When psychotherapy replaces religion

JAMES DAVISON HUNTER

WHEN it comes to the
moral life of children, the vocabulary of the psychologist frames
virtually all public discussion. For decades now, contributions
from philosophers and theologians have been muted or nonex-
istent. Anthropologists and sociologists are likewise absent from
the discussion. Historians have been busy documenting the
major developments in this realm of social life, but their in-
fluence has been limited mainly to their guild. Rather, it is
the psychologists, and in particular the developmental and
educational psychologists, who have owned this field—in theory
and in practice. All of the major players in the last half of the
twentieth century have been psychologists. Erik Erikson, B. F.
Skinner, Benjamin Spock, Havighurst, Carl Rodgers, Jean
Piaget, Abraham Maslow, Rudolf Dreikurs, William Glasser,
Lawrence Kohlberg, Louis Rath, Sidney Simon, Jane Loevinger,

Daniel Levinson, Robert Selman, Maurice Elias—their assumptions, concepts, and paradigms have largely determined how all of us think about the moral lives of children, and, indeed, about moral life generally.

Why has psychology become so dominant—even, as I will show, infiltrating religion? The discipline itself has maintained over the years that, as the science of human motive and behavior, it comes closest to a rational understanding of that difficult and elusive phenomenon, human nature. As such, psychology is supposedly in a position to specify the conditions that permit or impede the full realization of a person's natural creativity, productivity, and well-being. Understanding the range and expression of moral sensibilities is central to this task insofar as it helps to specify what are, in fact, the constituting elements of "the good life."

There are also sociological reasons why psychology has emerged as *the* framework for understanding the moral life. With theology in all its forms discredited as a public language, psychology has offered a seemingly neutral way to understand and cultivate the best qualities of the human personality. It is "science" after all—and science, we are inclined to believe, is "objective." In the wake of the diffused Christian consensus dominant through the first half of the twentieth century, the psychological approaches to moral education seem so much more inclusive, less offensive, and less problematic on legal grounds. Indeed, its most vocal proponents have maintained that the framework psychology offers in understanding the moral life is, in fact, objective, and its application to education is universal.

From the beginning, the centerpiece of the psychological strategy of moral education has been the concept of "development." For some theorists, the concept of development is a fundamental axiom made explicit in carefully worded theoretical propositions. For others, it is just part of the accepted wisdom that forms a background of their thinking. While morality, in this perspective, is mainly defined in terms of a rational competence that gets expressed in increasingly sophisticated principles of moral reasoning, many psychologists would insist, too, that a person's emotions are inextricably linked to moral judgment.

Indeed, since the 1960s, much of the research has given even greater prominence to the role of emotions in the development of moral understanding. It is our empathy with the plight of another that prompts ethical demands for justice; it is our uncertainty in the face of confusing events that prompts the effort of self-understanding; it is fear in the face of danger that invites the ideal of courage; it is our natural worry about threats to our livelihood or our well-being that prompts the virtue of prudence; and it is out of the experience of exhaustion or boredom that we learn to seek temperance.[1]

In the translation from theory to practical pedagogy, the dominant thrust of psychology has been *affective*. In the field, the centerpiece of this orientation has been the panoply of emotions surrounding one's own self-understanding and well-being—captured in the concept of "self-esteem." We are told that children who feel good about themselves tend to do well in school, are less likely to take drugs, will be sexually responsible, and will be more tolerant of others. Though the "self-esteem" concept lost some currency in the 1990s, other terms have arisen to take its place—for example, "emotional intelligence," or what its theorists call the EQ or "emotional quotient." After it was popularized by Daniel Goleman's 1995 best-seller *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More than IQ*, hundreds of schools instituted programs based upon the idea. The enthusiasm for EQ is as high as it ever was for self-esteem programs. Says one advocate, "We believe it needs to be comprehensive, just like science and math.... Every child, every school, every year."

