

Read the Book

An excerpt from THE DEATH OF CHARACTER
By James Davison Hunter

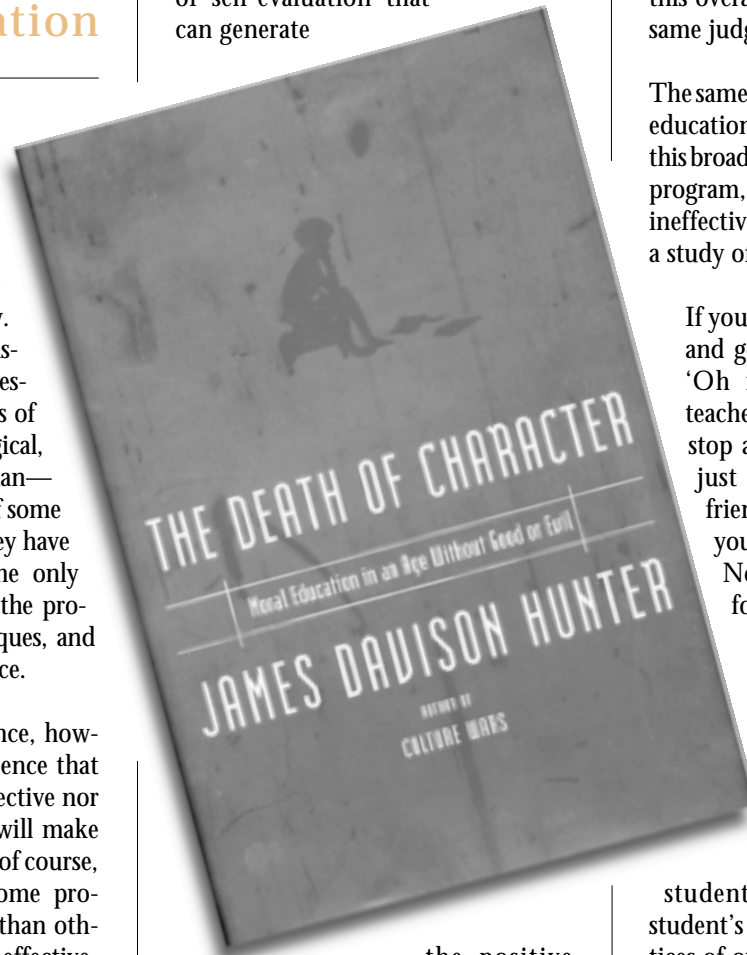
The Impotence of Contemporary Moral Education

Among parents, educators, and politicians there is a palpable urgency to deal with what one ethicist has called “the hole in the moral ozone” of contemporary American society. That urgency, however, can distract us from a rather basic question: do any of the strategies of moral education—psychological, neoclassical, or communitarian—actually work? If they do—if some or all accomplish the task they have set for themselves—then the only thing left to do is to refine the programs, improve their techniques, and expand their use and influence.

The growing body of evidence, however, inspires neither confidence that the various programs are effective nor hope that modifying them will make them any more so. There is, of course, some variation in this. Some programs, of course, are better than others. But cumulatively, their effectiveness is at best less than impressive, and certainly not adequate to the challenge they are meant to address.

Despite its many guises, the constant feature of the psychological strategy of moral education, as we have seen, is an individualism oriented toward liberating the self through autonomous decision-making and reforming the self through personal understanding. In practice, this often plays out as the simplistic proposition that personal psychological and emotional well-being is the foundation of positive social behavior and virtuous conduct. And so the logic goes: until young people develop a stable sense of positive self-

identity that is reinforced by successful learning experience, it is not possible for them to engage in the type of self-evaluation that can generate



the positive feelings, motivations, and behaviors they need to be well integrated, morally responsible members of society. Thus, it is “from [a] shift in self-concept” as one educator put it, that “lasting behaviors and values” come. Unfortunately, the evidence shows otherwise.

The studies are myriad.... In *nuce*, [they] present conclusions that are as unambiguous and indisputable as any body of social scientific analysis can provide. *The nub of it is this: there is little or no association, causal or otherwise, between psychological well-being and moral conduct, and psychologically oriented moral education programs have*

little or no positive effect upon moral behavior, achievement, or anything else. Even analysts who are sympathetic to this overall strategy have come to the same judgment.

The same applies to specific drug or sex education programs operating within this broad strategy. The popular DARE program, for example, is remarkably ineffective. As one student, quoted in a study of its effectiveness, said:

If your friends say ‘Let’s go out and get drunk,’ you don’t say ‘Oh my gosh, well DARE teaches me not to.’ You don’t stop and think about it. You just go and do what your friends do. Does DARE help you deal with peer pressure? No! You’re just going to follow your friends....

