

# *The Role of Education In Shaping Man's Morality In The 21st Century*

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***“The final stage is come when Man by eugenics, by pre-natal conditioning, and by education and propaganda based on a perfectly applied psychology, has obtained full control over himself.”***  
***CS Lewis***

In order to address the role of education in shaping morality in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we must first gain a basic appreciation for the influence an education has on a person’s moral view in general. The ideas being taught in the classroom have always shaped the way students view the world and in turn their view of morality. This is a well-known fact, recognized by leaders throughout history. Plato said, “The direction in which education starts a person will determine his future.” Consider the following statements as well: “By educating the young generation along the right lines, the People’s State will see to it that no boy or girl must leave school without having attained a clear insight into the meaning of racial purity”—Adolf Hitler. “Give me your four-year olds and in a generation I will give you a Socialist State”—Vladimir Lenin. “The philosophy in the schoolroom in one generation will be the philosophy of the government in the next”—Abraham Lincoln.

In 1948, Richard Weaver wrote a book titled, *Ideas Have Consequences*. The theme of his work focused on the conscious policies of men and governments as not just mere rationalizations of what has been brought about by unaccountable forces. Weaver recognized them as the deductions from our most basic ideas of human destiny and that they have a great, though not unobstructed, power to determine our future. Weaver concluded that the most important thing about a man is his view of the world and took issue with anyone who suggested this was not the case. He said, “If a man is a philosopher . . . what he believes tells him what the world is for. How can men who disagree about what the world is for agree about any of the finer points of daily conduct? Some believe that it does not matter what a man believes so long as he does not take his beliefs seriously. . . . But suppose he does take his ideas seriously?”<sup>1</sup>

Given the brief length of this paper, I have decided to illustrate how ideas do have consequences by following the thought process of an imaginary student—let’s call him Mark—as he interacts with some key ideas at his university. The core curriculum at his school is founded upon atheism and materialistic naturalism. I have decided to use this worldview because of the serious moral implications associated with it, particularly in light of the scientific issues we are facing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In all fairness, I am not suggesting that all atheistic materialists would agree with the ideas being stated in this paper and conclusions that are drawn. However, I would also have to say, with all due respect, that any disagreements with these ideas and their implications cannot be made on purely academic grounds. So, imagine with me, if you will, that you are viewing snap-shots of Mark’s thought processes as he interacts with the ideas being taught in his science and psychology classes.

Let’s begin by joining Mark in his science class where he has been taught to believe that scientific knowledge is the only valid form of knowledge and that there is nothing outside of nature. Accordingly, Mark accepts the proposition that human life can only be defined and explained in

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<sup>1</sup> Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 23.

physical terms. Taken together, these beliefs lead Mark to the conclusion that true scientific and social progress is only possible when the veil of religious superstition is lifted by the ever increasing scope of scientific knowledge. After Mark has enough time to assimilate this worldview into his own life experiences, he decides that it is time to abandon his childhood beliefs in the spiritual and supernatural.

Although Mark disposed of his religious superstitions, he still believes that good and evil are realities and begins to struggle with exactly how these metaphysical concepts fit into a physical worldview. When Mark tried to define good and evil in purely physical terms, it became frustrating. He realized that all observable phenomena can only be explained by the laws and processes found in nature, but where exactly are the phenomena of good and evil observed? There are no such things as good and evil molecules! Mark's dilemma was further complicated while reading the well-respected atheist, Bertrand Russell. Russell said, "Materialists use the laws of physics to show, or attempt to show, that the movements of human bodies are mechanically determined. . . . When a man writes a poem or commits a murder, the bodily movements involved in his act result solely from physical causes. It would seem absurd to put up a statue to him in one case and to hang him in another."<sup>2</sup>

Mark thinks that Russell makes perfect sense in light of atheistic materialism. Yet, when he pondered the concept of good, as it applies to a hero, and the concept of bad, as it applies to a traitor, it raised an even more pointed question. If the laws of nature did cause these actions, then how did we come to understand them as human virtues and vices? Since we are all part of nature, how is it that we call part of the natural processes good and another part bad? Aren't they essentially the same? Maybe Mark will find the answers to his questions in his next class, evolutionary psychology.

Mark considers this course to be ideal for him because it is scientifically consistent with respect to atheistic materialism. Other courses in psychology taught Mark that human behavior could be economically determined (Marx) or socially determined (Skinner) or self-determined (Sartre). However, it is in this class that Mark came to see the true nature of humanity and human behavior. This evolutionary psychology course explores human behavior from a purely scientific approach and has helped Mark to reach the only logically consistent conclusion about human behavior—it is genetically determined. Mark's professor read a quote in class the other day that made him see human destiny in a whole new light. The quote was taken from an essay written by the famous evolutionist Julian S. Huxley. Huxley asserted that, "In light of evolutionary biology, man can now see himself as the sole agent of further evolutionary advance on this planet, and one of the few possible instruments of progress in the universe at large."<sup>3</sup>

Huxley's idea that we can be the "sole agents of evolutionary advance" and "instruments of progress" captured Mark's attention. When he reflected on Huxley's words he gained an insight that helped him define morality and differentiate between good and evil within the framework of observable phenomena. Huxley points out that we can be agents to further human evolution and instruments of progress. Since there are physical laws that guide human evolution and since through science and technology we can now act as agents to further evolutionary advance on this planet, then to act towards that end must be directly related to the concept of moral goodness. Conversely, not to act as agents of progress must be directly related to the concept of moral badness. Hence, evolutionary progress is the physical indicator to which human behavior corresponds and is judged to be good or bad. Yet, we still do not know the law of physics that determines that relationship.

