



THE CULTURE WAR, MODERN ECONOMICS, AND ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

LA GUERRA CULTURAL, LA ECONOMÍA MODERNA Y LA EDUCACIÓN AMBIENTAL EN LOS ESTADOS UNIDOS

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ABSTRACT:

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Teaching ethics in public schools in the United States has been made almost impossible because of the Culture War and Modern Economics. When Catholics began to migrate to the United States in the early nineteenth century, they found that Protestant religion and ethics were taught in public schools and they created their own parochial schools. This controversy has continued for two hundred years. To encourage the Catholics to send their children to the public schools, by 1860 religion and ethics had been removed from the public schools. Concern about the teaching of ethics spread to other religious and non-religious groups. These groups attack the teaching of ethics as the indoctrination of the personal values of teachers, and when teachers include alternative ethical views to avoid indoctrination they are accused of relativism. According to Modern Economics, value terms are meaningless unless they have been translated into economic terms based on willingness to pay. This approach overlooks the social values that make up the cultural heritage of a society. Although children acquire these social values tacitly, since they are not taught these values as a common heritage, they come to believe that they invented them ahistorically and that they are just how they feel (ethical emotivism). By teaching children social values as a common heritage, the charges of indoctrination and relativism and the replacement of these values with economic terms can be avoided, later permitting a more objective role for ethics in public affairs among adults.

RESUMEN:

Palabras clave:

Guerra cultural;
Economía moderna;
Relativismo;
Clarificación de
los valores; Ética
tradicional y
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La enseñanza de la ética en las escuelas públicas en los Estados Unidos se ha hecho casi imposible a causa de la guerra cultural y de la economía moderna. Cuando los católicos comenzaron a emigrar a los Estados Unidos a principios del siglo XIX, se dieron cuenta de que en las escuelas públicas se enseñaba la ética protestante y, por eso, crearon sus propias escuelas religiosas. Esta controversia ha continuado durante doscientos años. Para animar a los católicos a enviar a sus hijos a las escuelas públicas, en 1860 se quitó la enseñanza de religión y de la ética de las escuelas públicas. La preocupación por la enseñanza de la ética se extendió a otros grupos religiosos y no religiosos. Estos grupos consideran a la enseñanza de la ética como el adoctrinamiento de los valores personales de los maestros, y cuando los maestros

incluyen puntos de vista éticos alternativos para evitar ese adoctrinamiento se les acusa de relativismo. De acuerdo con la economía moderna, las condiciones del valor carecen de sentido hasta que no se traducen en términos económicos basados en la disposición a pagar. Este enfoque no considera los valores sociales que conforman el patrimonio cultural de una sociedad. A pesar de que los niños adquieren estos valores sociales tácitamente, ya que no se enseñan estos valores como una herencia común, ellos mismos llegan a creer que los habían inventado a-históricamente y que no son más que cómo se sienten (emotivismo ético). Al enseñar a los niños los valores sociales como una herencia común, se pueden evitar los gastos del adoctrinamiento, del relativismo y de la sustitución de estos valores con términos económicos, permitiendo así un papel más objetivo de la ética en los asuntos públicos entre los adultos.

Ethics education, including environmental ethics education, is inhibited by two main factors in the United States. The first is the Culture War, which has been going on for about two hundred years. The second is the replacement of ethical thinking with economic thinking in both policy and daily living. Knowing about these factors is important even to educators in other countries because books on environmental education in the United States take these factors into account implicitly without explicitly acknowledging them. Thus, educators in other countries trying to make use of these views can unknowingly spread the peculiarities of the U.S. Culture War and the anti-ethical thinking of modern economics into their cultures, infecting them.

The Culture War began in the first decade of the nineteenth century when large numbers of Catholics began immigrating into the United States from Europe¹. From the beginning in the 1600s, Protestant ethics and religion were taught in the schools in the colonies and the practice was continued after the American Revolution. Catholics as they arrived in the U.S. were shocked and created their own schools to avoid their children's exposure to Protestant ethics and religion. Realizing that they were paying taxes for public schools, the Catholics asked that their tax money be redirected to pay for their own schools instead. Their request was denied because doing so would have opened the door to the creation of a multitude of religious-based schools, making public

schools financially unfeasible. Nevertheless, the attempt to obtain public funding for parochial schools has continued year by year for two centuries with most of the public believing that idea is a new one and unaware of the historical origins of the debate.

To eliminate the need for parochial schools, public school administrators began removing Protestant ethics and religion from the schools. By 1860, this process was largely complete². To prevent the reintroduction of Protestant ethics, Catholics watched the public schools to see if inappropriate ethics and religion would be covertly reintroduced into the schools. They did not, however, do away with their own schools or send their children to public schools. As time went by, groups opposed to the teaching of ethics and religion formed in virtually every religious group. Such is the situation to this day.

