

# THE REVERSE OF THE MEDAL: TWO VIEWS OF TOLERANCE.

*These contrasting opinion pieces exploring the value of tolerance appeared in June in The Australian newspaper* © The Australian

## Society depends on moral judgment

**Sue Knight and Carol Collins**

The emphasis on tolerance teaches students that different values are equal

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TOLERANCE has long been seen as a cornerstone of a just democracy. In the West we can trace the argument back to the ancient Greeks. In *The Histories*, Herodotus focuses on the differences between the funerary practices of the Greeks, who burned the bodies of their dead, and the Callatians, who considered it respectful to eat the bodies of their dead fathers, suggesting that, in an enlightened society, each group would be tolerant of the other's practices.

In contemporary Australian society we find many cultural differences: in food practices, in ways of caring for the aged, in religious practices and in a range of family structures.

It surely would be hard to hold that society is not the richer for such diversity. Clearly, the functioning of our democratic society depends heavily on its citizens appreciating and respecting difference.

We must be wary, though, of moral relativism. A society of individuals who believe that all beliefs, all values, have equal legitimacy, for whom anything goes, is neither tolerant nor just.

We should be gravely concerned, then, that the concept of tolerance looms large within the nine common Australian values outlined in the recent National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools, which directs teachers to foster in their students not only respect for others' points of view (value seven) but also an acceptance of cultural diversity within their democratic society (value nine).

This reflects a wider emphasis within present educational policy and curriculum documents, which is to make us wary of saying that some moral judgments are better than others. So teachers are concerned about holding that whaling is morally wrong because it is considered right in Japanese and Norwegian cultures. They feel wary perhaps about holding that girls and boys should have the same opportunities and rights within the broader community because this clashes with cultural values within schools. They are wedded pretty firmly to the notion of tolerance, of respecting all values. Here we are headed in the direction of moral relativism.

Surely a focus on social mores sanctioning racism, bullying or the abuse of women and children show us what is wrong with relativism. Think of Australia's treatment of asylum-seekers, and the complex issues of tribal law and the treatment of women and children in indigenous communities. These are examples of situations in which tolerance is dangerous.

A just democratic society depends on its citizens judging such practices to be morally wrong and, indeed, on equipping children to understand not only that such practices are wrong but also to see why they are wrong. In other words, social justice depends on a form of moral education, which introduces children to the grounds for moral judgments.

Morality is grounded in human good and harm (or suffering), and human beings share common capacities for suffering and for happiness. Of course, other species have the capacity for suffering, too. All sentient beings can suffer, but humans form a special class of sentient beings.

These are the general principles that must underlie any set of values, the principles that must form the basis of a moral decision-making procedure. They do not in themselves deliver a moral decision-making process.

But we can also draw on some other well-established elements of ethical reasoning, such as considering as fully as possible the consequences of one's behaviour, taking circumstances into account and ensuring consistency between one's beliefs and between one's beliefs and actions.

By paying close attention to such elements, we can identify a set of capacities that are necessary for the making of reasoned moral judgments. Such capacities include: Understanding others' interests; Being aware of one's own needs, both emotional and physical; Caring about other people's feelings and having sympathy for others' needs. Considering as fully as possible the consequences of one's behaviour (taking all things into consideration before acting, including the effect on others, on oneself, one's character and habits and the direction of one's life, as well as on the institutions of the society of which one is part). Distinguishing like from unlike situations and typical from atypical situations.

These are such capacities that any values education program must seek to develop. More than this, children must be given opportunities to practise and refine the use of these capacities and to understand and appreciate their value.

It is in this way that students will begin to develop a disposition to engage widely in reasoned moral decision making. It is in this way that the insidious influence of the emphasis on tolerance may perhaps be undone.

***Sue Knight and Carol Collins are lecturers in the school of education at the University of South Australia. © The Australian***

## **Cultures are not all equal**

### **Christopher Pearson**

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ON Tuesday The Australian carried an interesting critique of Brendan Nelson's campaign to instil "Australian values" in the classroom. Sue Knight, a researcher at the University of South Australia, used a Hawke Institute seminar to declare the exercise "doomed and dangerous".

Articulating civic values in the bland language deemed fitting in the national curriculum is a tricky business at the best of times. Linking them to notions of national identity compounds the problem. The notion of Australian values - as opposed to common human values, say, or Judeo-Christian civilisation's values - strikes me as hokey, chauvinistic and self-congratulatory. Contemplating the National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools, the only crumb of comfort I could find was that there's no mention of mateship.

All the other apple-pie banalities were crammed in, though.

"The common Australian values are: care and compassion; doing your best; a fair go; freedom; honesty and trustworthiness; integrity; respect; responsibility; understanding, tolerance and inclusion."

Knight's host forum, the Hawke Institute, was set up to perpetuate the ideological legacy of the former prime minister. Despite that fact, she chose to attack this politically correct wish list in her speech for its vacuity and to mock the \$29 million program to propagate those virtues.

She also questioned the value of teaching tolerance as an unchallengeable good.

"The emphasis within current educational policy and curriculum is on being aware of others and their cultures and accepting, even respecting, diversity and others' point of view. We are wary of saying that some moral judgments are better than others."

I remember the mid-1970s, when multiculturalism was first beginning to entrench itself as the official religion in state schools. Celebrating diversity suddenly became the only possible response to that often-confronting phenomenon.

In the same way, overnight it seemed that all cultures became equal and demanded uncritical acceptance, except for the Anglo-Saxon kind, about which we were encouraged to feel ashamed and apologetic.

