
FIRST, SECOND, AND THIRD-PERSON IN MORAL
EDUCATION AND CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

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I am steadfast.
You are stubborn.
He is pig-headed.

This is one of George Bernard Shaw's *subjective conjugations*. The gist of these conjugations is expressed in the saying, "where you stand [on an issue] depends on where you sit." In other words, our needs, desires and interests are often influenced by our proximity to a given situation, and are given expression in these conjugative locutions. I will use the *first*, *second* and *third-person* locutions as an interpretive framework of sorts, in order to evaluate various methods and approaches to moral education and classroom management. I will first examine moral claims that are made in the course of teaching, and then I will consider some examples of teacher-student interactions in the exercise of classroom management. In the conclusion I will offer a meta-evaluation of the insights garnered through using this first, second and third-person interpretive lens.

MORAL CLAIMS AND ETHICAL THEORY

I would like to begin by considering some ethical theories that inform the moral claims made by teachers, and also to consider the illocutionary dimensions of these claims. Take for example the claim "x is wrong."¹ Non-cognitivist ethical theories, such as prescriptivism and emotivism would view such claims as subjective expressions that are void of any substantive content. A *prescriptivist* would interpret this as a veiled second-person claim ("you should not do x"), and an *emotivist* would view it as an expression of subjective preference ("I don't like x").² *Cognitivists* and *moral objectivists*,³ on the other hand, would take the statement to mean that something in the fabric of the universe makes the doing of x objectively wrong: And therefore, *you* are obligated not to do x.⁴ Of course, this is a rather abbreviated sketch of the ethical theories that inform the moral claims made by teachers. While I must admit a certain philosophical sympathy with the non-cognitivists on these matters, I also recognize that for the most part, moral claims are used and understood, by both teachers and students, as claims of objective value.⁵ That is, most teachers operate with the belief that some actions are *really* right or *really* wrong, and must be labeled as such and dealt with accordingly.

THE THIRD-PERSON DIMENSION OF MORAL CLAIMS

Though a thorough treatment of the philosophical issues related to moral claims is beyond the scope of this paper, I would now like to consider moral claims in their *third-person* dimension. As I mentioned earlier, for the moral objectivist, the claim “*x* is wrong” includes reference to some “third-person” objective standard by which actions are evaluated, and on which moral claims are grounded. This standard might take the form of divine dictates, utilitarian hedonistic calculus, Kantian categorical imperatives, or any number of systems that posit the existence of some objective moral standard. While there is certainly much debate over which standard is subscribed to, I take it to be a fairly uncontroversial conceptual claim that moral objectivists will subscribe to some such standard.

At the risk of making a category mistake, I would like to propose an experiment to test the putative objectivity of the third-person element of the moral claim “*x* is wrong.” Is there some type of test that we could agree on to determine if a given action is right or wrong, good or bad, in a moral sense?⁶ I often pose this experiment to my grad students when we discuss the question “what is the difference between right and wrong?” Neither I, nor my students have yet to agree on any such test. It is for this reason that I raise the possibility that we may be making a category mistake.

Namely, a question of moral value is not the type of thing that can be determined by some type of empirical or observational test. I would contend, though, that the question actually functions to point out the category mistake inherent in the making of objective moral claims. That is, the moral claim “*x* is wrong” gives every appearance of referring to something in the fabric of the universe by virtue of which action *x* is judged to be wrong. Upon closer inspection, however, we cannot locate, nor can we agree upon, the existence of any objective standard whereby actions can be conclusively determined to be right or wrong in a moral sense. In other words, when making moral claims, we have entered that realm of interminable squabbles and irresolvable conflicts, otherwise known as moral discourse.

I realize that the moral skepticism I have expressed is controversial. I make no pretense that this brief argument will somehow convince the moral objectivist of the “error of his ways.” My intent is to point out what I take to be some important epistemological problems with moral claims. To elaborate on my moral skepticism, I would contend that we enter into a similarly nebulous and disputatious realm of discourse when we engage in metaphysical claims; especially those claims expressing religious beliefs.⁷ In his essay “On Liberty,” John Stuart Mill recognized the epistemic and political problems associated with making religious claims in the context of schooling. To avoid these problems, he advocated a “third-person” approach to the discussion of religion

in State education. Such discussions, Mill argued, “should not turn on the truth or falsehood of opinions, but on the matter of fact that such and such an opinion is held, on such grounds, by such authors, or schools, or churches.”⁸

This expresses the distinction between *teaching about* religion versus *teaching* (as in promoting or advocating) religion. The establishment clause of the First Amendment has generally been interpreted to allow the former in public schools, while prohibiting the latter. According to the document “Religion in the Public Schools: A Joint Statement of Current Law,” moral values may be taught in public schools, but they may not be taught as religious tenets.⁹ For example, it would conceivably be permissible to teach that sex between unwed teenagers is morally wrong, but it would not be permissible to teach that such conduct is wrong because “the Bible says so,” or because “it would defile our bodies which are the temples of the Holy Spirit.”