The psychological regime

The debates and discussion within this larger field of inquiry and pedagogy are complex, to be sure. The research that

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[1] More recent research has focused upon the cognitive dimensions of emotion, particularly in the neurophysiological aspects of emotions (e.g., the biochemical reactions in the brain when one feels, say, anger or elation) and in the peculiar behavioral expressions of emotions (such as knitting one's brow when one is worried or breaking into a smile when one is happy). Indeed, they view emotions as a kind of cognitive process, a "hot cognition" as some call it. See Jerome Kagan's essay, "The Idea of Emotion in Human Development," in *Emotions, Cognitions and Behavior*, edited by Carroll E. Izard, Jerome Kagan, and Robert B. Zajonc (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

forms the core of this general strategy is serious academic scholarship that has offered important insight into the psychology of moral understanding. Yet, as these theories find their way into curricula and other forms of practical pedagogy, the theoretical diversity rapidly disappears. Indeed, the real significance of this scholarship is found less in its details than in the way it diffuses into the larger culture as a guiding wisdom for thinking about moral life.

Such a diffusion is not surprising. The study of moral development was always meant to have a broader impact. The urgency of Dewey's educational vision—and those of Piaget and Kohlberg and their successors—was based on a straightforward logic: If we know what moral development is, then we will know what moral education ought to be. We can then proceed to devise programs that stimulate moral sensibility among children. It is in this way that the assumptions, concepts, and paradigms of secular psychology have largely shaped the way we all think about the moral lives of children.

The influence of psychology on our understanding of moral life has, in turn, had an impact on American culture. To whom do school systems turn when they need counseling for their students, or lawyers when they need "an expert" in court to explain the behavior of criminals, or journalists seeking opinions for a story on juvenile delinquency? We summon the psychologist, the child psychiatrist, the psychiatric social worker. The specialized knowledge of such individuals has become the common sense and working wisdom of parents, educators, and policy makers alike.

It is in the structure of this diffusion that we see this collective endeavor as a "regime." By regime I simply mean the complex network of institutions, ideas, ideals, and interests whose collective purpose is to propagate a general strategy of moral understanding and learning. Culturally, the regime goes far beyond whatever academic ideas are currently fashionable. Clearly, particular ideas and programs are packaged and presented in ever-changing ways. But the framing ideas, the mechanisms of diffusion, the institutional structures that support them, and the disparate group of elites that derive their livelihoods from them share common assumptions and interests. These ideas, mechanisms, structures, and elites

do not change quickly. It is in this way that I speak of the prevailing moral education establishment as a regime.

Dominated as it is by perspectives diffused and diluted from professional psychology, this regime is overwhelmingly therapeutic and self-referencing; in character, its defining feature is the autonomous self. This regime's strategy of moral education now pervades *all* of the mainstream institutions that mediate moral understanding to children—schools, youth organizations, family counseling, and, most curiously, faith communities.

The religion of self-esteem

One would think that religious faith and religious communities would constitute a protective enclave against the influence of secular psychology. The reality, of course, is more complex. It was not so long ago that Protestant faith and institutions dominated moral instruction in American society. Today, faith-based cultures are fragmented and their institutions are marginalized.[2] The nation's diverse faith communities are neither part of the present moral education establishment nor a politically visible part of the neo-classical and communitarian backlash.

And yet while peripheral to the larger culture-forming institutions, they retain a prominent role in local communities and in the lives of many Americans. Of course, religious denominations and other para-ecclesiastical organizations support the local structures with curriculum material and the like. There is within these faith organizations considerable ambivalence in the mix of traditional biblical teaching and psychological assumptions, concepts, and methods. There is also considerable variation in the mixture—some emphasizing Scripture and tradition and others emphasizing the psychologi-

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[2] In the case of Protestantism, Sunday-school enrollments in the United States from 1970 to 1986 dropped about a third (40.5 million to 26.6 million), a level that remained fairly stable through the 1990s. Consistent with this, Gallup polls have shown that the number of adults reporting no Sunday-school training during their childhood rose from 10 percent in 1970 to 27 percent in 1986. The number of willing, reliable, and trained volunteers has always been a challenge but, in this demographic context, it is a challenge that has only increased. Add to this a general drop off in denominational support for religious education and the cumulative evidence suggests that the institution is facing problems from which it may not recover.

cal. That there is a blending of the two is inevitable.

Religious conservatives—especially Evangelicals—have been among the harshest critics of secular public education in the late twentieth century. Rank and file Evangelicals have consistently protested the teaching of evolution as well as the absence of prayer and Bible reading in schools. They have also emerged among the greatest supporters of old-fashioned character education. Though its leadership has not been very visible, conservative religious faith has clearly animated much of the traditionalist backlash to the moral education establishment, inspiring virtually the entire movement of abstinence-based sex education.

