

## **Education for active goodness**

**Pavel Vacek**

### **Abstract**

The present paper focuses on the interconnection and the impact of broader social events responsible for shaping the character of the young in the context of developments in both post-communist countries and the European Union as a whole. The attention of the paper is devoted to the changing perceptions of liberty in relation to a high standard of living in European countries and the need to promote moral education comprehensively, with regard to having a balanced impact on the development of moral knowing and moral feeling. Further, the paper offers an analysis of dimensions that determine moral actions and character accents, considered to be essential to convey in order to encourage the moral development of pupils. Finally, the paper ends with a presentation of the conditions that should help the ethical development of active goodness in the young generation.

**Keywords:** freedom, moral complexity, moral education, individual and social ethics, meta-ethics, active goodness

### **Introduction**

The intent of the following text is to present social connection and impact of events within a broad social context on the process of education, especially their direct and indirect effect on shaping the moral behavior of the young generation. The basic idea which will be examined from several different perspectives is the subject of passive good in contrast to active evil. The topic has already been explored methodically and presented almost 20 years ago (Vacek, 1997).

However, it turns out that the contemporary world and especially the world of education today requires the development of more comprehensive approaches and interpretations. The following considerations are made assuming somewhat longer experience with democracy in post-communist countries that should be reflected in the content that refers to moral education models and their real impact.

The considerations mentioned are more generally valid in the context of events and processes in the whole European Union. Everything is updated in the context of the ongoing events which address new questions and issues to the whole society. The democratic world is not ready to sort out these issues.

If today's adult generation does not know how to deal with the current crisis, the question is how we can prepare future generations and what for. During a time of unprecedented change, accompanied by unprecedented social turmoil, which values should we teach the young? What ethical attitudes should be fostered during the "clash of civilizations" in a globalized world?

### **Freedom and indolence**

This paper starts with exploring the relationship to freedom which plays an important role in our considerations. Erich Fromm says "human existence and freedom are from the beginning

inseparable” and distinguishes between two kinds of freedom, the ‘*freedom from*’ and ‘*freedom to*’. Fromm calls *freedom from* negative freedom (Fromm, 1993, p. 27).

In our interpretation we associate the concept of freedom with the process of democratization. The changes in the geopolitical situation in the 1990s; i.e. a country’s transformation from dictatorship to democracy, did not require extra costs, neither economically nor in terms of human capital. In other words, no significant sacrifices or too much effort were made by the majority of population. After all, using the term Velvet Revolution to interpret the transition of power in the former Czechoslovakia has, in this context, an autonomous informative value. Thus, a democracy which was easily attainable and little respected by the people.

That is to say, *freedom from* was achieved and conveyed a false impression that it is enough, that no more is needed to secure the change. Now, we should define the term ‘*freedom to*’. We understand it as an active process of preserving and strengthening the already gained ‘*freedom from*’. Let us take these considerations and focus on ethics. The most frequently mentioned principle on various occasions is the Golden Rule, which says, “Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you” and the active version “Treat other people the way you would like them to treat you”. The first is an example of passive version – I am waiting; the second saying comes up with an active solution.

In this regard, Hábl makes comments on the publication *The Twilight of Obligation*, written by Gilles Lipovetsky, aptly (sub-)titled *The painless ethics of new democratic times*. He expresses doubts whether such painless ethics can be considered even ethics. Pedagogically speaking, Hábl says that “ethically sound behavior generally requires effort... to copy homework or dissertation is easier than the execution of it” (Hábl, 2015, p. 56).

Besides, ask someone to climb a hill voluntarily; if he can take the comfortable ride up in a funicular train. The availability of conditions for comfortable life apparently reduces responsiveness to actively intervene in favor of good social principles. Moreover, it seems to have the effect of losing the sensitivity, particularly among young people, to distinguish between good and bad (Stašová et al., 2015). Therefore, demand for topics including moral content seems to be increasingly necessary. Normal daily life “without hindrance”, without the need to put that effort into anything, weakens not only the young ones, but it takes all of us unprepared against the possible threats of “indolence”.

The sad proof of our inability to effectively and humanely deal with “unexpected” challenges and obstacles is the current migrant crisis. Indolent and multi-headed Europe demonstrates its inability to act and is looking for painless solutions which, due to the hesitant manner, will be very painful – as it seems - the longer they are being sought. In this sense, Viliam Buchert says: “Europe after two devastating wars has become self-absorbed, inward-looking to its successes and provided carefree living atmosphere. Europe was not practically confronted with a dramatic situation, that it lost its defensive instincts...” (Buchert, 2016, p. 11).

