making the distinction between intention and outcome but this was not so in the Catholic schools where there was a slight trend in the opposite direction. With regard to independence of adults and acceptance of peer group values, the Catholic children matured earlier with respect to one of the stories used to test this variable and on the other scored the same as the public school children. In both types of school, working class children became independent of adults earlier than middle class children.

Clearly this evidence is inconclusive but it does have some interest and it does raise some questions. One might have expected Catholic children at a Catholic school to have been able to make the distinction

[8]Boehm, E. & Naas, M.: 'Social Class Differences in Conscience Development', *Child Development*, 33, 1962.
Boehm, E.: 'The Development of Conscience: A Comparison of American Children of Different Socio-Economic Levels.' *Child Development*, 33, 1962.
[9]It should be remembered that in the United States a public school is the equivalent of a State school here and there is no religious instruction given in U.S. public schools.

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between intention and outcome at a fairly early age if only because of the explicit training in so doing which they would or should get in being prepared to go to confession. Moreover, it might be popularly expected that Catholic children would be slower at achieving relative independence of adults in forming their moral judgments because of the authority structure of the Church. Boehm's findings, however, did not support this.

Both of these possible expectations were used as hypotheses in an experiment designed to replicate, as far as possible, Boehm's experiment in a British setting. Using the same stories and questions as Boehm (adapted for the cultural change) but working with a smaller number of children, eighty drawn equally from a Catholic and a state junior school, and all from a roughly working class background, I found there was no significant support for either hypothesis. The tendency remarked in the American sample for Catholic children to mature earlier in distinguishing between intention and outcome as criteria for moral value was not found among the English children. Children of high intelligence at the state school (none of whom were Catholic) matured, in this respect, significantly earlier than the corresponding Catholic group. The evidence concerning the second hypothesis was equivocal but on one of the stories used for assessment there was a trend against the expectation which corresponded to Boehm's findings though not at a statistically significant level.

These experiments have done little more than highlight some of the features and difficulties of the field. The results confirm that not chronological but mental age, or intelligence, is probably the most important variable bearing on the pattern and rate of moral development. They also confirm the importance of socio-economic status and suggest that religious affiliation and practice are effective influences. But this work has sampled only some of the variables known to be operative in the development of conscience: no attempt was made to control the type of discipline to which the children were subject nor the extent of religious practice in the home and, of course, no assessment of the actual moral practice of the children was attempted. But even within the limits of the experimental procedures outlined, and these, as has been said, are as yet crude, there remains work to be done in investigating differences in the breadth or range of moral concepts. It may be possible, for example, by presenting a variety of situations involving lying or stealing of a progressively subtle nature to see how far the child can apply the concept to unfamiliar situations, how far he has grasped a principle and how far he is using an extended rule of thumb. Along the same lines one might also go some way towards investigating the relationship, in the moral sphere, of intelligence to range of experience. It might also be possible to determine the overall range of moral awareness and to see whether

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there are marked class and religious differences here. Statements like the recent reminder by the French bishops of the moral evil of dangerous driving, suggest that they may be situations which the Catholic finds it difficult to see in moral terms at all.

This paper has looked at only one small aspect of a wide field. No mention has been made, for instance, of the work of Bandura and Walters and their laboratory techniques for attempting to assess the development and stability of moral concepts nor of Leonard Berkowitz's work along similar lines on aggressive activity. Bernstein's work on public and formal languages (cf *New Blackfriars*, February, 1965) and much recent work on selective perception is clearly relevant to the topic and the McCords' important *Tentative Theory of the Structure of Conscience* offers a possible theoretical basis for attempting to correlate work in the field. More corroboration of findings and clarification of concepts may be necessary before a useful attempt can be made to relate the various lines of research and to see what findings are sufficiently well established to be of help in formulating future educational policy. But already the techniques are developing which may help us to assess rather than merely to assert the value of our methods of moral education.

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