Conspicuous in this mix is James Dobson. As the head of the Evangelical family ministry, Focus on the Family, he has been at the forefront of opposition to nearly every cultural change since the late 1960s. Whether battling the National Education Association, the Sexuality Information and Educational Council of the United States, Planned Parenthood, or the liberal wing of the Democratic party, his opposition to progressive organizations and causes has been consistent, strident, energetic, and fairly effective. At the same time, as a family psychologist, he has dispensed advice to literally millions of parents and children. Dobson thus presents an instructive case of the mainstream Evangelical approach to moral education.

Dobson's 1989 book *Preparing for Adolescence*, perhaps his most significant effort to reach Evangelical adolescents with moral guidance, has sold over one and a half million copies and has had an extraordinary sway within the Evangelical subculture. The book is "designed to acquaint you with yourself ... to give you a better grasp of who you are and where you appear to be going." With the first chapter on self-esteem and a later one on emotions, *Preparing for Adolescence* depicts self-understanding and moral action as dependent upon the categories of contemporary psychology. The message is implicit but sustained throughout: Growing up requires ongoing introspection—about one's feelings of inferiority, sexual identity, problems, looks, indeed, every aspect of a teenager's emotional life.

As one would expect, the book offers a distinctively Chris-

tian commentary on these challenges. Dobson speaks of the obligation to obey God's will as revealed in Scripture. He also speaks of God's values as distinct from "man's values," of the example of Christ and his courage, of the need for prayer before making decisions and the need for reading the Bible as a source of guidance. Thus the "appetite for sex"

> is something God created within you. I want to make this point very strongly. Sex is not dirty and it is not evil. Nothing that God ever created could be dirty. The desire for sex was God's idea— not ours. He placed this part of our nature into us; He created those chemicals (hormones) that make the opposite sex appealing to us. He did this so we would want to have a family of our own.... So sex is not a dirty thing at all; it's a wonderful, beautiful mechanism, no matter what you may have heard about it.

> However I must also tell you that God intends for us to control that desire for sexual intercourse. He has stated repeatedly in the Bible that we are to save our body for the person we will eventually marry, and that it is wrong to satisfy our appetite for sex with a boy or girl before we get married.

At the same time, the very first reason Dobson gives against premarital sex is the risk of venereal disease; and against marriage at a young age, the likelihood of divorce and becoming a parent before one is emotionally prepared. Likewise, the leading reasons for resisting the pressure of peers to smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol, or take drugs are the consequences to health and emotional well-being.

In the lessons Dobson conveys to young people, the importance of a sustained introspective gaze, self-understanding, and well-being are established as the paramount moral categories. He enshrines self-esteem as the adolescent's most significant category in thinking about moral questions. Biblically based moral standards *are framed within* the language and concepts of popular psychology; not the other way around.

The end of sin

Dobson's approach is not uncommon within Evangelicalism. Kenneth Erickson's *Helping Your Children Feel Good About Themselves: A Guide to Building Self-Esteem in the Christian Family* also employs the language of popular psychology. Pub-

lished in 1994, this sentimental book expresses an earnest concern for developing children. Here, too, self-esteem is made the cornerstone of a healthy childhood and even a healthy society. Quoting Dobson, Erickson bases his argument on the consequences of low self-esteem:

> In a real sense, the health of an entire society depends on the ease with which the individual members gain personal acceptance. Thus whenever the keys to self-esteem are seemingly out of reach for a large percentage of the people, as in twentieth-century America, then widespread 'mental illness,' neuroticism, hatred, alcoholism, drug abuse, violence, and social disorder will certainly occur.

As an Evangelical, Erickson grounds the idea of self-esteem in the love of God. "Teaching children the almost-unbelievable truth about God's love," he writes, "is one of the major tasks of parents." Beyond this important theological caveat and occasional Bible verse, however, there is little to distinguish his advice from that of secular family therapists. On the one hand, he emphasizes the building of self-esteem and self-confidence as ends in themselves, techniques of communication and problem solving, and the "inner child" (or "the stowaway child within"); on the other hand, he criticizes perfectionism and shame-based morality. While he writes of the importance of forgiveness, the problem of sin is all but absent.

