Nel Noddings Chapter 8: Ethics and Moral Education

Just as there are debates between the believers in absolute universal Truth & those who argue for some relativity to truth, there are debates between those who believe in absolute moral standards & those who argue for some relativity here too.

The believers in absolute independent universal moral standards of right & wrong believe that without such standards, all we have left is power.

Believers in absolute standards of right and wrong tend to believe that moral relativism necessarily descends into an “anything goes” attitude.

Those who argue for relativity say the believers in absolute Truth create elaborate intellectual systems that don’t really help us in concrete day-to-day situations.

Those who argue for relativity ask why, if there is absolute truth, its advocates disagree with one another about what it is.

TWO CHOICES:

• Believe in absolute universal moral truths that are valid for everyone everywhere. Or
• Believe that morality is relative to the situation, so that you might accept discrimination, oppression, torture & killing if a particular cultural group considered it appropriate in the situation.

• Are there any other choices?

Plato argued for the absolute world of Ideas, and absolute standards of right & wrong that were independent of our situations.

Aristotle believed that there was such a thing as “the good life,” the life of satisfaction, meaning, and contentment; and that virtue was necessary to the good life.

Aristotle believed that you become virtuous by practicing virtue, by doing the right things regularly.

(remember Denis Doyle’s emphasis on example, teaching, and practice, all three being necessary to develop character.)

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• So, if you believe that practicing virtuous acts is what makes people have good character, what are the implications for school?
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  - Once the virtues are engrained, then you can proceed to analyze and reason about them.

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What is one of the main criticisms leveled against Aristotle?

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Remember Kohn's claim that many of the virtues of conservative character education programs would have been practiced by Nazi Germany, e.g., loyalty, orderliness, rule-following, hard work.

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  - Aristotle defended the practice of slavery.
  - The master had to treat the slaves justly, and the slaves had to work dutifully.
  - What is the response to that critique?

Immanuel Kant: 1724-1804

After classical times, the next most important phase in ethical thinking came after the Enlightenment, a time of mistrust in authority and greater faith in human reason to move us toward a better society for all.

Kant used reason to develop absolute standards of right & wrong. Act in such a way that you would be willing for it to be a law that everyone act that way.
  - Can you think of any drawbacks to this reasoning?

Kant elevated duty to act morally above emotional reasons for acting morally.
  - Would you rather parents, spouses, children treated you out of genuine affection or out of a sense of duty?

Kant is said to have elevated the “right” over the “good.”
  - What do you think that means?

Those who argue for relativity ask why, if there is such a thing as Absolute Truth, do so many believers in Absolute Truth disagree with one another?

Utilitarians define morality as working to achieve the greatest good for the greatest number of people. The mathematical formula for this is that we want to maximize the ratio of happiness to pain.
  - What might be advantages & disadvantages of this approach?
Dewey would say that the ethics of an act depends on its outcome, as evaluated by all in society. And this can change from time to time & situation to situation.

- What are strengths and weaknesses of this approach?

The “Cognitive Developmental” Approaches of Kohlberg

- Kohlberg argued that as humans mature they grow toward acceptance of a Kantian moral imperative.
- What are the strengths & weaknesses of this interpretation?
- What implications does it have for education?

“Values Clarification”

- What philosophy does it seem compatible with?
- What are its implications for education?
- On what bases would Dewey critique it?