

OF SUBJECTIVE & OBJECTIVE MORALITY

William Ayers' chapter "Seeing the Student" presents a deeply problematic argument for me. He writes that when he first began to teach, many of his students were described to him as "culturally deprived." Over his years of teaching, he found that this description usually referred to kids who were either not white, or middle class, or English-speaking. These kids were seen as "inferior," which led him to ask whether "some children have a culture and others do not?" and "What is culture anyway?"

He concludes that thankfully, patronizing and untrue description of some people as "culturally deprived" fell into dis-use.

My argument with Ayers' position is with his assertion that all cultures are equal and that labeling some cultures as superior to others is not helpful. His position is typical of the post-modern pluralist world, which views all belief systems as equally valid.

Personally, I struggle with this conclusion. Are all cultures truly equally valid? I find this difficult to reconcile in the school system, where we value broad things like "truth", "treating others equally" and "social justice". Teachers all want to not appear non-xenophobic and culturally sensitive - and to do so we must accept the conclusion that all cultures are equally valuable.

However, the view of morality as subjective flies in the face of the idea of an objective set of rules which we as educators must uphold.

If we are to say that, for example, we believe in treating women equally, then we are asserting our cultures superiority to those which do not value women equally.

If we are to say that, for example, peace is better than war, then we as teachers cannot stand by cultures that promote violence.

If we are to say that poor students should have the same opportunity as rich students, how can public school teachers value the interests of extreme capitalists?

On a smaller level, if we are to say that, for example, physical activity is better than sitting in front of a television playing video games, then we are by nature "discriminating" against people who let their kids sit unsupervised in front of a television playing video games.

We are saying that these people are, in a sense, culturally deprived...

My point is then - every day we are judging and valuing some cultural values above others.

While Ayers argues that labels are "limiting," I would argue that labels are equally as helpful as they are harmful. What is wrong with labeling evil as evil and hate as hate? Teachers use labels all the time.

We have no problem saying Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi are "good" and Hitler and Stalin were "evil." Why should we hesitate to say that feeding children soda for breakfast is less good for them than feeding them a balanced meal? Why should we hesitate to say that soda for breakfast is "uncultured" and a balanced meal is "cultured"?

Now, to be clear, I'm not suggesting throwing around labels for the sake of it. I'm also not suggesting that schools and teachers should re-institute the sort of hateful and truly racist, sexist and classist labeling of the past.

However, I am saying that the over-all trend of our society these days seems to be to assume that the world is a good place and that all systems of thought are equally healthy.

In North America, the present generation has grown up in a near post-violent society.

Almost none of us has experienced true, violent and hateful discrimination. I recently read a blog by a traditional Sikh woman, who, at the age of 30, after growing up in North America, was surprised to feel her first true experience of hateful racism.

Growing up in this society, it is tempting to forget that violence and hate does, in fact, exist in the wider world. We also may be tempted to forget the many struggles our society has gone through to "grow up" and "learn positive lessons."

In our focus on the idea that **everyone's stories are valuable** (which, I again stress, is not an inherently bad thing), we must not lose sight of the fact that, while everyone has a right to their own story, perspective and opinion, not all stories can be equally true.



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OF CHILDHOOD & ADULTHOOD

There was a time in some idyllic past where children and adults were able to live within the same realm. Children were a constant, noticeable presence in the life of the average adult – not only at home, where parents had seventeen children to feed – but also at work, where children worked alongside adults as apprentices in trade. Or breathed in deadly phosphorus while making matches in factory.

That time is, for the good and the bad, long gone. These days, our lives are neatly categorized. From the ages of 0-12, live nearly exclusively in the company of other children, save for our parents and teachers. From 13-18, our lives revolve around our teenage peers in high school, and adults are expected to be ignored. Then, from 18 until, increasingly, our mid-thirties, we are “finding ourselves” – living among similarly-aged adults and encouraged to travel, explore careers, sexual lives, and living situations with our peers.

It is possible then, for a 30-year-old in our society to have had little or no interaction with a child since they were themselves a child. A period of 20 years!

Imagine how the average person from 1900 would view our culture today – where adults are constantly portrayed in media as SCARED OF CHILDREN.

How then do we expect children to form relationships with us? There was a time when adults mentored children and taught them how to make good decisions. Not to idealize the past – but I wonder how many children even have a positive relationship with an adult these days?

This problem is discussed thoughtfully in Deborah Meier’s article “Learning in the Company of Adults”, where she argues that our school system has to do a better job integrating ages and interests. She writes that “our institutions and adult lives are structured more and more to keep us at a distance,” and she prescribes seven fixes to this. Her article is beautifully-written and her “fixes” are not quick. To her words, I would add only one thought: This problem goes far beyond schools, and into a culture where we forget not just the young, but the old as well. Something does indeed need to change.