In a way that is typical within the Evangelical subculture, Erickson provides parents a range of specific and practical therapeutic techniques for improving their relationships with their children and, ultimately, for enhancing their children's self-esteem. These include meeting frequently with other parents "to identify and share the major problems experienced in communicating effectively with their children"; holding "family inventory sessions," in which parents and children identify and record favorite things to do together; scheduling "family discussion sessions where each member is asked to think of, and share, two special qualities they like in each of the others"; recalling the number of times they affirmed or criticized each member of the family; estimating "the amount of one-on-one time you spend with each child per day" and comparing it to the actual amount of time spent with the child; selecting

positive traits parents would like to pass on to their children and identifying a "trait-for-this-week" they will incorporate into their parenting practices; and "los[ing] no natural opportunity to serve as a family 'hug therapist' ... resolv[ing] that when you feel lonely or hurt, you will ask for a healing hug from your spouse or your children."

Much the same theme is found in Charles Gerber's 1996 book, *Christ-Centered Self-Esteem: Seeing Ourselves Through God's Eyes*. Here again, the terminology and presuppositions of secular psychology provide the framework for Christian self-help. In the view of this professional counselor, not only is "correct biblical self-esteem ... a vital ingredient to being successful ... it is the main ingredient." Unlike most of the Evangelical books of this genre, Gerber stays very close to biblical texts in his treatment of self-esteem; each point is backed up with verses from the Bible. The author justifies this by arguing that the Bible is "the ultimate source of self-esteem." Gerber's purpose, then, is to "show how important it is that a person build his or her esteem from God's side of the cross at Calvary and not their side of the cross." The key to biblically based self-esteem, he argues, is "Christ's esteem for us." By contrast, "low self-esteem is a doctrine of the devil; a cleverly disguised and disgusting lie taught by the devil for the purpose of killing, stealing and destroying mankind."

Typical of the formulae found in Evangelicalism, Gerber offers a "prescription to improve your self-esteem" that includes the recommendation that each person "spend time with God, reading the Bible," "remember your successes," "state positives about yourself," "do a weekly inventory of positive traits you see in yourself," "smile and maintain good eye contact," "become your best friend," and "stop wanting to be someone you are never going to be, and probably should not be."

Then there is Nell Mohney's *Don't Put a Period Where God Put a Comma: Self-Esteem for Christians*, a sweet book filled with inspiring stories whose purpose is to instruct Christians in the "abundant life" as portrayed in the gospel of John. For Mohney, the greatest obstacle to abundant life is negative self-image. "Many Christians have low self-esteem because they

haven't yet accepted God's grace. Some even believe that because we are sinful and unworthy of God's grace, we should have low self-esteem." The antidote, of course, is a positive self-image. "We no longer have to live with feelings of loneliness, rejection, and unworthiness," Mohney writes. "Instead, as we receive God's love, we are able to perceive ourselves as 'new creations'—persons full of potential and worthy of respect. When we learn to love ourselves, we can be open to others, see them as persons of worth, and be instruments through whom God's love is made visible." She, too, punctuates her lessons with specific techniques "for developing high self-esteem," "reducing harmful stress," "developing better attitudes," "overcoming negative emotions," "becoming more optimistic," and "building self-confidence." Mastery over the self in this way is important because a positive self-image is central to the "Christian value system."

In these and other books there is a curious blending of cultural ideals and conceptual categories. This is not an unconscious parroting of contemporary moral psychology. Evangelicals seek, rather, to co-opt psychology for their own purposes, making therapeutic concepts subordinate to biblical wisdom. The premise is that psychology provides tools that are, by themselves, theologically and morally neutral but useful all the same when linked to the truths of Christian faith. Yet insofar as popular psychology provides the framing categories for this literature of popular guidance and admonition, it is the Christian worldview that undergoes a peculiar reworking. Despite an easy and contemporary coherence in all of these books, the cultural incongruities these advice books represent are, from a historical point of view, breathtaking.

The mainline churches

In part, because the claim to orthodoxy is not so aggressively adhered to, such incongruities are less obvious among mainline Protestants. But the ambivalent relationship of mainline Protestant communities to the therapeutic ethos is unmistakable.