When educators who felt that ethics needed to be taught attempted to introduce ethics into the curriculum, they were promptly accused of indoctrination. The basic assumption was that ethics and values were personal, rather than social, and that the teachers were trying to impose their personal ethics and values on the children. To solve this problem, psychologists took a leading role. Following Kant, they assumed that all minds worked the same way and that if children were properly engaged in appropriate training, they could learn ethics and values without overt instruction, avoiding the charge of indoctrination. Psychologists fine-tuned their techniques by studying stages of child moral development. Of these, the most famous are perhaps Jean Piaget and Lawrence

¹ See Hunter, J.D. *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America: Making Sense of the Battles over the Family, Art, Education, Law, and Politics*, Basic Books, New York, 1991. For full details on the educational aspects of the Culture War, see: Hunter, J.D. *The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age without Good or Evil*, Basic Books, New York, 2000.

² See Jorgenson, L.P. *The State and the Non-Public School, 1825-1925*, University of Missouri Press, Columbia, 1987, 216.

Kohlberg³. The streamlined version of the psychologists' approach is called values-clarification. It is as controversial as indoctrination. Proponents are charged with teaching relativism, that whatever children think is okay. The twin threat of indoctrination and relativism prevents most attempts at teaching ethics and values in elementary school.

The Culture War leaves an empty space in which economic value reasoning easily fills without overt effort. Children learn their economic values tacitly⁴. Bryan Norton begins one of his books with an anecdotal encounter with a small child who values a living creature called a sand dollar exclusively because the local hobby shop will buy them for five cents each⁵. At a very early age, most people come to hold the following views: "Values are subjective", "Values are personal biases", "Values are arbitrary and irrational", "Values are instrumental", "Values are expressions of emotions", "Values are just how you feel", "Values are just not facts", "The world is or ought to be value free", and "Intrinsically valuing something is stupid".

The ultimate point is that only economic value is objective and worth thinking about. According to this view, economics is independent of ethics and values. As Milton Friedman put it in his influential book *Essays on Positive Economics*, if economists forget about what ought to be and concentrate only on what is, then economics becomes a science⁶. The social sciences, colleges of business, and colleges of public administration have followed economics in separating themselves from philosophy, ethics, and values. Since most people working in government, business, and public policy come out of these fields, ethics and values have come to play a smaller and smaller role in public life.

Although economists have claimed that their disci-

pline is completely independent of philosophy, actually it is a naïve mixture of three recent philosophical and ethical positions: utilitarianism, pragmatism, and logical positivism. Utilitarianism is an ethical view that defines *good* as pleasure. Aristotle had objected to this move on the grounds that because people often take pleasure in bad things, if good were defined as pleasure, then moral standards would not be possible⁷. Utilitarianism set the stage for the eventual establishment of value-free, ethics-free economics of today. Pragmatism is a philosophical position initially focused on clear thinking. A major element of the view, however, was an inordinate focus on instrumental value, which in large part as a result of a crusade by John Dewey undermined intrinsic value, according to which nearly everything came to be valued in terms of its use⁸. This simplification of the value system made social ideals appear frivolous and extraneous. Finally, logical positivism is a philosophical view that tries to take a scientific approach to all problems. Positivists hold that values are expressions of emotion, values are arbitrary and irrational, and values are just how you feel, or have been trained to feel. As a result, ethical debate is deemed to be useless, since there is no objective basis by which one person can convince another person that his or her childhood ethical training is superior to that of others.

From a value perspective, the application of environmental law is very problematic. For example, the Endangered Species Act in the United States is supposed to promote five values: aesthetic value, educational value, historical value, recreational value, and scientific value. Notably missing is economic value, and this omission is intentional, for the purpose of promoting these values is to inhibit "economic growth and development untempered by adequate concern and conservation".⁹ Promoting the five values, however, is problematic because policy people have not been taught how to do so.

3 See Piaget, J. *The Moral Judgment of the Child*, K. Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., London, 1932; Kohlberg, L. *The Philosophy of Moral Development: Moral Stages and the Idea of Justice*, Harper and Row, San Francisco, 1981.

4 See Polanyi, M. *The Tacit Dimension*, Anchor Books, Garden City, N.Y., 1967; Polanyi, M. *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, Harper and Row, New York-Evanston, 1967.

5 See Norton, B.G. *Toward Unity among Environmentalists*, Oxford University Press, New York-Oxford, 1991, 3-13.

6 See Friedman, M. *Essays in Positive Economics*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London, 1953, 3-4.

7 See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, II, 3.

8 For a discussion of the issues involved in the relationship of intrinsic value and pragmatism, see Minter, B.A. «Intrinsic Value for Pragmatists?». *Environmental Ethics*. 2001; 23: 57-75.