### **Moral complexity**

To consider life without obstacles would be rather boring, and the desire for powerful experiences has not weakened for generations. However, the willingness to invest in gaining this experience is lacking. Consequently, the preference for so-called experiential shortcuts is increasing. Ethical values fade into the background. The offer of adventure activities without making an effort is increasingly rich, from shared self-injury with a group of similarly oriented people on the Internet through alcohol and drug use to the experience of “modern” bullying, that is, cyberbullying. In this case, it causes harm with zero energy expenditure hiding cowardly behind a mask of anonymity. Unfortunately, this trend does not concern only the youth.

These strange roots of non-ethics are certainly deep and date back to the period before the year 1989. They have been, certainly, accentuated by one-sided consumerist-oriented policy and disregard for ethics in general over the last two decades. It is a paradox that public office holders and protagonists of transformation from communism to capitalism in the Czech Republic emphasize, in fact, the unequivocal dominance of the Marxist base over the superstructure model. The young generation, living a comfortable life of abundance and without having to make much effort, needs to be reminded that freedom and democracy cannot be taken for granted. The key role to play in addressing such issue is assumed by the method of experiential learning.

Enhancing experience during lectures on ethics is certainly a good pedagogical principle. On the other hand, however, excessive emphasis placed on the emotional aspect of experience at the expense of rational reasoning (ethical instruction) among children and teenagers carries risks. Helping young people to make good choices, using unilateral emotion based argument, is relatively easy. Nevertheless, one-sided adherence to principles of good without the rational element makes young people the easy prey to defection to “the other side” by evil manipulators – from cult leaders using brainwashing techniques in the name of “something”, respectively anything, to the most tragic forms of violence using young suicide bombers, who believe that they will “*earn a place beside Allah*” (Zimbardo, 2014, p. 350). Zimbardo notes that young Palestinian suicide bombers are not drawn exclusively from the ranks of the poor, illiterate and socially isolated without personal future prospects. On the contrary, three-quarters come from middle-class families or higher, 90% from two-parent homes, two thirds were university students, etc. It is an example of the abuse of power that comes from the misuse of patriotic feeling and religious beliefs (see below).

However, to anchor values, it requires a balanced combination of rational and emotional components. The book, *Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility* by Thomas Lickona, provides a detailed step-by-step guide to the harmonious development of moral knowing and moral feeling, which results in moral action (Lickona, 1991; Vacek, 2013). After all, social psychologists normally, defining characteristics of attitude, include cognitive and emotional dimensions and also add the conative dimension of an attitude (Hayesová, 2007). From an educational philosophy standpoint, Jan Hábl interestingly comments on his view from the perspective of ethics with emphasis placed on prosocial behavior. He admits that frequent manifestations of unhealthy individualism and selfishness raise educational requirements to motivate pupils for prosocial and altruistic behavior. He considers the use of the terms pro-social and ethical roughly equivalent and misleading (Hábl, 2015). “...[I]f ethical education is to be functional, it must cultivate humanity in the light of the whole moral complexity of life” (Hábl, 2015, p. 49).

The last mentioned author emphasizes that such complexity means inextricable linkage among individual personal ethics (“good heart and good conscience function”), social ethics (relationships, “harmony and coexistence among people”) and so-called meta-ethics. Meta-ethics seeks to answer the most fundamental questions “What is goodness?” “What it means to live a good life”. In the following text, Hábl ponders over some of the negative consequences of neglecting meta-ethical dimension, especially in education (Hábl, 2015, pp. 51 -52). Let us add that what is seen as postmodernist destabilization and relativization of the system to determine what is good and what is bad should impose on us as educators at all levels of education to seriously engage in a thorough and meaningful redefinition of the basic categories of ethics.

### **Moral actions**

In the above-mentioned text published in 1997, we expressed the view that evil rides in a Mercedes and, therefore, is often not identified as evil. It turns out that any attempts, whether

consciously or unconsciously, to simplify the approach to moral education is a step towards its weakening, failing to recognize what is good and what is not. According to Hábl, a condition that for an action “to be called moral, that is good in itself, it must include the following three components” (Hábl, 2015, p. 59). In the author’s conception, it includes essence, intention and situation, and those components should form a so-called complementary unity. If one of the three components is missing; “the moral quality of an action is disqualified” (Hábl, 2015, p. 59). The essence refers to the acquisition and study of basic moral principles, rules, values and ideas about what is good, etc.

From our psychological perspective, Hábl’s essence represents the rational component of personality. Thus it involves the development of moral consciousness. Philosophically speaking, it refers to acquiring knowledge in basic ethical concepts. The anchoring of knowledge is essential, as without it, the other two components lose their moral quality. Intention is a motivation-encompassing attitude, desire to act morally, to do something good. Then psychologically speaking, our emotions come into play.