The effort to link lay theological education and developmental psychology was already well established in the mainline Protestant churches by the mid 1960s. In a document

produced by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches in 1966, for example, leaders from 16 Protestant bodies outlined a strategy by which each member denomination could construct its own curriculum of religious education. Beyond better "use of the Bible in curriculum," they sought to better understand "the relationship of theological foundation and psychological insights in Christian nurture." Toward this end, their strategy was meant to integrate "learning theory" and "developments in contemporary education" in a Christian context. As a matter of practical theology, they explained that "the person's perception of his whole field of relationships, especially the way others relate to him and accept or reject him, greatly influences his capacity for self-acceptance. The self-acceptance, in turn becomes a key factor in his capacity to be outgoing in his relationships with others and with God, his Creator." Over the ensuing decades, the various mainline Protestant denominations have negotiated these insights in similar ways.

The United Church of Christ, for example, offers a pamphlet especially for youth in its "Looking Up" series. Entitled "Feeling Good About Yourself: Helping Young People Build Self-Esteem," the 1983 booklet argues that "self-esteem, self-worth, self-acceptance, self-image, or just feeling good about yourself" is the beginning of the moral life and remains forever central to it.

> Loving myself is at the heart of living, loving, and growing. Unless I love myself, it is harder for me to love others and to be loved by them. Life's problems are easier to figure out and face up to if I love myself. Growing into healthy maturity and being successful are helped by how much I value myself.

The message to young people is that the foundation of goodness, and especially altruism, is love of self: "We cannot give love if we don't have the love to give. And the love we have to give has its roots in our love of Self." The booklet even goes on to counsel its readers that to love oneself "is holy." Having made this clear, it then warns young people about the excesses of narcissism—where people are so fixed upon themselves that they give little thought or concern for anyone else. This is love of Self "gone wrong." "Persons who are selfish are so insecure that they need all the attention they can get, not only from others but also from themselves." The problem with these individuals is that

they were improperly cared for when they were young. The answer for them, as for all young people, is to learn a proper form of self-love. It is to this end that readers are invited on a journey of self-discovery, a journey that never ends for the simple reason that the "self is always becoming, always growing, whether we're aware of it or not."

The importance of self-understanding and self-regard to both a healthy and moral life appears in the United Methodist litera- ture as well. Of the many materials the denomination provides, one of the most interesting is *Devo'zine*, the devotional magazine designed to help Methodist teenagers to "develop a lifetime pat- tern of spending time with God and reflecting on what God is doing in your life." The message is familiar:

> Low self-esteem can keep us from achieving our goals, forming solid friendships, and seeing the good in others. It can even hinder our relationship with God. On the other hand, when we have healthy self-esteem, we realize that we are not perfect and are comfortable with that; are able to laugh at our mistakes rather than punish ourselves; can step out, share who we are, and try new things; view God as the loving, compassionate, and generous Creator of good things.

In helping them sort out their values, *Devo'zine* encourages readers to apply "critical thinking skills" to what they see on television: "Are the characters honest or dishonest? What are the consequences of their honesty? dishonesty? Are the char- acters especially selfish? Do they routinely show disrespect for one another? What are the results?" But embedded within this utilitarian logic is an appeal to transcendence: "What would Jesus think about the program? How would you feel if Jesus were watching it with you?" Moral choices are also framed within a psychology of emotional need. For example, "destruc- tive choices meet a need of some kind. They do so in the wrong way, but they still meet a need. Bad choices may tem- porarily make us feel good about ourselves." Yet "to deal with sin, just saying no isn't enough. We need to fill our lives with Jesus, who is better and stronger than sin."

Sex and drugs

Because the reformed tradition in theology is known for its tendencies toward rational elucidation, it is not altogether

surprising that the literature mainline Presbyterians offer their youth is far reaching. Here, too, whether on the moral life generally or on sexuality and drug use, the material reflects much the same pattern of ambivalence. The general orientation rejects "handing out absolutes," for these "can sometimes be a disservice to youth." Rather, one "must teach youth how to think, how to make faithful decisions, and how to live with the consequences of their choices." The stories and metaphors of biblical literature are used copiously throughout as a tool of moral instruction.

