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# Religion, Ethics and the Implications for Moral Education: a critique of Nucci's *Morality and Religious Rules*

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**ABSTRACT** *Through a critique of a recent argument by Larry Nucci, this article claims that for many religious believers, religion and morality cannot be wholly separated. Accordingly, efforts at moral education that seek to ignore the role of religion in moral judgement will fail to engage with the realities of many students' moral frameworks. In contrast to Nucci's claim that religion is irrelevant to moral judgement, this essay argues that morality is only weakly independent from religion. Moral knowledge does not derive exclusively from religious sources, but none the less involves relevant (and sometimes critical) religious considerations. Accordingly, moral education in American public schools needs curricula that help students explore and understand various moral rationales and motivations from a variety of cultural sources, religious and otherwise, providing opportunities for students to engage with difference and develop the capacity for mutual respect and (when necessary) reasonable disagreement.*

Can public schools engage in effective moral education without addressing religious perspectives? The relationship between moral education and religion in American public schools has a long history of competing ideologies generating varying curricular approaches. In this past century, character education's "search for a civic religion" (Yulish, 1980), Kohlberg's cognitive–developmental models inspired by Kantian ethics and modern character education's emphasis on Judeo–Christian virtues have all played an influential role. More recently, work in domain theory (Turiel, 1983; Nucci, 1996) has provided important insight into the relationship between moral rules and conventions and established firmly that moral development is not simply reducible to a cultivation of religious faith. Accordingly, an American public education intended for and respectful of a diverse mix of religious, agnostic and atheistic students cannot insist on the exclusive religious grounding that characterised its New England colonial origins. But just as an exclusive connection between religion and morality cannot be justified, neither can an insistence on their complete separation, even in the realm of moral education in public schools. In this article, I contend that a recent argument by Larry Nucci (in his largely impressive

*Education in the Moral Domain*, 2001) advocating a moral education independent of religious considerations suffers from both empirical and normative weaknesses, and that such an education fails to engage with the realities of many religious students' moral frameworks.

As my introductory comments suggest, my intention here is not to defend what Nucci refers to as the "old and enduring belief that morality and religion are inseparable" (2001, p. 20; all further quotations from *Education in the Moral Domain* unless noted otherwise). Rather, I argue that Nucci's data do not demonstrate the opposite extreme, that morality is wholly independent from religion. I also do not intend to dispute Nucci's more modest claim that "children and adolescents make a distinction between the rules and practices specific to their religion, and those moral issues that ought to be common to religions other than their own and to secular society as well" (p. 21). Instead, my critique focuses on his significantly more ambitious conclusion that "even for deeply religious children from fundamentalist or orthodox backgrounds, morality *stems from* criteria independent of God's word" (p. 33; emphasis added). When Nucci claims that morality stems from criteria independent of religious sources, I assume that he is referring to our current concept of morality, rather than offering an evaluation of its historical origins; the historical interplay between religious sources and the emergence of modern moral sensibilities seems beyond doubt.

In considering the present relationship between morality and religion, we might frame the question as whether morality is strongly or weakly independent from religion. That is, to what extent—if at all—do the moral criteria people employ rely on religious belief? To illustrate the distinction between strong and weak independence, consider the different roles that religious revelation and mathematics play in scientific procedure. It is generally acknowledged that supermatural revelation and the scientific method occupy separate *magisteria*—the premises of one are irrelevant to the other. In the same way, if religious premises were determined to be strictly irrelevant to moral issues, we would conclude that morality is strongly independent from religion. Conversely, mathematics—while not wholly sufficient for science but often essential—is weakly independent from scientific procedure. Similarly, a claim that religion is weakly independent from morality means that moral knowledge does not derive exclusively from religious sources, but none the less involves relevant (and sometimes critical) religious considerations.