I think Mill’s fact based, third-person approach to teaching about religious matters could also be fruitfully applied to moral education. For example, factual descriptions that certain persons hold moral positions for such and such reasons, could be fodder to promote critical thinking on these ethical matters. I would even suggest that Mill’s approach be taken a step further. In regard to teachers making claims about a particular student’s conduct, and in regard to instructional claims made in such value laden subjects as sex education, drug education, political issues, etc., I would recommend avoiding moral claims and moral language as much as possible. In their place, I would favor factual descriptions of specific actions, as well as a description of the actual and probable consequences of these actions. The goal being, then, not to be the moral arbiter of such actions, but to help facilitate informed and reflective decisions on the part of students.¹⁰ Therefore, while I objected to the use of moral claims because of epistemic and metaphysical problems related to their “third-person” dimension, I am *recommending* a third-person approach that attempts to avert these problems by steering clear of moral claims. Not only does such an approach place the teacher on firmer epistemic grounds than the teacher who issues moral claims and engages in the imposition of moral values, but such an approach can also help teachers to prevent some of the negative psychological consequences that often result from making moral judgments about students’ conduct.

SOME POSSIBLE EFFECTS OF SECOND-PERSON MORAL JUDGMENTS

I will briefly discuss some of these negative psychological consequences, as they relate to second-person moral judgments, by reference to the work of Alice Miller.¹¹ As Miller, among others, has noted, when we say to a child or student “what *you* did was bad, or wrong,” it is difficult—particularly for younger children—to distinguish between their action being judged as bad/wrong and their person being judged as bad/wrong.¹² There is a tendency for children to

internalize these judgments, and according to Miller, this contributes to subsequent psychological disorders; namely, the phenomena of splitting-off and projection, and the repetition compulsion disorder. Miller cites the abusive, manipulative and deceptive child rearing practices that she calls “poisonous pedagogy” as the culprit in these disorders. And, in Miller’s account, moralizing is an essential feature of poisonous pedagogy: both because the exercise of poisonous pedagogy is replete with moral injunctions, and because it relies on the use of moral, religious and ideological rhetoric that functions to conceal from children what is being done to them, and to convince children that the treatment they receive is “for your own good.” I will not attempt to define or delimit what counts as “abusive treatment” or poisonous pedagogy, nor will I attempt to determine how frequently it occurs or to what degree it contributes to psychological disorders. Miller, though, contends that poisonous pedagogy has been the dominant mode of child rearing throughout history, and that its occurrence in contemporary society is more common than most will acknowledge (247).

Miller argues that moral injunctions and moral prohibitions, in no small part, are the psychic mechanisms employed by parents and pedagogues to suppress children’s expressions of anger and rage against their abusers. In their condition of helpless dependence and unawareness, children internalize the shame, guilt, and labels of moral censure foisted upon them by their parents. That is, the child comes not only to believe “what I do is bad,” but “what I am is bad.” Unable to endure one’s “badness,” the individual projects the evil onto a target or scapegoat who is then subjected to the punitive treatment that such putative evil deserves. Miller refers to this “complicated psychodynamic mechanism” as “splitting off and projection of parts of the self” (80).

Another psychological dynamic that Miller attributes to poisonous pedagogy is the *repetition compulsion disorder*. Miller cites our early upbringing as the genesis of this disorder. She writes, “The way we were treated as small children is the way we treat ourselves the rest of our life.” One who is subjected to poisonous pedagogy and is not aware of what is being done to him “has no way of telling about it except to repeat it” (133). This compulsion to repeat how one was treated can take the form of treatment of others and “acting out” (as with splitting-off and projecting), or take the form of self-destructive behaviors. For example, one may repeatedly become involved in dysfunctional relationships in which others may inflict cruel and punitive acts upon the individual. And in other cases, individuals will repeatedly engage in such self-destructive behaviors as drug abuse, addictions, and eating disorders. These individuals, Miller argues, are compelled to punish the “badness” or “evil” that is within them, just as their early pedagogues and parents punished them.

