

Hudson Institute

Why Johnny Can't Tell Right from Wrong by Christina Hoff Sommers
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"We need a "great relearning," to restore our moral environment"

We often hear that today Johnny can't read, can't write, and has trouble finding France on a map. It is also true that Johnny is having difficulty distinguishing right from wrong. Along with illiteracy and innumeracy, we must add deep moral confusion to the list of American educational problems. Increasingly, today's young people know little or nothing about the Western moral tradition.

This was recently demonstrated by Tonight Show host Jay Leno. Leno frequently does "man-on-the-street" interviews, and one night he collared some young people to ask them questions about the Bible. "Can you name one of the Ten Commandments?" he asked two college-age women. One replied, "Freedom of speech?" Mr. Leno said to the other, "Complete this sentence: Let he who is without sin. . . ." Her response was, "have a good time?" Mr. Leno then turned to a young man and asked, "Who, according to the Bible, was eaten by a whale?" The confident answer was, "Pinocchio."

Conceptual Moral Chaos

As with many humorous anecdotes, the underlying reality is not funny at all. These young people are morally confused. They are the students I and other teachers of ethics see every day. Like most professors, I am acutely aware of the "hole in the moral ozone." When you have as many conversations with young people as I do, you come away both exhilarated and depressed. There is a great deal of simple good-heartedness, instinctive fair-mindedness, and spontaneous generosity of spirit in them. Most of the students I meet are basically decent individuals. They form wonderful friendships and seem considerate of and grateful to their parents—more so than the baby boomers were.

An astonishing number are doing volunteer work (70 percent of college students, according to one annual survey). They donate blood to the Red Cross in record numbers and deliver food to housebound elderly people. They spend summer vacations working with deaf children or doing volunteer work in Mexico. This is a generation of kids that, despite relatively little moral guidance or religious training, is putting compassion into practice.

Conceptually and culturally, however, today's young people live in a moral haze. Ask one if there are such things as right and wrong, and

suddenly you are confronted with a confused, tongue-tied, nervous, and insecure individual. The same person who works weekends for Meals on Wheels, who volunteers for a suicide prevention hotline or a domestic violence shelter might tell you, "Well, there really is no such thing as right or wrong. It's kind of like whatever works best for the individual. Each person has to work it out for himself." This kind of answer, which is so common as to be typical, is no better than the moral philosophy of a sociopath.

I often meet students incapable of making even one single confident moral judgment. And it's getting worse. The very notion of objective moral truths is in disrepute. And this mistrust of objectivity has begun to spill over into other areas of knowledge such as the concept of objective truth in science and history. An undergraduate at Williams College recently reported that her classmates, who had been taught that "all knowledge is a social construct," were doubtful that the Holocaust had occurred. One of her classmates said, "Although the Holocaust may not have happened, it's a perfectly reasonable conceptual hallucination."

A creative writing teacher at Pasadena City College wrote an article in the Chronicle of Higher Education about teaching Shirley Jackson's celebrated short story "The Lottery" to today's college students. It is the tale of a small farming community that seems normal in every way, but, as the plot progresses, the reader learns that the village carries out an annual lottery, the loser of which is stoned to death. Past students always understood "The Lottery" as a warning about the dangers of mindless conformity, but today not one of them will go out on a limb and take a stand against human sacrifice.

The Loss of Truth

It was not always thus. When Thomas Jefferson wrote that all men have the right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," he did not say, "At least, that is my opinion." He declared it as an objective truth. Today's young people enjoy the fruits of these ideas, but they are not being given the intellectual and moral training to argue for and justify truth. On the contrary, the kind of education they are getting is systematically undermining their common sense about what is true and right.

After the long assault on objective truth, many college students find themselves unable to say why the United States was on the right side in World War II. Some even doubt that America was in the right. To add insult to injury, they are not even sure that the salient events of the war ever took place. They simply lack confidence in the objectivity of history.

Too many young people are morally confused, ill-informed, and adrift. This confusion gets worse rather than better once they go to college. If they are attending an elite school, they can actually lose their common sense and become clever and adroit intellectuals in the worst sense. George Orwell reputedly said, "Some ideas are so absurd that only an intellectual could believe them." The students of such intellectuals are in the same boat. Orwell did not know about the tenured radicals of the 1990s, but he was presciently aware that they were on the way.

The Great Relearning

The problem is not that young people are ignorant, distrustful, cruel, or treacherous. And it is not that they are moral skeptics. They just talk that way. To put it bluntly, they are conceptually clueless. Their problem is cognitive. Our students are suffering from cognitive moral confusion. To treat this, we must improve their knowledge and understanding of moral history and restore their confidence in the great moral ideals. It is still possible for them to become morally articulate, morally literate, and morally self-confident.

In the late 1960s, a group of hippies living in the Haight-Ashbury District of San Francisco decided that hygiene was a middle class hang-up they could best do without. So they decided to live without it. Baths and showers, for example, while not actually banned, were frowned upon. The essayist and novelist Tom Wolfe was intrigued by these hippies who, he said, "sought nothing less than to sweep aside all codes and restraints of the past and start from zero."

Before long, their aversion to modern hygiene had consequences as unpleasant as they were unforeseen. Wolfe describes them: "At the Haight-Ashbury Free Clinic there were doctors who were treating diseases no living doctor had ever encountered before, diseases that had disappeared so long ago they had never even picked up Latin names, such as the mange, the grunge, the itch, the twitch, the thrush, the scroff, the rot." The itching and manginess eventually began to vex the hippies, leading them to seek help from the local free clinics. Step by step, they had to rediscover the rudiments of modern hygiene. Wolfe refers to this as the "Great Relearning."