Extending this notion to Nucci's argument, a strongly independent morality would either dismiss religious considerations or, as Nucci claims religious children do, attempt to coordinate religious beliefs to match moral judgement. However, Nucci's data and analysis do not demonstrate this strong independence, and therefore do not refute my contention that, for many religious believers, morality is only weakly independent from religion. Put another way, many religious believers rely on their moral judgement as a form of reflection and validation concerning divine command, but their lives and moral actions are nonetheless shaped directly by the force of those religious commitments.

My critique of Nucci's claim—and the ensuing implications he draws for pedagogy—will focus on two points: the empirical inadequacy of his interview data

analysis and the inconclusiveness of an underlying normative assumption that, for all people, the moral good exists independent of conceptions of God.

### **Interviews with Religious Students: establishing a weakly independent morality**

Nucci describes several studies in which groups of children and adolescents (ages 9–17) with fundamentalist religious beliefs (conservative Mennonites, Orthodox Jews, Conservative Jews and Dutch Reform Calvinists) were interviewed. Structuring this questioning was the domain theory of social development, which distinguishes between morality (conceptions of human welfare, justice and rights) and social convention (behaviour determined by particular social systems) (Turiel, 1983). Murder, for example, would be a moral issue, whereas appropriate attire falls in the conventional domain. Following this distinction, children were queried regarding the alterability or universality of religious conventions and moral rules.

While the studies garnered a number of interesting findings, my focus here is on these religious students' conception of "moral domain" rules; in the interview transcripts Nucci provides, the primary examples were stealing and murder. Using the example of stealing, then, the four anchor questions followed this pattern:

Would it be right/wrong for religious authorities to eliminate rules about stealing?

If another religion does not have rules about stealing, would it be right/wrong for them to steal?

If God/Scripture did not say anything about stealing, would it be right/wrong for you to steal?

If God/Scripture had said you *should* steal, would it then be right for you to steal?

Analysis of interview transcripts revealed that over 90% of the children felt moral transgressions were wrong even for those who had no religious rules governing the acts. In addition, Nucci claims that "with respect to moral issues, it was apparent that children had reasons beyond 'God's law' to object to alterations in the governing rules". He cites 40% of the Mennonite children's justifications and 75% of the Jewish children's justifications as "focused on the intrinsic features of the acts as hurtful or unjust" (p. 31). Two comments deserve emphasis here: first, we might also observe from these percentages that a significant number of rationales were *not* based on these intrinsic reasons; secondly, based on the transcripts Nucci provides the reader, those children who offered these non-religious reasons often did so *in addition* to references to God's law.

The implications here—both concerning what we can claim and what we cannot—are important. Clearly, some religious students see moral laws as justified by more than their own religious beliefs, but it would be unwarranted to conclude (as Nucci does) that the *source* of moral criteria for these children is entirely independent of religious belief. The first three questions seek to ascertain whether moral criteria can be derived in the absence of religious decree. It is vital to note, however, that the most these questions can reveal is that morality is *weakly* indepen-

dent from religious sources. That is, students are confident in making moral claims apart from religious authority when the (hypothetical) circumstances involve religion's silence—but this reveals little about the relationship between morality and religion in matters when divine command is clearly present.

A review of the interview transcript reveals the limitations of what Nucci can claim from students' answers to the first three questions. In the excerpt with 11-year-old Sam, a conservative Mennonite, he is asked about the wrongness of stealing. He emphasises repeatedly that God's law is the source of this universal prohibition—"because God said that thou shalt not steal and that goes for everybody". Sam is then posed the hypothetical question, "If God hadn't said anything about stealing one way or the other, would it be okay to steal then?" to which he responds in the negative (pp. 35–36). This suggests that Sam is able to draw on moral criteria beyond God's word, but because the hypothetical momentarily denies the role of religious influence, we are unable to draw any conclusion about the influence that Sam's moral intuition would have *relative* to divine command.