In addition to suspending the use of moral judgments in reference to students' actions, I think it would also be a healthy and productive practice if teachers would take care to make it clear to students that while it may be necessary to disapprove of a student's action, such disapproval is not of the student's person. As the old saying goes, "judge the sin, but not the sinner." In explaining his Love and Logic approach to discipline, Jim Fay claims that it is possible to "unconditionally accept the worthy person even while rejecting the questionable behavior."¹³ He offers one of his favorite lines to illustrate how this might be accomplished. "Just because I like you, do you think I should let you get away with that?" This statement/question contains both a first and second-person element, it contains no moral judgments--though it does assert that the given behavior will not be permitted--and yet it also gives a personal affirmation that the teacher likes the student and is not judging the student's person. I am not suggesting that this particular phrase is a panacea for teacher-student relations, but grasping the statement's function is instructive. I am sure that creative teachers can come up with statements and modes of interacting with students that serve the same purpose in their particular situations and contexts. This is certainly preferable to the issuance of moral judgments that are epistemically dubious, can have negative psychological consequences, and, as will be suggested later, are largely ineffective.

THE "PERSON" LOCUTIONS AND CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

The first portion of the paper focused on a theoretical consideration of the "person" locutions, with some consideration of how they play out in practice. The latter portion of this paper will focus on some examples of student-teacher interactions and how the "person" locutions figure in them. Though these examples may or may not involve an explicit moral dimension, they do involve human conduct and are typically discussed under the rubrics of classroom management, classroom discipline, or human relations.

Jim Fay, in his Love & Logic approach to classroom discipline, offers numerous tools and techniques that hinge on the "person" locutions and perspectives. I'll share a few of these for your consideration. The first concerns the self-concept of students. Fay explains,

Our self-concept has two main characteristics: It is fragile and easily broken. It is conservative and resistant to change. This combination results in our creation of defense mechanisms to protect our self from the necessity to change. To say my behavior is wrong is bad enough. To say that "I" am wrong is often intolerably painful. We seek to maintain our view of ourselves and often will go so far as to reject clear evidence to the contrary (127).

These dynamics are similar to Alice Miller's views on splitting-off and projection that I discussed earlier. While Miller engages in a more subtle and sophisticated psychological treatment of the subject, the issue of the psychic pain resultant from moral judgment against one's person is a paramount concern in both accounts. In the classroom, Fay contends, the object of the student's projection is often the teacher. When accused, charged or judged, there is a tendency for students to project blame on the teacher ("She doesn't like me," "She's mean") rather than reflecting upon their own actions and considering possible changes in behavior.

Therefore, instead of moralizing and judging the student, Fay recommends a host of strategies intended to remove the teacher as the "fall guy" in the situation and to give the students opportunity to reflect upon consequences and to assume responsibility for their actions. These strategies include the use of questions rather than statements ("How do you plan to take care of that?" vs. "You just can't get it right"), encouraging students to consider possible consequences of their actions ("What do you think might happen if you keep talking instead of working?"), role reversal ("What do you think of your work on that paper?"), giving students a degree of control by offering choices, and showing empathy for the student.

Fay gives an example of how the "person" locution used in praising a student can affect a student's self-concept:

Allow kids to own their feelings. We often rob them of both pleasure and disappointment by phrases such as, "I'm so proud of (or disappointed in) you." Instead, saying "You can be proud of that" allows the feeling to reside in the child instead of orienting him to make his feelings and, subsequently, his worth dependent on how somebody else feels about him (132).

Fay's desire for students to "own their feelings," is consistent with a major feature of the Love & Logic approach to discipline. Namely, students are given the opportunity and are encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning and thinking, and for solving their own problems. Fay offers metaphors for two types of teachers whose approaches can thwart the development of independent, responsible students. The first are called "helicopter" teachers, because of their tendency to "rescue" students at the first sign of distress. Though these teachers are well intentioned (as are many in the helping professions), Fay is of the opinion that they are thereby robbing students of the opportunity to develop independent problem solving skills and to learn from their mistakes. "I realized," claims Fay, "that every time I did something for kids that they could do for themselves, I was limiting them in the long run" (203).