This church's pedagogy on sexuality, most fully developed in *God's Gift of Sexuality*, is unusual for its thoroughness and the fact that theology frames the discussion in its entirety—for all age groups. It offers, right up front, seven biblical and theological principles to guide an understanding of sexuality: "God created us and gave us the gift of our sexuality; God created us for life in community; our church is a community of love; our church is a community of responsibility; our church is a varied community; our church is a community of forgiveness; and God gives us responsibility for our own decisions." The theology is squarely in the liberal tradition and therefore inclines the denomination toward progressive views of abortion, homosexuality, and premarital sex. It also maintains a critical awareness of sexism, homophobia, and racism.

At the same time, the curriculum's authors are biased toward restraint—for example, "young people who are not married should not engage in sexual intercourse." In this framework, "young people ... learn a method of responsible decision making that can become a model for their lives." The model includes the typical techniques of hypothetical moral dilemmas, self-esteem exercises, and value-clarification activities. Here, too, the moral reasoning passed on to the young speaks of the importance to one's moral autonomy of feeling good about oneself. Yet consistent with its theological emphasis, the document states emphatically that one's sense of worth is enhanced by recognizing that God created us as one of his good creations. Indeed, overshadowing all is the view that "in our decision making, we are instructed by God's Word to us."

The Presbyterian drug-prevention curriculum, *Together: Growing Up Drug Free*, is thorough as well but more like other mainline Protestant and Evangelical literature in its em-

phasis on psychological assumptions.[3] Thus, for example, while the manual openly recognizes that affective education focusing on self-esteem would be limited in its effectiveness, one of the fundamental factors in its alternative model (beyond teaching the consequences of drug use and interpersonal skills to resist peer pressure) is the "development of self-concept," which "includes helping children to discover and believe in their own competence, responsibility, and personal worth."

Therapeutic assumptions concerned with basic biological, psychological, social, and spiritual needs frame the argument, but the starting point is emotional well-being through self-understanding. Repeated to all age groups, in age-appropriate language, are four lessons on the nature of feelings: "feelings are real," "as real as things we can see or touch"; "feelings are not right or wrong," they "merely are"; "doing good feels good"; and "feelings change." The objective in these lessons is to change feelings through actions. If you are upset but respond in a way that is good, "your upset feeling will change into a good feeling," but "if you feel upset and do something you know is wrong, your resulting feeling may be different, but it will still be an upset feeling." Emotional self-understanding is not only the starting point but is also one of the threads that ties all lessons together, whether it is in dealing with peer pressure, the consequences of drug use itself, or the development of refusal skills. Stories from the Bible provide a point of reference, as do affirmations of God's love and strength, but the moral imagination is framed more by the categories of psychology than either Scripture or theology.

Judaism and Catholicism

The story becomes much more complex when considering the Catholic and Jewish approach to moral education. Without

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[3] For younger adolescents, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) offers the drug-education curriculum, "Just Say Yes!" Here, too, biblical guidance is woven together with the moral concerns of emotional and physical well-being. Straight off, young people are presented with 31 "price tags" of drug abuse, only one of which bears on the spiritual consequences. The rest emphasize cancer and other serious physical illnesses along with suicidal depression, embarrassment, and other emotional and psychological problems. Session two is on self-esteem. Session three focuses upon "personal power" to make tough autonomous decisions. The final session addresses "freedom"—mainly from bad habits but also freedom to choose positive goals.

elaborating too much, it is worth noting that within these traditions, the moral education curricula have kept remarkably free of the influence of secular therapeutic strategies—or at least the influence is not so obvious. A number of factors may explain this. For one, both Catholicism and Judaism have historically sought to survive as minority faiths in a Protestant-dominated culture. These faiths also possess an identity rooted in ritual and tradition as well as a more deeply embedded historical self-understanding than Protestantism. But in practice, they too are not untouched by psychology.

The story is also made more complex within the lives of particular churches, parishes, and synagogues. Here such distinctions tend to flatten out to the kind of utilitarian formulae advocated through the dominant regime. For example, when asked how she would deal with a student who stole something from a classmate, the principal of a Catholic school in San Antonio said, "First, I'd ask them why they did it. I'd ask them about how it makes them feel, and how would they like it if somebody did that to them?" But if they felt okay about it? "I'd say, 'You know, you can't get away with it all of your life. It just doesn't work that way.'" Would she ever use the language of the Catholic faith to deal with these matters? After all, the setting was a Catholic school sponsored by the Catholic Church in the very Catholic city of San Antonio, Texas. To this, she answered quite matter of factly,

> Oh, no, that kind of language would probably not relate to them anyway. When I was growing up I personally might of responded to someone if they said, "hey, this is a sin." Today, though, I don't think that young people would respond to that. The most you could say to them is that, "this is not allowed."

