

# MORAL EDUCATION, MINDFULNESS AND SECULARISATION

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## **Introduction**

In seeking answers to the question of how to revitalise the teaching of humanities in our 'culturally shell-shocked society' Chris Ormell (2010) discusses a number of interesting issues surrounding the secularisation of contemporary culture which has accompanied the onset of modernity. In the process of seeking ways of fostering a healing process to counteract the 'commercial brainwash' (ibid., p.31) and thus establish a universal moral foundation on which to base humanities, a range of relevant topics – including the information revolution, multiculturalism and faith schools – are explored. I would like to use the concerns raised in Ormell's analysis to examine in more depth some general issues surrounding moral education in a secular and materialistic age. In particular, I want to argue that – although secularisation can be seen to be a positive development in terms of establishing the appropriate moral and intellectual climate for deep and rich learning – it has left too much of a moral vacuum which has been filled negatively either by forms of hedonistic materialism or religious fundamentalism. As an antidote to this malaise, I will draw on some of the work of the leading secularists – the so-called 'new atheists' such as Hitchens, Dawkins, Dennett and, in particular, Harris – to argue for a secular form of spirituality which may serve to fill the moral vacuum in more rationally defensible and other-regarding ways. In the process, I will stress the utility of mindfulness practice as a means of both fostering and maintaining an educationally justifiable climate based on social values supported by universal moral principles.

## **Secularism and the New Atheists**

The rise of the so-called 'new atheism' – which is really just new wine in the old bottles originally filled by Hume and the Enlightenment thinkers – has been spectacular, no doubt helped considerably by the impact of science and information technology, the scandals within the Catholic church, and the frightening consequences of Islamic fundamentalism. It seems to me that the new atheism is generally positive and educationally justifiable. The general tenor of the criticisms – the concern to ground all our knowledge, beliefs and values on rationally defensible foundations supported by relevant evidence – is commendable and fully in line with the general criteria for educational theory and practice established half a century ago by Dearden, Hirst and Peters (1972).

The so-called 'four horsemen' of the new atheist movement – Dawkins (2006), Dennett (2006), Hitchens (2007) and Harris (2006) – are united in advocating a perspective which celebrates human achievement and potential combined with the awe-inspiring wonder generated by reflection on the universe and our place within it. None of this requires anything more than just ordinary powers of human reasoning coupled with a determination to demand adequate and relevant evidence for all aspects of knowledge and belief. All of this necessarily brings with it a robustly sceptical attitude to claims to knowledge which rest solely on superstition, divine revelation or tradition.

Since all the standard claims for theism – from the design, first cause and ontological arguments (Stenger, 2008) - have been endlessly examined and found wanting from the rational point of view, we are left with putative revelation, with Kierkegaard's 'leap of faith'. I would not wish to suggest that there is anything morally wrong with making such a leap though clearly it is non-rational in the sense that we would not entertain such a lack of evidence for belief and action in the most important spheres of life such as choosing an occupation, investing money or buying a house (in the same way it is irrational to gamble in these areas as it is – *contra* Pascal's wager – in all important spheres of life). If ordinary standards of evidence are important in these spheres why should they cease to hold in the crucial sphere of determining the nature of the universe and the meaning and purpose of life? Dawkins' (2004) advice to his ten year old daughter is worth noting: Next time somebody tells you that something is true, why not say to them 'What kind of evidence is there for that?' And if they can't give you a good answer, I hope you'll think very carefully before you believe a word they say. (p.291).

This is just the advice I would want teachers to give my own children and, arguably, the most appropriate strategy for teachers in all state schools. Faith schools which are deliberately selected by parents for the precise reason that they advocate other grounds for belief are, naturally, a different matter and allowed by education and common law. However, as an educator I would still want to support Dawkins in arguing that parents who inflict religious doctrine on their children should think a bit more carefully about what they are doing since, whatever it is called, it is certainly not education according to publicly accepted criteria.