However, the priority to make good decisions based on knowledge and with the intention to carry it through does not necessarily mean that the conditions are favorable to perform the act. “Therefore ... ethics education should develop the skills needed for the application of moral principles in specific situations; different situations require different applications of otherwise stable principles” (Hábl, 2015, pp. 67, 68).

### **Ethical issues**

From a psychological standpoint, we owe young people to be a source of information and experience and provide the tools to navigate today’s complicated world, both in the field of good and evil. It applies, primarily, to our historical and personal experience with totalitarian regimes.

A tendency to demonstrate its undemocratic nature and its disadvantage of poor supply of toilet paper and bananas has been far more dangerous than it may appear. It is necessary to constantly demonstrate the risks associated not only with “individual evil”, which in its extreme forms tends to attract a lot of publicity (Drbohlav, 2013), but also with what may be termed “collective” and, above all, institutional evil.

Such form of institutionalized evil, with which the world is incorrigibly confronted again and again, is an example of an abuse of inherently *good* human values: faith and patriotism. Religion and patriotism are transforming - more precisely are being transformed – into a sort of intolerant fanaticism and aggressive nationalism. However, this is the same scenario – to point out the internal/external enemy that threatens us, demonizing the enemy, using “ideology” to be ensured about our aggression towards the enemy, legalization of cruel and inhuman treatment in the name of “holy war”, etc. (Staub, 2003; Fromm, 1997).

We owe it to our young generation to give another essential message that good and evil do not exist as such *outside* ourselves. In particular, Stanley Milgram’s and Philip Zimbardo’s experiments showed that most human beings (so called decent people) are capable of acting in inhumane ways, far beyond their expectations, under certain situational conditions. The book’s title *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* by Philip Zimbardo speaks for itself (Zimbardo, 2014).

The generally accepted view that the horrors caused by Nazi Germany was a historical anomaly, which can never be repeated on such a scale, was dispelled, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, by Milgram’s experiment on obedience to authority – the study of effects of punishment on learning ability using electric shocks if an answer was incorrect, and Zimbardo’s Stanford prison experiment. Unfortunately, more than seventy years after the end of World War II, we know today that this assumption was deeply mistaken.

### Active goodness

In our view, fostering active goodness in education means not being indifferent to even relatively minor acts of injustice, aggression, rule-breaking involving school age children. If I consider being funny when classmates hurt each other, even I do not take part in it, creates an alibi-habit and pattern of passive innocence with the perspective that I, myself, can also become a victim in future if I do not join the bullies. Relational processes within peer groups are incredibly similar to the tragic stories of entire communities.

Philip Zimbardo was not satisfied with just demonstrating the negative power of situational factors in terms of their effects on the behavior of ordinary people. In the above mentioned publication (*Lucifer Effect*, 2014), he offered a Ten-Step Program to resist undesirable influences. His Decalogue serves as a great instructional inspiration to teachers, what principles they should accentuate in moral education.

1. To strengthen the willingness to admit our mistakes. Not only to ourselves, but also to others, always associated with the words “I’m sorry”, “Forgive me”, “I apologize”, etc.
2. To strengthen the efforts not to do things automatically, but think about them, to be mindful.
3. To promote the sense of personal responsibility of one’s decisions and actions and not to succumb to behavior changes brought on by anonymity.
4. To be yourself, and as a unique being, not to allow others to deindividualise you, to turn you into an object.
5. To discourage harmful behavior – a zero-tolerance approach to even the smallest offenses, fraud, slander, lies, harassment and intimidation. All of this is often the first step down in regard to the degradation of behavior.
6. To learn to distinguish between legitimate authority, which can be recognized and deserves respect, and unjust authority, which should be disobeyed and rejected.
7. To support critical thinking from the earliest times in a child’s life and throughout the whole life course. To require facts for the foundation of all reasoning, to determine independently whether the recommended means ever justify potentially harmful or malicious ends.
8. To reward, at all levels, positive social encounters of moral behavior and highlight them publicly.
9. To respect the diversity and variability of people as a natural defense mechanism against prejudice and discrimination.
10. Not to sacrifice personal and civil freedoms for the illusion of security (adapted from Zimbardo, 2005, pp. 76, 77; 2014, pp. 528–534).

Zimbardo’s ten points undoubtedly are of general validity, but the urgency of his ideas becomes more and more significant in the contemporary European context. And schools and teachers are the most responsible for making future adults better oriented in the contemporary “dangerously” complicated world.

We believe that the earliest solid knowledgeable base and continuing education of children rationally and emotionally discern and competently distinguish what is good from what is evil, increases the likelihood that they can confidently and competently step out in favor of good in the future as adults, to grow up to be responsible and high-principled citizens.

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