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<sup>2</sup> Bertrand Russell, "Has Religion Made Useful Contributions to Civilization?" published in *Why I Am Not a Christian* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), 37.

<sup>3</sup> Julian S. Huxley, *Essays of a Biologist* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1939), 132.

After class, Mark asks his psychology professor a few questions to help him think through his ideas. “Professor, don’t you think that psychoanalysts must admit that human behavior, along with the social conflicts it produces, originates with and is controlled by our primitive urges? And if this is so, isn’t it also the case that the best way to control these urges is to control the genetic code that determines them? For example, homosexuality is a genetically determined trait, but so are all other sexual behaviors, such as rape, incest and pedophilia. The same is true of other antisocial behaviors, such as acts of violence and murder which are caused by such primitive urges such as anger and greed. So, if we are really looking to rid society of certain types of behaviors, wouldn’t the genetic solution be the most effective one?” Mark’s professor ponders his questions for a moment and asks him to make an appointment to meet and talk more about this later that week. At the meeting, his professor listened to more of Mark’s ideas and questions. As a result, he suggested that Mark prepare a research paper as he continued to investigate these ideas.

Even though this seemed like an insignificant assignment, Mark was encouraged by the interest his professor took in listening to his ideas. Mark sees himself, albeit in a small way, as one of Huxley’s “agents of progress.” As Mark thinks about what Huxley meant when he used the word “progress,” he knows that in today’s world it speaks directly to genetic engineering with the goal of eliminating genetic imperfections in the physical sense and ultimately in the behavioral sense. This must be the good end to which we must use our knowledge of science and our advanced technology to attain.

Mark has reached a significant point in his studies because he senses that his education is becoming increasingly supportive of an ever growing life passion to make a difference in this world. He has a desire to study some of the greatest atheistic and scientific minds of the past, in order to reinterpret their ideas in light of current scientific thinking. One book that was instrumental in carrying out this task was written by Robert Wright. The title of that book is, *The Moral Animal: the New Science of Evolutionary Psychology*. Mark found that Wright seemed to have a finely honed thought process when it came to the correlation between scientific laws and human behavior. There was one key idea that immediately captured Mark’s attention. Wright said, “A moral code is an informal compromise among competing spheres of genetic self-interest, each acting to mold the code to its own ends, using any levers at its disposal.”<sup>4</sup>

Here is the physical/psychological link Mark was looking for—the genetic code and the moral code. However, the correlation conveyed something Mark did not expect. In fact, it was contrary to what Mark believed about moral goodness. Moral goodness suggests strength of character, courage to face your fears. Yet, Wright calls the moral code a compromise! How can compromising part of the natural order, genetic self-interests, be considered the essence of the moral code? A compromise is a weakness; a vice, not a virtue. It became perplexing to Mark when he wondered why humans would create a negative concept for a natural part of life—genetic self-interest. It makes so much sense that the ultimate good for humanity is evolutionary advancement and that kind of progress depends on this genetic self-interest, just as Huxley said. So why attribute a positive concept to an impediment to progress, which is negative?

As Mark reasons this through, he begins think that maybe what drives this moral code is actually the fear that other genetic self-interests will dominate and so that fear is what causes the compromise. Perhaps the human psyche pressures us to call this compromise a virtue so that we can appear strong and courageous. Just as in nature, natural camouflage helps animals to hide from their predators. Now,

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<sup>4</sup> Wright, Robert. *The Moral Animal: The New Science of Evolutionary Psychology* (New York: Vintage Books/Random House, 1994), 146.

more than ever, Mark is determined to develop a working hypothesis in order to systematically sort out his ideas and move ahead.

As Mark continues his research, he is particularly influenced by the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche. So, Mark begins to wonder how Nietzsche would rewrite his thoughts in light of our current scientific understanding of human behavior and genetics. He agreed with Nietzsche's maxim that reason was the only hope for humanity. What intrigued Mark was Nietzsche's instrument or agent of reason, the person who would possess the will power to become the "self-sufficient man." For it is this man, this *Overman* Nietzsche wrote of, who must have the courage to "live dangerously and to send out ships into uncharted seas!"<sup>5</sup> Mark begins to think that perhaps Nietzsche's "self-sufficient man" is in actuality the "genetically self-sufficient man" and the "uncharted seas" represent Huxley's "progress in the universe at large."