There are many educational advantages of avoiding the inculcation of notions based only on faith, or belief without evidence. For example, teachers are able to argue for the importance of the various forms of evidence and criteria in the forms of knowledge without having to make a special case for supernatural claims to knowledge which require faith and not evidential support as this is ordinarily understood. Tests for truth in science are especially important in this respect for they encourage students to adopt a provisional stance towards knowledge and truth. All knowledge claims are subject to empirical test and revision in the light of new evidence; Popper and Kuhn have explained in detail how this process operates in the various sciences. This hypothetical and probabilistic stance must also, of course, be applied to claims about God's existence. As Stenger (2008, p.22) puts it:

1. Probably, if God were to exist, then there would be good objective evidence for his existence.
2. But there is no objective evidence for his existence.
3. Therefore, probably God does not exist.

Such an open-minded approach is also ideally suited to discussing and justifying moral beliefs and actions, and allows teachers to tackle head on the problem of evil without having to fudge issues by trying to square the existence of an alleged omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent deity with the terrible human suffering caused by the latest earthquake, drought or tsunami.

### **Spirituality and Purpose in a Godless Universe**

Hawking & Mlodinow (2010) in praise of M-theory – really a collection of quantum supersymmetrical ideas positing multiple universes – offer the following observation:

According to M-theory, ours is not the only universe. Instead, M-theory predicts that a great many universes were created out of nothing. Their creation does not require the intervention of some supernatural being or god. Rather, these multiple universes arise naturally from physical law. They are a prediction of science (pp.8-9).

In a broadly similar vein, Dawkins (1995) argues that: The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference (p.155).

Such visions – though they may be scientifically accurate – are rather bleak and austere. There is more to human existence than this, we would want to say, and teachers in particular might, perhaps, wish to offer more spiritually uplifting and aesthetically inspirational visions to students.

The new atheists – and also most scientists – acknowledge this and seek to offer an explanatory context in which to place such perspectives on our knowledge of and place in the universe. Dawkins (2004) likes Darwin's remark that he would continue to 'rejoice in the multifariousness of nature and leave the chimera of certainty to politicians and preachers' (p.226), and this does serve to direct attention to the awe-inspiring, wondrous and magnificent nature of the cosmos. Science itself can also produce such uplifting perspectives. In *Unweaving the Rainbow* Dawkins (1998) remarks:

The feeling of awed wonder that science can give us is one of the highest experiences of which the human psyche is capable. It is a deep aesthetic passion to rank with the finest that music and poetry can deliver. It is truly one of the things that makes life worth living and it does so, if anything, more effectively if it convinces us that the time we have for living is fragile (p.x).

Of course, science has no monopoly when it comes to evoking wonder, passion and reasons for living, and committed teachers would seek, amongst other things, to introduce students to a wide range of forms of knowledge, each one of which might contribute to these ends. The austere elegance of logic and mathematics, the wondrous intricacy and complexity of the natural world, and the mighty human achievements in music, art and literature are all candidates for enhancing this dimension of human experience and endeavour.

This sphere of experience may be described as 'spiritual' – perhaps as opposed to 'material' or 'practical' – in the sense that it has to do with activities beyond those of mere existence, survival and reproduction. However, following Harris (2006), I would want to offer here an interpretation of spirituality which foregrounds its links with human consciousness and universal values, and does not depend upon religious faith or supernatural belief. Whatever else may be happening when we are undergoing a spiritual experience – or, for that matter, a religious, supernatural or ordinarily emotional experience – there must also be some activity of the mind realised in and through our consciousness. Such a commonsensical and, it seems to me, unexceptionable observation underpins Harris' argument that: Investigating the nature of consciousness directly, through sustained introspection, is simply another name for spiritual practice. It should be clear that whatever transformations of your experience are possible – after forty days and forty nights in the desert, after twenty years in a cave, or after some new serotonin agonist has been delivered to your synapses – these will be a matter of changes occurring in the contents of your consciousness (ibid., pp.209-210).

This is the robustly secular notion of spirituality which, I am suggesting, is important from an educational point of view as one which can fill the moral vacuum currently occupied either by hedonistic materialism or various forms of fundamentalism.