Nucci claims that "each child employed evidence from his and her own personal experience as a touchstone from which to evaluate these moral transgressions" (p. 39), but I would suggest that many of these children probably used their personal experience as a *validation* of the moral principle they had learned from their religion, rather than as the sole *source* of that principle. Nucci, of course, interprets this process of reflective equilibrium differently. He perceives "an attempt by children to coordinate their notion of the just Judeo-Christian God with what they *know to be morally right*" (pp. 46–47, original emphasis), depicting conceptions of God as wholly dependent on freestanding moral knowledge, rather than a more complex interrelationship. Nucci sees the religious justifications as merely *initial* justifications that are then superseded by a foundational justification rooted in a universal moral core; but the most Nucci's research can demonstrate is that there is sometimes more to these students' justifications besides their initial religious ones. As Jeffrey Stout (1988) points out, someone could grant that God's will is not the sole fundamental criterion, "but it does not follow from this admission that a criterion connecting moral goodness or obligation to God's will is less fundamental than many (or even most) of our moral judgments. So there may still be a strong sense in which God's will belongs to the foundation of morality—the level of criteria on which the bulk of moral judgments depend for their justification" (p. 116). A rational desire to have one's faith resonate with one's moral intuitions does not necessarily mean that the former is dictated by the latter. At the very least, the interview data provide no conclusive answer.

### **"That Changes the Whole Thing": an incoherent hypothetical question**

It is the fourth question listed above, however, that aims to establish the existence of moral criteria *strongly* independent from religion. Here, instead of exploring the role of moral intuition in the absence of clear religious criteria, a diametric conflict between the two is presented. Rather than simply stipulating that God/Scripture has nothing to say about a moral wrong, interviewers ask children to suppose that God

commands exactly the opposite—“Suppose that God said that we *should* murder?” This question fails to reveal what Nucci claims. Within the three major theistic traditions of Islam, Judaism and Christianity, a standard conception of the nature of God exists whereby God is *by definition* perfectly good; it is, in other words, the very essence of God’s being. This foundational concept of an omnibenevolent God (Swinburne, 1993) means that Nucci’s hypothetical construct essentially requires students to imagine that their God does not exist, which defeats the intent of forcing a judgement about moral goodness in opposition to divine command.

Understandably, then, the religious students’ responses to this fourth question are ambiguous. Nucci seems to suggest that such responses indicate either underdeveloped or incoherent reasoning. In his commentary on the interview with 10-year-old Cathy, he notes that she takes “two seemingly contradictory positions”: stealing is wrong because it hurts people, but if God said it was acceptable, then it would be. He then admits, “We cannot conclude whether such reasoning is a function of developmental level or if it simply reflects an alternative mode of conceptualising the relationship between morality and God’s word” (p. 48). It is not clear whether Nucci assumes the second possibility to be incoherent; if not, then this alternative conceptualisation deserves further consideration as an example of an intertwined relationship between morality and religion, the very scenario Nucci seeks to deny. More likely, Nucci assumes Cathy’s conceptual framework is incoherent. It is the assumed contradiction of this alternative conceptualisation that I wish to question; the next section of this essay will suggest reasonable philosophical explanations for such alternative positions.

The interview with 17-year-old Faith also prompts Nucci to address the possibility of a more complex relationship between religious and moral conviction. Faith appeals to God as a higher law than moral judgement, while expressing discomfort with the character of a hypothetical God who would command theft and murder. Nucci observes that:

Faith’s thinking nicely illustrates how a deep conviction and faith in God’s goodness, coordinated with a belief in God’s omniscience, can lead a person to accept conclusions about the moral rectitude of actions commanded by God that run counter to the person’s own intuitions about the actions. The reasoning of such individuals, however, is not structured by an unreflective acceptance of God’s authority. On the contrary, the notions of God’s moral authority, held by the participants in this study, stemmed from their assumptions about the inherent goodness of the Judeo-Christian God (pp. 49–50).

But Nucci’s next sentence seems to miss the point: “Should that assumption be challenged, then God’s authority in moral matters would be called into question” (p. 50). This claim would be more accurately and revealingly phrased, “If we *require* children to abandon that assumption [of God’s inherent goodness], then God’s authority in moral matters would be called into question.” As noted previously, it is the conviction of God’s goodness that grounds the entire belief framework of many religious children; to “assume” that away is to create an imaginary scenario that tells

us very little about the relationship between religious and moral belief in the actual lives of believers, and thus has little to offer in formulating a singular approach to public moral education. The final exchange between Faith and her interviewer makes this abundantly clear:

I: So, if He were a different kind of God, would it be all right to do it—to kill?

