

Plunkett Centre for Ethics

A joint centre of Australian Catholic University and St Vincents & Mater Health Sydney

Inquiry into Education Amendment (Ethics Classes Repeal) Bill 2011

Replies to Questions on notice

1 Re Question from Hon Sarah Mitchell

- a. The 'curriculum outline' on the website of Primary Ethics validates my concern.
- b. First, there is little evidence that the promoters understand the need for children to acquire good habits of conduct before they are well placed to acquire the good habits of thought which form the basis of sound thinking about difficult cases. The point is: practice has cognitive effects. To illustrate (using a topic about which the curriculum which teach the students): You need to have acquired habits of friendliness before you are well placed to understand the point (the value) of friendship and thus to be able to think well about 'dilemmas' associated with being a friend.
- c. Second, the curriculum designers show little evidence of knowing, and responding to, the fact that a child's desires and thus thinking may be so corrupted by his or her upbringing that no amount of discussion will bring him or her to appreciate what is right and good. So (again to illustrate) the classes may well foster discussions of the value and the demands of friendship amongst children who have not only had no experience of the real thing but whose capacity for friendship has been corrupted by an upbringing which encouraged them to think of friendship as an opportunity to manipulate others. Discussion won't do much good for that child.
- d. Third, there is little evidence that the teachers have an appreciation of what Dr Gerald Gleeson argues is the central question in ethics: are some ways of acting wrong in and of themselves? If stealing is wrong in and of itself, then an abhorrence of stealing needs to be securely fostered in young children before they are well placed to consider difficult issues such as whether a starving man's taking fruit from the rich man's field is stealing or not, and if it is, whether it nevertheless may sometimes be a permissible (though still wrong) thing to do.

2 Re Question from Dr John Kaye

- a. Re (a): The line of reasoning about ethics to which I drew the committee's attention comes from the thinking of Socrates, Plato as well as Aristotle. In essence, it is as follows: Any theory about how kids acquire moral maturity depends on a view of what counts as moral maturity. The former depends on the latter. This is a conceptual point, not an empirical point.¹ That is to say: you understand it once you understand the

¹ Socrates had been asked by Meno 'Can virtue (moral maturity) be taught? Or is it to be acquired by practice? Or is it neither to be practiced nor learned but something that comes to people in some

relevant concepts. It is not something that is discovered by studies of how children learn. So anyone who attempts to refute this claim by pointing out that we have come a long way since the Greeks, that we know more than they do about how children learn, etc, shows by that very remark that he or she does not understand the claim. Of course studies show that children can reason, that they can reason well, that they can reason about human conduct: one hardly needs studies to show that. The point is not what children's cognitive capacities or interests are: the point is about the nature of moral maturity (and thereby about how that maturity is developed).

- b. Re (b) The point about the likelihood that children will develop sceptical habits of thought about ethical matters follows from this way of understanding moral maturity and thus moral development. And the scepticism is likely to be confused in and of itself, embracing not only various forms of contradictory meta-ethics but also various forms of contradictory ethical theory.
- c. Re (c) I do not doubt that ethics classes can 'benefit' children. Classes (that's to say: disciplined conversation about right and wrong, good and bad, about individual feelings and judgments on the one hand and cultural conventions, religious traditions, etc, on the other) can benefit children by:
 - i. Helping children to correct unsound patterns of evaluative response that they may have acquired...just as they may have had the bad fortune to grow up in a family in which no one is good at maths, so they may have had the bad fortune to grow up in a family in which no one is good at genuine friendship.
 - ii. Helping children to appreciate the point or value of sound patterns of evaluative response they have acquired: that the point is their own maturity as social beings who are sufficiently attentive to the needs others.
 - iii. Helping children to understand and appreciate the seeds of weakness of will in them: that's to say, why they do what they know is wrong and don't do what they think they should do.
 - iv. Fostering in children the capacity to think for themselves. The designers of the curriculum are very aware of how young people and others can act out of standards which they have not reflected upon. Indeed it seems to be the chief aim of the curriculum: to encourage independent thinking. A good idea, of course. But in my submissions I've tried to explain the dangers of making 'thinking for yourself' the only or the chief goal of educators in ethics.

Bernadette Tobin
Director, Plunkett Centre for Ethics
20.3.12

other way?' Socrates' simple reply was: 'Until you know what virtue (moral maturity) is, you can know how it is to be acquired.' Meno 71ab

**Questions on Notice:
Inquiry into the Education Amendment (Ethics Classes Repeal) Bill 2011
Dr Bernadette Tobin**

Question from the Hon Sarah Mitchell:

1. I refer to section 4.2 of your submission, where you express concern about the teachers of the ethics program. You state:

"Tellingly, a supporter of the 'special education ethics' program said in a letter to the Sydney Morning Herald: 'In ethics there are no right answers'.

Other than this letter, do you have any other evidence or examples to validate your concern that the current teachers do not have a solid understanding of ethics?

Question from Dr John Kaye

2. Your evidence was based on the views of Aristotle that a young person must learn to behave well before they are "in a position to benefit from a study of ethics". You suggested that the consequences of exposing a child to ethical inquiries before learning the habit of right behaviour would be a "moral scepticism". The evidence you cited to the committee related to university students.
 - a) Do you have any evidence to support your views that goes beyond the views of Aristotle?
 - b) In particular, can you identify empirical evidence such as longitudinal studies that support this view?
 - c) There are alternative views based on international experience with teaching moral philosophy and ethics that identify benefits for young people. Do you have a critique of these studies or can you identify any such critique?