One student’s cynicism does not close the books, but these are the results that studies have repeatedly produced.

In the case of sex education, the majority of such programs increase a student’s knowledge, increase a student’s tolerance of the sexual practices of others, and modestly increase the use of contraception. Few, however, reduce risk-taking sexual behavior or teenage pregnancy.

Proponents and critics alike offer a range of explanations of why, study after study, the associations between psychological well-being and “positive” moral conduct are invariably weak or nonexistent. The most consistent explanation points to the studies’ methodological shortcomings. Phrases like “design flaw” and a “need for further research” are repeated like mantras. The implication is that if researchers had only tweaked the variables in such and such a way, they might have found the results for which they were look-

ing. While there may be some merit to this argument, against the aggregate body of evidence it does not ring true. In the most rigorous of these studies, the cumulative weight of evidence is clear and overwhelming: high levels of psychological well-being, however measured, do not correlate with stronger adherence to moral virtues, a strong sense of social responsibility, improved academic performance, or any of the other laudable goals these programs claim to promote. The cognitive development programs of Lawrence Kohlberg, though different in design, cannot boast any greater effectiveness. Indeed, fundamental aspects of his “just community” experiment in democratic education in the “Cluster School” proved to be nothing less than a social and moral fiasco, as careful evaluation studies by his own students document. In the face of such evidence, the promises of the psychological strategy of moral understanding and instruction, however they are packaged and promoted, clearly remain unfulfilled.

The alternative strategies of moral instruction—neoclassical and communitarian—build upon a commitment to teaching moral standards that have their origin outside of the self, at least in theory. One such strategy focuses on socializing children into the inherited rules and narratives distilled from ancient traditions. The other tries to integrate children into the normative standards defined by the social group. In both, the development of virtuous habits in the young through reinforcing compliance with external authority (for instance through rewards and punishments) is central to the educational mission.

This more recent cycle of character education programs has yet to be studied as thoroughly as those that employ the psychological strategy. From what we know so far, however, their actual effectiveness is also highly dubious....

Evidence about the effectiveness of the renewed character education programs of the 1990s is scant and, where it does exist, it is mostly anecdotal. But there are a few serious studies. On the more general character education programs, the evidence is mixed. Some demonstrated some positive effects in the short term for certain kinds of moral sensibilities; but over the long term, children who went through these programs showed no substantial or consistent difference from those who did not. Especially when character education consists of an exhortation in platitudes (say through “virtue of the week” programs), pledges (such as abstinence contracts), and programs of reward and punishment, the new character education programs have almost no effect at all. Abstinence-based sex education programs, like Teen-Aid or Sex Respect, do seem to influence certain abstinence values in the short term, but not over the long term. Nor do they delay or reduce the frequency of intercourse. Community service programs do not fare much better. These programs can positively affect young people’s personal development (for instance, if they enjoy meeting and working with new people with whom the program has put them in contact), but do not necessarily enhance their sense of civic responsibility. In sum, the newly revived character education programs favored by neoclassical and communitarian educators appear no more likely to have an enduring effect on children than those in the psychological strategy.

It goes too far, of course, to conclude that all major programs of moral education are of no account. Still, the very best of them are unimpressive—not only in their long-term but also in their short-term effects.

Even so, where studies evaluating moral education programs reveal their inadequacy, they often signal ways in

which they *could* be effective. There is a body of evidence that shows that moral education has its most enduring effects on young people when they inhabit a social world that coherently incarnates a moral culture defined by a clear and intelligible understanding of public and private good. In a milieu where the school, youth organizations, and the larger community share a moral culture that is integrated and mutually reinforcing; where the social networks of adult authority are strong, unified, and consistent in articulating moral ideals and its attending virtues; and where adults maintain a “caring watchfulness” over all aspects of a young person’s maturation, moral education can be effective. These are environments where intellectual and moral virtues are not only naturally interwoven in a distinctive moral ethos but embedded within the structure of communities.

Needless to say, communities with this level of social and cultural integration and stability are scarce in America today. Moral education operates against the backdrop of a social life that is intensely fragmented, a shifting polity of abstruse bureaucratic proceduralism, a moral culture framed by a diffuse therapeutic individualism, and an economy of saturated consumerism. Add to this the fact that these programs are typically low-intensity activities conducted over a relatively small number of hours over the course of the school year, and it is no wonder that they are so ineffectual. At the end of the day, these programs may do more for adults than they do for children. At least they salve our conscience that something constructive is being attempted.

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