### **Justifying Morality in a Secular Society**

Having demonstrated that the universe we live in is exactly what science would expect if it had no creator or designer, Stenger (2008) challenges Aquinas' moral argument for God which claims that the presence of a moral conscience in humans proves God's existence. Turning this on its head, he argues: As we have seen from an examination of the empirical evidence, God cannot be the source of commonly accepted human morals and values. If he were, we would expect to see

evidence in the superior moral behaviour of believers compared to non-believers...Observable human and societal behaviours look just as they can be expected to look if there is no God (p.210).

In fact, two millennia of moral philosophy have demonstrated that it is not difficult to justify moral thought and action without reference to religious doctrines or the existence of God. The autonomy of ethics was firmly established by Kant and contemporary moral philosophy has flourished without the need to ground values in anything beyond the empirical world of humans and their needs, capacities and interests.

It is a truism that almost all moral and legal codes – from those of Hammurabi operating 3,700 years ago, through Hindu and Buddhist ethics, Mosaic, Christian and Islamic versions of Abrahamic law down to contemporary secular codifications such as utilitarianism or Rawls' theory of justice – agree remarkably about what it requires to establish a just, orderly and good society (though, naturally, there are vast differences in emphasis, penalties for infringement, and forms of justification in and between the different traditions). All have something to say about the preservation of human life, truth-telling, respect for other people's property and person, and so on. Trusted (1987) brings together many of these notions in her observation that:

Since morality is concerned with behaviour toward others what we seek must be a feature of human societies, and moreover of *all* human societies for we hope to find moral values that are universally accepted. I suggest that there are two universally accepted moral principles: keeping trust and benevolence. They are not to be taken as principles external to human nature, principles *imposed*, but as principles of behaviour that have developed from pragmatic rules to moral laws as human societies developed (p.65, original italics).

Dennett (2006) illustrates clearly how such fundamental moral principles are a part of human evolution and progress, and require no further explanation and justification beyond those which can be supplied by science. This is the point at which Harris' robust secularism comes into its own in terms of the enterprise of conceptualising and justifying morality. In recent work, Harris (2010) takes on the task of reconciling human values with scientific endeavour. The central thesis is that: questions about values - about meaning, morality, and life's larger purpose – are really questions about the well-being of conscious creatures. Values, therefore, translate into facts about what can be scientifically understood: regarding positive and negative social emotions, retributive impulses, the effects of specific laws and social institutions on human relationships, the neurophysiology of happiness and suffering, etc....The more we understand ourselves at the level of the brain, the more we will see that there are right and wrong answers to questions of human values (pp.2-3).

Conceptualised in this way, morality becomes an area within which science can contribute to an understanding and promotion of human flourishing in the same way that health is. Just as we value health whilst accepting that it is a broad and mutable concept so we can promote human flourishing or well-being without being able to define it specifically once and for all. In any case, we clearly have sufficient knowledge about what causes ill health (and how to avoid it) and what tends to foster or frustrate our wellbeing without having to refer to anything but our experience and knowledge of the world. Moreover, Harris cites the neuroscientific research on belief which demonstrates its 'content-independence' and thus 'challenges the fact/value distinction' directly. As he observes: for if, from the point of view of the brain, believing that the "sun is a star" is importantly similar to believing that "cruelty is wrong", how can we say that scientific and ethical judgments have nothing in common? (ibid.,p.122).

### **Mindfulness and Moral Education in Destitute Times**

The value and significance of mindfulness practice – non-judgmental present moment attention and awareness – is being increasingly acknowledged in the sphere of moral, social and emotional learning (Schoberlein & Sheth, 2009; Hyland, 2010).

Direct links between the inner clarity and enhanced vision that Siegel (2010) calls 'mindsight' – the 'focused attention that allows us to see the internal workings of our own minds' (p.xi) – are brought out in Kabat-Zinn's (2005) discussion of mindfulness and the moral life. As he suggests, the 'wholesome mind and body states' resulting from the practice include: Generosity, trustworthiness, kindness, empathy, compassion, gratitude, joy in the good fortune of others, inclusiveness, acceptance and equanimity are qualities of mind and heart that further the possibilities of well-being and clarity within oneself, to say nothing of the beneficial effects they have in the world. They form the foundation for an ethical and moral life (p.103).