A youth minister in a large Presbyterian church in Chicago made much the same admission. When asked—"Do you ever invoke the name or the example of Christ" with your work with kids on moral issues?—he said he did not. "Sometimes I think I should, but I find it artificial. For these kids, the symbols [of the faith] don't mean anything."

And for a rabbi in charge of religious education in one of New York City's largest Reform synagogues, are the young people he works with ever exposed to theological concepts like "sin" to help make sense of various ethical issues?

> Sin isn't one of our issues. My guess is that in twelve years of religious school our kids will never hear the word. It's not a Jewish concern. It doesn't exist by us, for better or for worse.

As to the moral ideal of well-being, it is ubiquitous in youth ministry. The concept of self-esteem, in particular, is never far from the articulated objectives of such work, though it is not embraced without reservation. "Yes," said the Presbyterian youth minister,

> self-esteem is touted in youth ministry everywhere. It has become our standard. Yet what does self-esteem have to do with Christianity? Jonathan Edwards didn't have a damn thing to do with it. Isn't the denial of self at the heart of Christian faith? To me it can kind of degenerate into solipsism, self worship, so to me it's somewhat superficial."

Nevertheless, he continues to see self-esteem as a worthy aim.

The principal of the Catholic school in San Antonio also embraced the ideal of self-esteem but, in the same breath, interpreted it in the language of her faith. "Self-esteem is very much a basic teaching of the Catholic Church: you are created good and the Holy Spirit has gifted you and empowered you." The director of education at the synagogue in Manhattan affirmed it as well but framed it in communal terms. "I do want them to understand what a healthy Jewish identity is," he said, "so we have some very deliberate units that are called 'Proud and Jewish' which unquestionably builds up their self-esteem as young Jewish people."

The ambivalence of faith communities toward moral education could not be more clear. Many faith communities are determined to ground moral education in biblical literature and theological tradition; at the same time, they embrace the language and assumptions of contemporary psychology. Because Evangelicals are among the most self-conscious about the preservation of their orthodoxy, it is a bit ironic that they are among the least self-conscious about their embrace of therapeutic categories and ideals. Whatever else may be lost in this bargain, such syncretism does provide a contemporary diction that is both relevant to the young and easy for them to grasp. However, the fact that Evangelical Protestantism, despite its public posturing to the contrary, is comfortable with

a therapeutic understanding of morality and moral develop-
ment suggests that its resistance to the dominant culture may,
in fact, be little resistance at all.

Triumph of the therapeutic

The problem is not subjectivity, for moral life has always
required a deep and rich subjective engagement. But subjectivity
in our day has given way to *subjectivism*, where the experiences,
interests, and sentiments of the autonomous individual are en-
shrined as the standards defining the height, length, and breadth
of moral hope and possibility. That this cultural transformation
has taken place is rarely disputed anymore. What is particularly
noteworthy is that the moral education establishments have, in
various and often unintended ways, assisted and even celebrated
this transformation in its work with children. The old Protestant
establishment offers no real protest.

And so whether or not the pedagogies provide specific train-
ing in a range of desired behaviors, the implicit lessons of
contemporary moral education speak powerfully to the moral
imagination. Here, the self—its appetites, preferences, and
interests—is at center stage, without serious rival or competi-
tion. *Thus, while nearly all moral educators disparage the
subjectivism and individualism of our time, none of the alter-
natives presented are able to transcend or escape them.*

The purpose of moral education is to change people for the
better and, in so doing, to improve the quality of life in
society. The difficulty is that moral education, as it is pres-
ently configured and institutionalized, is utterly captive to the
society in which it exists. It embodies too well the psychologi-
cal assumptions that have brought the social order to its present
place and that continue to maintain it. It is, in so many re-
spects, a reflection of the moral order it seeks to transcend
and then transform. In this regard, moral education, even in
its diversity and its apparent oppositions, is more a story about
the legitimation of American culture than it is about its trans-
formation. This continues patterns well-established in history.
In every context, in every generation in America, the evolving
substance of moral education has reflected the central as-
sumptions and ideals of the prevailing *Zeitgeist*. Our present
moment is no different.