It became less and less possible to make critical, cross-cultural comparisons. If, for example, you wanted to talk about the Aztec practice of human sacrifice, there were all sorts of shibboleths getting in the way of plain speaking. Even the most remotely negative reflection on priests cutting out the still-beating hearts of their victims with obsidian knives had to be prefaced with mea culpas about the victims of Anglo imperialism. The verdict of Mircea Eliade, the previous century's most distinguished historian of comparative religion, that the Aztec rites were "a perversion of the religious impulse" had become almost literally unspeakable.

It was the same with other, less spectacular examples of barbarism. The clitoridectomies of African tribes and the genital mutilation of Aboriginal boys in initiation were subjects hedged around with taboos. The same was true of cannibalism, on the rare occasions when anthropologists and historians could bring themselves to acknowledge the existence of the problem among some Australian and New Guinean hunter-gathers. Who, after all, were we white Westerners to criticise the customs of other cultures, especially those so much closer to nature?

Where all other cultures are notionally equal, all sorts of crucial differences are annihilated and categorical distinctions swamped. For example, basic issues such as comparative levels of cultural development are set at naught. Primitive nomads, villagers and the inhabitants of cities become all much of a muchness because they all have a culture of some sort, and comparisons are odious or at least ill-mannered.

Even if they paid lip-service to those pieties, you may well be thinking, surely the school-teaching classes never really believed all that claptrap? The fact of the matter is that the calibre of people attracted into teaching has been falling steadily since at least the '50s and it's a long time since the profession encouraged independent-mindedness in its members. The chances are that most of the people entrusted with values education swallowed their multicultural pieties whole and cling to them in much the same way as they would to articles of religious faith.

It is as Allan Bloom warned in *The Closing of the American Mind*. Barbarism has largely triumphed in the classroom. Judeo-Christian civilisation has been trivialised and marginalised by those entrusted with the task of transmitting it. As he put it: "Cultural relativism succeeds in destroying the West's universal or intellectually imperialistic claims, leaving it as just another culture."

Mandating tolerance as a civic virtue leads not only to cultural relativism but to a more general moral relativism. Knight alluded to the problem in her speech and returned to the theme in an opinion piece she wrote with a colleague, Carol Collins, which appeared in *The Australian* on Friday.

"We must be wary, though, of moral relativism," they argued. "A society of individuals who believe that all beliefs, all values, have equal legitimacy, for whom anything goes, is neither tolerant nor just."

If anything, this understates the problem. If such a society were conceivable, it would be profoundly anomic and anarchic. Its citizens would lack any moral compass in their dealings with one another.

There would be no internalising on the part of individuals of the constraints imposed for the common good by the criminal code. If people were law-abiding, it would be a matter of personal preference or convenience rather than considered obligation.

As Knight and Collins maintain, it is a matter of vital importance to any society that it not only inculcates ethical values in the classroom but that it teaches the young how to make complex moral assessments. It's a process that, in the days before the word acquired a negative connotation, used to be called discrimination. To be reckoned a person of discriminating judgment was once high praise.

Knight and Collins say: "Surely a focus on social mores sanctioning racism, bullying or the abuse of women and children show us what is wrong with relativism. Think of Australia's treatment of asylum-seekers, and the complex issues of tribal law and the treatment of women and children in indigenous communities. These are examples of situations in which tolerance is dangerous."

Just as I had begun to revise my longstanding low opinion of the University of South Australia and all its works, Knight and Collins gave the game away with their choice of our treatment of asylum-seekers as an example of self-evident evil. They are trying to suggest that a policy of mandatory detention is an open-and-shut case of abuse of women and children. That suggests, to my mind at least, that they're less interested in public policy to develop young people's ethical judgment than in using ethical education instrumentally to push ideological barrows of their own.

The ethical questions surrounding the entitlements of unauthorised immigrants are by no means simple. Amitai Etzioni, the distinguished American sociologist, contributed the leading essay in the June edition of *Quadrant* magazine on the rights and responsibilities of immigrants. Those who doubt the moral right of sovereign states to provide a place of asylum in a third country will find it challenging.

Liberal senators with delicate consciences may find it instructive and Knight and Collins may learn a thing or two.

The charge of instrumentalism shouldn't be levelled lightly. In this case the issue is quite clear-cut. Moral education ought to be designed to enable people to make considered judgments for themselves, not to dispose them to a particular political ideology. To confuse those two objectives is, at the very least, a sign of moral obtuseness. Yet all unawares, it seems, Knight and Collins convict themselves out of their own mouths.

"A just democratic society depends on its citizens judging such practices to be morally wrong and, indeed, on equipping children to understand not only that such practices are wrong but able to see why they are wrong," they write.

"In other words, social justice depends on a form of moral education, which introduces children to the grounds for moral judgment."

Social justice is a Vatican cant term for an ill-considered, church-sanctioned halfway house to socialism. Readers who are interested in how the clerical Left got a toe-hold in as profoundly conservative an institution as the Catholic Church should have a look at the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891). Happily, as can be seen from another encyclical, *Centesimus Annus* (1991), the church has evolved a more

sophisticated understanding of economics and the role of markets in free societies. If only the same could be confidently said of the Australian Labor Party.

The rhetoric of social justice is a legitimating device for the sort of old-fashioned class-war politics the ALP once thrived on and that, to his credit, Bob Hawke largely abandoned. It is a self-serving, partisan rhetoric and a moral education worthy of the name would enable the rising generation to work that out for themselves.

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