Such qualities of mind – functioning as cardinal virtues – play a central role in all systems of morality whether the ultimate justifications are found in naturalistic, utilitarian or deontological ethics (Trusted, 1987). Keown (2005) classifies Buddhist ethics as 'virtue ethics' (p.30) which – as in Aristotle's system – is essentially concerned with the development of character in certain desirable and wholesome directions, though he points out that the key precepts of non-harming, compassion and lovingkindness are also central to most mainstream moral systems.

The compassion and lovingkindness of mindfulness traditions – and these are also central to the secular conception of spirituality outlined earlier – can be seen to dovetail with the moral foundations of human existence in general. What mindfulness adds to the moral tradition is, first, the clarity of vision and equanimous stability of mind and body which allow for the full expression of moral principles and practice and, secondly, the passionate motivation to engage with the world in the moral project of challenging injustice, poverty, inequality and all the other factors which stand in the way of human flourishing and well-being. It is for this reason that the 'socially engaged' aspects of both ancient and modern mindfulness traditions (Garfinkel, 2006) have encompassed a broad and diverse range of social movements including peace movements, environmental campaigns, projects to combat urban poverty around the world, work in prisons and hospices, and projects to temper the harmful effects of globalisation (see the *Dharmanet International Learning Resource Site* for information on the array of projects; [www.dharmanet.org/lcengaged.htm](http://www.dharmanet.org/lcengaged.htm)).

Mindfulness practice is designed to promote well-being in ourselves and others or – in the language of the Buddhist noble truths – to work towards the reduction of suffering of all living beings. What stands in the way of achieving such objectives? Clearly, the key *internal* obstacles are located in the instincts and capriciousness of the emotions, and mindfulness can help in fostering the requisite control and, eventually, transforming these to promote equanimity. Once this is achieved, however, there is a host of *external* factors which clearly contribute to what Schopenhauer called the 'suffering of the world' or, to express this in a less negative way, which militate against the promotion of human flourishing and well-being. Thus, the internal and external can be seen to come together in mindful engagement to bring about the desirable ends.

As Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) conclude in their analysis of levels of inequality around the world, 'further improvements in the quality of life no longer depend on further economic growth: the issue is now community and how we relate to each other' (p.254). The idea of education as the prime mover in the fostering of economic capital – always suspect as Dore (1997) graphically illustrated – is now an empty and hollow slogan, particularly as countries around the world struggle with the consequences of the abject failure of neo-liberal economics. Yet, it is not only the economic consequences of Chicago school free marketeering (Klein, 2007) ideas that have turned out to be disastrous but also their impact on the social fabric in glorifying selfish and materialistic possessive individualism. The selfish capitalism which James (2008) and Gerhardt (2010) have criticised so forcefully has produced sickness – mental, physical and psychological – in all nations in which it has gone unchallenged by social-democratic and moral values concerned with societal well-being and the common good. Levels of public and community trust have plummeted in recent years (Seldon, 2009; Judt, 2010) and the fostering of social capital – always overshadowed by the dominance of economic capital arguments in New Labour's lifelong learning policy (Hyland, 2008) – has never been more urgently needed from our education system.

It is suggested that mindfulness practice – incorporated into affective and moral education programmes – may help to fill the space once occupied by religion in state education systems. Not only do we no longer need the belief in religious doctrine, it has, arguably, now come to be seen as anti-educational in its attachment to belief without

evidence and frighteningly dangerous in its tendency to fundamentalist thinking. Harris'

(2008) observation is worth noting by all educators committed to rationality and openmindedness in learning:

One of the greatest challenges facing civilization in the twenty-first century is for human beings to learn to speak about their deepest personal concerns – about ethics, spiritual experience and the inevitability of human suffering – in ways that are not flagrantly irrational. We desperately need a public discourse that encourages critical thinking and intellectual honesty. Nothing stands in the way of this project more than the respect we accord to religious faith (p.87)

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