Mark is now convinced that it would actually be wrong for a society, in particular his society, to weaken itself by fearfully compromising their collective genetic self-interests. He believes that humanity has finally reached the place where there is a scientific basis for Nietzsche's maxims and Huxley's vision. Up to now, they could only be discussed in a philosophy class and lacked true knowledge—scientific knowledge—which is needed to form the backbone of a truly great society. We have the knowledge we need to remove the weaknesses Nietzsche talked about and to recognize that the truly virtuous are those who work to achieve the evolutionary advanced society.

Of course, Mark is just a fictional character, created by me to illustrate the power of ideas and the consequences they can have in the lives of young people. Although Mark is an imaginary person, students like him have always existed in real life down through the ages. I wrote this story as a plea for educators to take responsibility for the academic credibility of ideas being taught at their respective institutions. In particular, I am making an appeal to teachers who believe, as Mark was taught, that scientific knowledge has preeminence over all other knowledge. That belief is simply false and very dangerous in light of the issues facing humanity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Allow me to explain why this is the case.

First, let me say that science is a useful tool in the hands of morally competent people and has showered great benefits upon human life and human society. However, science, devoid of a valid moral philosophy to guide it, ought to be a concern to all educators. This is my point; scientific knowledge has been given dominion over all other kinds of knowledge—in particular, philosophical knowledge. I believe that the most significant role educators can play in shaping the moral views of students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to teach students about the *true nature of knowledge* with respect to the distinction between science and philosophy. For the only way to understand the *true nature of man* is to understand the *true nature of knowledge*.

Philosophy is more eminently knowledge than science, having a validity that is independent of scientific findings, and a utility superior to that of science. This can be understood by looking at the nature of science. The entire discipline of science rests upon a philosophical first principle known as *causality*. This first principle forms the foundation for all scientific knowledge. All the inductive and deductive reasoning skills needed for scientific analysis and its methodology, depend upon this philosophical principle. Consequently, good science depends upon good philosophy. For example, when Mark encountered the claim that "scientific knowledge is the only valid form of knowledge," that claim could have been easily refuted by asking the individual who made it if the claim was

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<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, the portable Nietzsche, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1968), 97.

offering scientific knowledge or philosophical knowledge. The claim is self-defeating because it is not offered as scientific knowledge—it is a philosophical claim.

The second area where philosophy has dominion over science is utility. Clearly, the difference between intelligent and unintelligent operation lies in referring means to ends. Everyone knows that scientific knowledge can be used for good as well as evil purposes. Therefore, it must be decided if the means it provides us with are ordered to the right or the wrong ends. But what determines the ordering of means to ends, and what provides the criteria for judging ends as good and bad? Either this is mere opinion, or it is knowledge. If merely opinion, then any means could justify any ends. If it is knowledge, however, then it is clearly not scientific knowledge because science could protect itself and all of us from the misuses to which it is so readily put. The knowledge that governs science is philosophical knowledge. It is good philosophical knowledge (also called morals) that must direct our intelligent operation in referring means to ends.

For these reasons, the utility of philosophy is thus superior to that of science, and what is even more obvious, science without moral wisdom—a command of utilities without right direction—is a dangerous thing. The more science we have, the more we are in need of wisdom to prevent its misuse. The imminent tragedy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is found in the fact that modern culture has magnified science and almost completely emancipated itself from good philosophy—moral wisdom. So, now more than ever the primary role of education in shaping the morality of man in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to put science under the dominion of moral philosophy, where it belongs.

I realize that there are many pressing issues facing us as a global community and that I could have written a story about Mark attending an institution whose fundamental ideas were supernatural, turning Mark into a religious fanatic. However, good moral philosophy would still be the solution in that situation as well, not science. Furthermore, we stand at the brink of a more critical threshold that, if crossed, will catapult us into a “Brave New World.” This New World will be a place where Men take control of the genetic destiny of other Men. CS Lewis, the former Oxford atheist, warned us that this day was when he wrote a book titled, *The Abolition of Man*. In that work, Lewis warned us that when society reaches the point of obliterating moral philosophy and traditional values altogether and replaces it with perfectly applied evolutionary psychology and scientific technology, then that society is perilously close to the end. Lewis said,

Having mastered our environment, let us now master ourselves and choose our own destiny. . . I am only making clear what Man’s conquest of nature really means and especially that final stage in the conquest, which, perhaps, is not far off. The final stage is come when Man by eugenics, by pre-natal conditioning, and by education and propaganda based on a perfectly applied psychology, has obtained full control over himself. *Human* nature will be the last part of Nature to surrender to Man. The battle will be won. . . . But who precisely will have won it? For the power of Man to make himself what he pleases means, as we have seen, *is the power to make other men what they please.*<sup>6</sup>

I think it only proper to end this paper with Plato’s maxim. He said, “There will be no end to the troubles of states, or indeed of humanity itself, till philosophers become kings in this world, or till those we now call kings and rulers really and truly become philosophers.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 72 (emphasis added).

<sup>7</sup> Plato, *The Republic* (Book 6, line 484).