9 Public Law 88-577, in U.S., *Statutes at Large* 78 (3 September 1964), 890-891; Public Law 91-190, in U.S., *Statutes at Large* 83 (1 January 1970), 852; Public Law 93-205, in U.S., *Statutes at Large* 87 (28 December 1973), 884.

According to the economists, the values have no clear meaning until they have been translated into economic terms. They are considered vacuous non-economic terms until the transformation has occurred. Most commonly, aesthetic value is translated into travel costs – the cost of tickets for trains, planes, or gasoline for a car, the cost of food, the cost of lodging, and the cost of entrance fees. Such translation is totally inappropriate since it redefines as something that it obviously is not. Aesthetic value can be correctly taught in terms of the factors that created it over the centuries: poetry and prose, painting, photography, natural history (geology, biology, botany), and landscape gardening¹⁰. If in the unlikely event that the translation process was successful, future generations might come to wonder why spending money meant the appreciation of natural beauty.

There are many important ways to value nature other than in monetary terms. Holmes Rolston, III has developed an axiological model for environmental policy which shows that economic value is only a small part of the whole picture¹¹. For Rolston, the value of nature begins with its ecosystem value. All the other values that arise in nature depend on it. Next is organism value, which together with the nonliving parts of nature determines the ecosystem value. Above these are an array of social and individual values which depend ultimately on the organism and ecosystem values. First, there are the social good and social preference values. These are distinct because what is good for a society is mostly not a matter of preference. In determining policy, both what is actually good for a society and what a society prefers need to be considered. In addition, there are the values relevant to each individual, what is actually individually good for a particular individual and what that individual prefers, which may not be the same and may indeed be in conflict. Finally, there is market price, the amount of money that society and individuals places on nature in terms of willingness to pay or willingness to sell. These

economic values are usually arbitrary and rarely take into account the other values adequately. To treat economic value as the primary value, as we usually do, is a terrible mistake.

In his book *1984*, George Orwell presents a world in which a future society is engaging in a revised language called Newspeak, the purpose of which was to limit the ways in which the citizens could think. With regard to ethics, the aim was to reduce value language down to six values, good, plus good, double plus, ungood, plus ungood, and double ungood, or really only one value, good. Although the attempt to revise non-economic language in our world into economic language is not consciously intentional, it can reasonably be regarded as the same process and can appropriately be called “environmental Newspeak”.¹²

The Culture War and the current economic Newspeak fit together well, depriving children of the words they will need to express ethics and values as adults. Environmental science students at my university are often genuinely confused by talk of intrinsic value when talking environmental philosophy classes because throughout their childhoods they had come to believe that all value is instrumental. The Culture War opens a gap in the educational process that is filled with false and misleading terms and definitions. They may still think in an ethical way but they present their views as how they feel (mimicking the emotivism of positivism).

An easy alternative to this approach is to simply teach children material related to poetry and prose, painting, photography, natural history science, and landscape gardening and using the correct value terms. Recently Eugene Hargrove and Kelli Moses at the University of North Texas taught some selected classes at an elementary-level summer educational environmental camp. It turned out that the children were regularly using intrinsic value arguments but because they had never been told anything about intrinsic value, they thought that they were just talking about how they “felt.” Very likely, if everyone learned the term *intrinsic value* as children,

10 See Hargrove, E.C. *Foundations of Environmental Ethics*, Environmental Ethics Books, Denton, 1996, chap. 3; see also Hargrove, E.C. «Why We Think Nature is Beautiful», <http://www.cep.unt.edu/show>.

11 Rolston, III, H. *Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in the Natural World*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1988, 259.

12 Orwell, G. *Orwell's Nineteen Eight-Four: Text, Sources, Criticism*, Harcourt, Brace and World, New York-Burlingame, 1963, 23-24.

they would not need to struggle with the term as undergraduate and graduate students in college after they had been inoculated against it by exposure to the instrumental value of pragmatism¹³.

With regard to the selection of the specific values to teach, one solution is to use the values found in the purpose statements of our environmental laws. The charge of indoctrination involves the assumption that values are subjective and invented by each person individually. Referencing the values in our laws avoids indoctrination by tying them to societal values. Likewise, because the values in the environmental laws are specific, the charge of relativism is also avoided. Instead of indoctrination and relativism, teachers will be presenting social values and a common heritage. In addition, the teachers can truthfully claim that they are not actually teaching ethics (which the Culture War is intended to prevent) but rather citizenship (which will likely be regarded as noncontroversial), by preparing children to promote the values listed in their environmental laws.

