

## Can Ethics Be Taught?

In a recent editorial, the Wall Street Journal announced that ethics courses are useless because ethics can't be taught. Although few people would turn to the Wall Street Journal as a learned expert on the teaching of ethics, the issue raised by the newspaper is a serious one: Can ethics be taught?

The issue is an old one. Almost 2500 years ago, the philosopher Socrates debated the question with his fellow Athenians. Socrates' position was clear: Ethics consists of knowing what we ought to do, and such knowledge can be taught.

Most psychologists today would agree with Socrates. In an overview of contemporary research in the field of moral development, psychologist James Rest summarized the major findings as follows:

- \* Dramatic changes occur in young adults in their 20s and 30s in terms of the basic problem-solving strategies they use to deal with ethical issues.
- \* These changes are linked to fundamental changes in how a person perceives society and his or her role in society.
- \* The extent to which change occurs is associated with the number of years of formal education (college or professional school).
- \* Deliberate educational attempts (formal curriculum) to influence awareness of moral problems and to influence the reasoning or judgement process have been demonstrated to be effective.
- \* Studies indicate that a person's behavior is influenced by his or her moral perception and moral judgements.

Much of the research that Rest alludes to was carried on by the late Harvard psychologist, Lawrence Kohlberg. Kohlberg was one of the first people to look seriously at whether a person's ability to deal with ethical issues can develop in later life and whether education can affect that development.

Kohlberg found that a person's ability to deal with moral issues is not formed all at once. Just as there are stages of growth in physical development, the ability to think morally also develops in stages.

The earliest level of moral development is that of the child, which Kohlberg called the preconventional level. The person at the preconventional level defines right and wrong in terms of what authority figures say is right or wrong or in terms of what results in rewards and punishments. Any parent can verify this. Ask the four or five year old why stealing is wrong, and chances are that they'll respond: "Because daddy or mommy says it's wrong" or "Because you get spanked if you steal." Some people stay at this level all of their lives, continuing to define right and wrong in terms of what authorities say or in terms of reaping rewards or avoiding unpleasant consequences.

The second level of moral development is the level most adolescents reach. Kohlberg called this the conventional level. The adolescent at the conventional level has internalized the norms

of those groups among whom he or she lives. For the adolescent, right and wrong are based on group loyalties: loyalties to one's family, loyalties to one's friends, or loyalty to one's nation. If you ask adolescents at this level why something is wrong or why it is right, they will tend to answer in terms of what their families have taught her, what their friends think, or what Americans believe. Many people remain at this level, continuing to define right and wrong in terms of what society believes or what laws require.

But if a person continues to develop morally, he or she will reach what Kohlberg labeled the postconventional level. The person at the postconventional level stops defining right and wrong in terms of group loyalties or norms. Instead, the adult at this level develops moral principles that define right and wrong from a universal point of view. The moral principles of the postconventional person are principles that would appeal to any reasonable person because they take everyone's interest into account. If you ask a person at the postconventional level why something is right or wrong, she will appeal to what promotes or doesn't promote the universal ideals of justice or human rights or human welfare.

Many factors can stimulate a person's growth through the three levels of moral development. One of the most crucial factors, Kohlberg found, is education. Kohlberg discovered that when his subjects took courses in ethics and these courses challenged them to look at issues from a universal point of view, they tended to move upward through the levels. This finding, as Rest points out, has been repeatedly supported by other researchers. Can ethics be taught? If you look at the hard evidence psychologists have amassed, the answer is yes. If you read the Wall Street Journal, you wouldn't have thought so.