Fay refers to the second type of teachers as “drill sergeants.” Central to the drill sergeant’s arsenal for achieving control of the classroom are imperative statements that are strictly and punitively enforced. The drill sergeants see control and order as ends in themselves, and show little concern for developing student autonomy and independence. They substitute “domination over others for self-control” (197). Winston Churchill was quoted as saying, “I am always ready to learn, although I do not always like being taught.”¹⁴ Maybe this sentiment sheds some light on the negative intents expressed in the phrase “I’ll teach you a lesson.” That is, teaching is portrayed as something that is done to others, whereas learning is something we do for ourselves. Fay argues that learning is seldom accomplished through coercion, manipulation or other measures used to control the students. Such methods are not conducive to learning, and their use typically creates a power struggle between teachers and students.

To avoid and to defuse power struggles, Fay advocates an approach that he calls the “consultant” teacher.¹⁵ The tools used by the “consultant” teacher to avoid power struggles and to defuse student resistance include the use of “thinking words” instead of “fighting words,” and the use of self-enforcing statements. Fighting words, according to Fay, tell students what the teacher “is going to *make them do*” (142). These usually involve a second-person demand. For example, “You’re going to have to clean this desk, or I’m not letting you go to recess” (146). Thinking words, on the other hand, tell the student what the *teacher will do* (142). This typically involves a first-person statement. For example, “I’ll be happy to let you go to recess, just as soon as that desk is cleaned” (146).

The use of self-enforcing rules works on the same principle. Second and third-person imperatives are, in actuality, unenforceable. When a student refuses to comply with such demands, the teacher is left with the exasperating question, “what do I do now?” Rather than create such a situation, Fay suggests that teachers utilize self-enforcing statements. These are first-person statements by the teacher that are within her power to enforce and fulfill. For example, rather than telling students “you must prepare your papers in the correct format,” an enforceable statement would be, “I’ll accept all papers that are prepared in the correct form” (286).

I have been experimenting with self-enforcing statements with my classes. I’ll share one example that has worked well for me. When giving exams in the past, I would state, “the time limit is fifty minutes and then you must turn in your exams.” At the end of the time period, there would usually be a few students feverishly working on their exams, and I would confront them, “time’s up, I need your papers, give me your papers.” A power struggle would ensue, and the students had the upper hand. They would usually turn in their papers when they were ready, and it was a most uncomfortable situation. For the last couple

years, I have been telling my students, “I will be leaving the class in fifty minutes, and I will grade every exam that is turned in by that time.” I get a kick out of seeing the students rushing up to turn in their exams as I begin to make my exit for the door.

SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Throughout this essay, I have recommended several illocutionary approaches to address a variety of pedagogical situations and concerns. This does not mean that I am suggesting or endorsing a formulaic approach in which a particular first, second, or third-person technique can be used to solve every problem a teacher may encounter. In fact, the “person” locutions and perspectives may not be the central factors, even in the situations I have discussed. In regard to the third-person dimension of moral claims, for instance, the key issue may be the *type* of claim used (e.g., using descriptive empirical statements vs. moral judgments), rather than the “person” locution. Likewise, with the use of second-person claims in classroom management: where the more important factor might be the use of questions rather than statements.

Nevertheless, I believe the use of the “person” locutions as an interpretive lens can provide a number of valuable insights and perspectives for teachers, teacher educators, and philosophers of education. First, a familiarity with, and reflection upon these “person” locutions can provide teachers with an expanded repertoire of tools and perspectives with which to address the challenges associated with moral education and classroom management. Second, because most pre-service teachers are already acquainted with the “person” locutions, this can serve as an introductory bridge to guide them to a further investigation of the more subtle and complex philosophical issues that are germane to teacher-student interactions. Third, philosophers of education could fruitfully apply this interpretive lens to examine a host of pedagogical issues that are not explicitly treated in this essay. For starters: the use of first-person vs. third-person in student assignments;¹⁶ listening techniques such as “empathic listening” in teacher-student dialogue;¹⁷ and, the effect on student thinking and reflection when a teacher makes a first-person stand on a controversial moral or political issue.

EPILOGUE

When I was an undergraduate, one of my professors asked me to consider the difference between these two statements: “You’re not making sense,” and “I don’t understand.” At first glance, the two statements appear to express very similar sentiments. After thinking about it, though, I began to recognize that there are important, and maybe even profound differences between the two statements; differences rooted in the first and second-person locutions. My

desire in this essay is that I am making sense, and that you (the reader) might find this information useful in facilitating the education of others.