Should citing the values in environmental laws prove not to be enough to avoid the charges of indoctrination and relativism, it is possible to seek consensus values. A group of representative people from the community is brought together to determine which values are permissible¹⁴. As it turns out, the Culture War controversy only works at a fairly abstract level. When members of a community actually discuss the details of just which values can and should be taught, there is usually no disagreement, for nearly everyone has tacitly picked up the same social values.

In summary, ethics needs a starting point. Although much of ethics in a given society is learned tacitly through the observation of adults, it cannot be very effective if no one can express ethical and value terminology satisfactorily. Furthermore, ethical arguments will always seem weak and ineffective if everyone thinks they are the subjective views of an individual emot-

ing about how he or she feels. If values can be tied to a common heritage and a society's environmental laws, it will be possible eventually to move from vague emotivism to authentic ethical discourse at the level of ordinary everyday life. Elementary school is the proper place to begin.

It is, nevertheless, just a beginning. Earlier in this paper I spoke of one solution as teaching social values in terms of the values listed in environmental laws, defined in turn in terms of the social values in the common heritage of a specific culture. This approach allows teachers to get beyond just teaching common values as a form of indoctrination. If our values were personal inventions with no history, it would be difficult, if not impossible, for us to talk to each other about our values. They would just be how we felt personally. Nevertheless, it is important to go beyond discussing common values without falling into criticisms of indoctrination.

A counterbalancing solution, that is also needed, involves not permitting the common heritage to become so solidified that the evolution of social values as a common heritage becomes difficult if not impossible. This kind of solution could present the ethical values of other cultures as a contrast to make clear that heritages have developed differently in other parts of the world, that a cultural heritage is not written in stone, and that the evolution of elements of a cultural heritage is permissible and sometimes necessary. Even better than just citing other major cultures around the world might be to highlight the ethical values of indigenous peoples, ones that are close at hand when possible.

In an earlier article on this subject, "A Traditional and Multicultural Approach to Environmental Ethics at Primary and Secondary Levels", I discussed the values of the First Nation Peoples of the Yukon and the indigenous people of Chile¹⁵. The Yukon Environment Act calls for the promotion of aesthetic value (for Euro-Canadians) and cultural and spiritual value (for the First Nation Peoples). Similarly, the values of indigenous people such

13 See Hargrove, E.C. «Teaching Intrinsic Value to Children». *Environmental Ethics*. 2010; 32: 227-228.

14 Hunter, *The Death of Character*, *op. cit.*, 207-208; for a discussion, see Nazario, S. «Schoolteachers Say It's Wrongheaded to Try to Teach Students What's Right». *Wall Street Journal*. 6 April 1990, 1, 6.

15 Hargrove, E.C. «A Traditional and Multicultural Approach to Environmental Ethics at the Primary and Secondary Levels». *Environmental Ethics*. 2008; 30: 268-269.

as the Yahgans and Mapuche in Chile¹⁶ could also be incorporated into the purpose statements of environmental laws in that country and referred to in value discussions in schools.

Currently, in the United States the values in its cultural heritage are discounted and replaced by consumer values on the grounds that only economic-based values are intelligible and have meaning. Ignoring our common cultural values (which have a four-century history in terms of landscape gardening, natural history science, nature poetry and prose, and landscape painting and photography as well as philosophy) puts the citizens of a society in a difficult and peculiar position in which societal values are treated merely as consumer values (willingness to pay or sell) or as weak personal feelings of emotion (just how you happen to feel). Ethics should not be based on consumer values or arbitrary feelings of emotion. Rather it should be based on citizen values based on social values which can and should incorporate indigenous values as part of the common heritage whenever appropriate. This approach provides a smooth transition from ethics to citizenship¹⁷ in which policy decisions are based not on the cost-benefit surveys of economists but rather in terms of democratic alternates such as representative government and referendums¹⁸.

16 See Rozzi, R. «Biocultural ethics: from biocultural homogenization toward biocultural conservation». In: *Linking Ecology and Ethics for a Changing World: Values, Philosophy, and Action*, Rozzi, R., Pickett, S.T.A., Palmer, C., et al. (eds.), Springer, Dordrecht, 2013, 10; and Rozzi, R. (ed.), *Multi-Ethnic Bird Guide of the Sub-Antarctic Forests of South America*, UNT Press, Denton, 2010.

17 As Aristotle puts it in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, ethics is from the point of view of the individual and politics or citizenship is based on the group, but otherwise the development of each takes place in much the same way and are therefore basically the same thing.

18 See Sagoff, M. *The Economy of the Earth: Philosophy, Law, and the Environment*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988, for a more detailed discussion on the differences between consumerism and citizenship. The economist's willingness-to-pay surveys are often rejected by participants in such surveys on the grounds that the hypothetical buying and selling of the future of a species is an inappropriate approach for which, in addition, the participants have no useful experience. Usually, such protest bids are not taken into consideration and are considered refusal to cooperate.

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