The Great Relearning is what has to happen whenever earnest reformers extirpate too much. "Starting from zero," they jettison basic social practices and institutions, abandon common routines, defy common sense, reason, conventional wisdom, and, sometimes, sanity itself.

We saw this with the most politically extreme experiments of our century: Marxism, Maoism, and fascism. Their proponents had faith in

a new order and ruthlessly cast aside traditional arrangements. Among the unforeseen consequences were famines, mass suffering, and genocide. Russians and East Europeans are just beginning their own "Great Relearning." They now realize, to their dismay, that starting from zero is a calamity and that the structural damage wrought by political zealots has handicapped their societies for decades to come. (See David Satter's article, "Russia's Deepening Crisis," in this issue.) They are also learning that it is far easier to tear apart a social fabric than to piece it together again.

America, too, has had its share of revolutionary developments—not so much political as moral. We are living through a great experiment in "moral deregulation," a movement whose first principle seems to be, "Conventional morality is oppressive." What is right is what it works for us. We casually, even gleefully, throw out old-fashioned customs and practices.

We now jokingly call looters "non-traditional shoppers." Killers are humorously described as "morally challenged," but the truth behind the joke is that moral deregulation is the order of the day. We poke fun at our own society for its lack of moral clarity. In our own way, we are as down and out as those poor hippies knocking at the door of the free clinic.

Moral Conservationism

We need a societal Great Relearning. I propose that we adopt an approach I call moral conservationism. It is based on this premise: we are born into a moral environment just as we are born into a natural environment. Just as there are basic environmental necessities such as clean air, safe food, and fresh water, there are basic moral necessities. A society thrives on civility, honesty, consideration, and self-discipline, and education should make citizens civil, considerate, and respectful of one another. As long as philosophers and theologians have written about ethics, they have stressed the moral basics. We live in a moral environment, and we must respect and protect it. We must acquaint our children with it and make them aware that it is precious and fragile.

We must encourage and honor institutions such as Hillsdale College, St. Johns College, and Providence College, to name a few, that accept the responsibility of providing a classical moral education for their students. The last few decades of the twentieth century have seen a steady erosion of knowledge and a steady increase of moral relativism. This is partly due to the diffidence of many teachers who are confused by all the talk about pluralism. Such teachers actually believe that it is wrong to "indoctrinate" our children in our own culture and moral tradition.

Of course, there are pressing moral issues about which there is no agreement, and as a modern pluralistic society we argue about all sorts of things. But we achieved consensus long ago on many basic moral questions. We agree, for example, that cheating, cowardice, and cruelty are wrong. As one pundit put it, "The Ten Commandments are not the Ten Highly Tentative Suggestions."

Although it is true that we must debate controversial issues, we must not forget that there exists a core of uncontroversial ethical issues that were settled a long time ago. We must make students aware that there is a standard of ethical ideals that all civilizations worthy of the name have discovered. We must encourage them to read the Bible, Aristotle's Ethics, Shakespeare's King Lear, the Koran, and the Analects of Confucius. In almost any great work, they encounter these basic moral virtues: integrity, respect for human life, self-control, honesty, courage, and self-sacrifice. We must bring the great books and great ideas back into the core of the curriculum.

American children have a right to their moral heritage. They should know the Bible. They should be familiar with the moral truths in the tragedies of Shakespeare and in the political ideas of Jefferson, Madison, and Lincoln. They should be exposed to the exquisite moral sensibility in the novels of Jane Austen, George Eliot, and Mark Twain, to mention some of my favorites. These great works are their birthright.

This is not to say that a good literary, artistic, and philosophical education suffices to create ethical human beings, nor to suggest that teaching the classics will by itself repair the moral ozone layer. But we cannot, in good conscience, allow our children to remain morally illiterate. All healthy societies pass along their moral and cultural traditions to their children.

This leads to another basic reform. Teachers, professors, and other social critics should be encouraged to moderate their attacks on our culture and its institutions. They should treat great literary works as literature and not as reactionary political tracts. In many classrooms today, students only learn to "uncover" the allegedly racist, sexist, and elitist elements in the great books.

Meanwhile, pundits, social critics, radical feminists, and other intellectuals on the cultural left never seem to tire of running down our society and its institutions and traditions. We are overrun by determined advocacy groups that overstate the weaknesses of our society and show very little appreciation for its merits and strengths. I would urge those professors and teachers who use their classrooms to disparage America to consider the possibility that they are doing more harm than good. Their goal may be to create

sensitive, critical citizens, but what they are actually doing is producing confusion and cynicism. Their goal may be to improve students' awareness of the plight of exploited peoples, but what they are actually doing is producing kids who are capable of doubting that the Holocaust took place and kids who are incapable of articulating moral objections to human sacrifice.

Preserving the Patrimony

Today we resemble those confused, scrofulous hippies of the late 1960s who finally went to the clinics for their dose of traditional medicine. We should follow their example. We are still a sound society; in more than one sense, we have inherited a very healthy constitution from our founding fathers. We know how to dispel the moral confusion and recover our bearings and our confidence. We have traditions and institutions of proven strength and efficacy, and we are still strong.

We need to bring back the great books and the great ideas. We need to transmit the best of our political and cultural heritage. We need to refrain from cynical attacks against our traditions and institutions. We need to expose the folly of all the schemes for starting from zero. We need to teach our young people to understand, respect, and protect the institutions that protect us and preserve our kindly, free, democratic society.

This we can do. And when we engage in the Great Relearning that is so badly needed today, we will find that the lives of our morally enlightened children will be saner, more dignified, and more humane.