NOTES

1. While I am using the claim “x is wrong” as an example, I also have objections to the moral claim “x is right/good.” First, both “positive” and “negative” moral claims share the same epistemological and metaphysical problems. Second, positive moral claims pose their own potential practical problems that I will mention in footnote 12.
 2. For an overview of non-cognitivism, cognitivism, prescriptivism, emotivism, and moral objectivity, see: Louis P. Pojman, editor. *Ethical Theory: Classical and Contemporary Readings* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1989).
 3. Moral cognitivists are typically moral objectivists. A notable exception is J. L. Mackie, who while denying the existence of objective values, is of the belief that it is possible to “know” the truth or falsity of moral claims, and that they are categorically false. J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right And Wrong* (London: Penguin Books, 1977).
 4. Garner makes a distinction between ethics (which are conventional and include ranking, recommending and discouraging certain behaviors) and morality (the hallmark of which is objectively binding prescriptivity). I follow this conceptual distinction throughout the essay. Richard Garner, *Beyond Morality* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 18.
 5. This is not to be taken as a quantified or confirmed empirical claim. Rather, I am following—and perhaps extending—Mackie’s claim: “[T]he main tradition of European moral philosophy from Plato onwards has combined the view that moral values are objective with the recognition that moral judgements are partly prescriptive or directive or action-guiding.” Mackie, *Ethics*, 23.
 6. The reader may notice some similarity between this question and G.E. Moore’s famous “open question argument.” However, I find—as do many other philosophers—Moore’s conclusion that ‘good’ in a moral sense refers to some “indefinable non-natural property,” to be unsatisfactory. Pojman, *Ethical Theory*, 358-364.
 7. For example, Elizabeth Anscombe has argued that moral claims and the language of morality are residuals from divine command sources of morality, that they no longer apply, and they would best be discarded. G.E.M. Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy” in *Ethics, Religion and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), 26.
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8. John Stuart Mill, “On Liberty,” in J. S. Mill: *On Liberty, in focus*, edited by John Gray and G. W. Smith (London: Routledge, 1991), 120.

9. “Religion in the Public Schools: A Joint Statement of Current Law” (New York: American Humanist Association, 1995), <<http://www.americanhumanist.org/press/Religionpublicschools.html>>.

10. This is similar to “non-directive” approaches to moral education (e.g., values clarification, situation ethics, and perhaps the early work of Kohlberg). To clarify, I share their aversion to the issuing and imposing of moral judgments. The theoretical orientation that informs my aversion is *amoralism*. In short, this involves abandoning moral language and the philosophical beliefs and assumptions on which such language is grounded. Moreover, I am of the opinion—though it is not argued in this essay—that abandoning morality in education might well lead to a more humane (and some might say “moral”) society. On the other hand, as a parent and as a teacher, I have no problem per se, with issuing directives, recommendations, or even prohibitions for certain conduct and actions: As long as such directives are not issued with moral language, or justified by recourse to “moral” reasons. Furthermore, it has been my experience that the amoralist approach can be applied in an age-appropriate manner.

11. Alice Miller, *For Your Own Good: Hidden cruelty in child-rearing and the roots of violence*, third edition. Translated by Hildegarde and Hunter Hannum (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1983). Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically by page number.

12. Miller also finds fault with the use of “positive” moral judgments. For example, Miller argues that many parents, in their preoccupation with abstract moral principles related to being a “good” parent, are rendered unable to understand the true needs of their children (258). She also cites numerous examples of individuals who have inflicted great harm on others in the name of “morality.” A similar point is made by Noddings, who argues that adherence to abstract moral principles creates the possibility and often the practice of elevating principles over persons. Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics & Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 36.

13. Jim Fay & David Funk, *Teaching With Love & Logic: Taking Control of the Classroom* (Golden, CO: Love & Logic Press, 1995). Subsequent references to will be cited parenthetically by page number.

14. *The Reader’s Digest Treasury of Modern Quotations* (New York: Readers Digest Press, 1975), 245.

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15. The metaphoric conceptions of the “drill sergeant” and the “consultant”, as well as their respective methods, are similar to the distinction between “boss teachers” and “lead teachers” that is made in William Glasser’s work. William Glasser, *The Quality School: Managing Students Without Coercion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990).
 16. Jonathan Kozol, *The Night is Dark and I Am Far from Home*, revised edition (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990).
 17. Harville Hendrix, *Getting The Love You Want* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).
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