F: Well, I don't know. That changes the whole thing. So, I don't know.

Nucci's hypothetical construct does indeed change the whole thing. I am therefore deeply sceptical of his claim in the very next sentence: "In summary, there was clear evidence in this study that Christian and Jewish children evaluate moral issues on the basis of criteria independent of the word of God" (p. 50). No such strong independence is demonstrated. In fact, for many of these children, the relationship between God and moral goods appears deeply intertwined.

In summary, Nucci's data suggest the existence of a morality that is weakly autonomous from religion. His argument for a stronger independence, however, proves unconvincing. The likelihood of a more complex relationship between morality and religion for many people remains. The next section sketches a philosophical description of such a relationship and thus throws into doubt normative claims that insist on morality's strong independence from religion for all people. The final section then suggests implications for moral education in public schools if Nucci's claims are unsubstantiated.

### **Divine Command and Moral Reflection: unresolved complexity**

The question is at least as old as Plato's *Euthyphro*, where Socrates explores the gods' relationship to moral obligations: are they obligatory because the gods command them, or do the gods command them because the obligations exist in and of themselves? These are the philosophical roots of Nucci's claims for a clear separation between religion and morality. Nucci contends that the one source or sustaining element of morality is secular considerations of right and wrong, and that a coherent morality does not include the idea of God's commands. Religious considerations, therefore, are irrelevant when it comes to moral judgement. Nucci cites Nielsen's (1973) argument that, at least for a Judeo-Christian framework, moral goods must be prior to and independent of God. My intent here is not to show that Nielsen's contention *must* fail, but rather that other reasonable philosophical arguments can be made that describe a more complex interrelationship between God and moral goods. If this proves convincing, we have further indication that a moral education stripped of religious considerations probably does not provide a sufficiently diverse picture of the moral life.

The interview question, "What if God said that you *should* murder?" involves a divine command at odds with our strong moral intuition that murder is wrong. In relation to this question, Nucci alludes to a story from the Jewish and Christian Scriptures that serves as perhaps the most prominent example of divine command

seemingly at odds with moral intuition: the story of Abraham and Isaac. Described briefly, God tells Abraham that he must sacrifice his son Isaac as a burnt offering. Abraham proceeds to obey God's command and when he raises his knife to kill Isaac, God intervenes and provides a ram as a sacrificial substitute. The children's understandable discomfort in defending a divine command to murder (or steal, hit other children, etc.) stems from their own moral intuition that such things are wrong. Nucci sees this as a rejection of morality determined by divine command and an effort to "coordinate their notion of the just Judeo-Christian God with what they *know to be morally right*" (pp. 46–47). By contrast, I suspect that the conflicted responses of some of these children do not represent a rejection of divine command morality as much as a lack of philosophical language to express such complexity. What follows is a brief sketch of a philosophical attempt to give fuller expression to the issues these children struggle to articulate in the interviews.

One common element of theistic belief mentioned earlier that children would probably have difficulty defending from philosophical objection is God's omnibenevolence. A sceptic might question this foundational principle by pointing to historical examples where original divine command has apparently been superseded by new revelation—if God is always good, how could divine moral commands have shifted so drastically? A prime example of this in the Christian tradition involves the Old Testament command of "an eye for an eye" (Exodus 21:24) which is altered by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount to "turn the other cheek" (Matthew 5:38–48). In such an instance, theologians often appeal to the notion of progressive revelation, the idea that God's commands address our current moral capacity and are intended to bring us along closer and closer to God's full moral goodness. In this particular example, the Old Testament admonition of "an eye for an eye" was a tempering of previous practice in which transgressions were responded to with increasing escalation (for example, Genesis 4:24). While the theology of progressive revelation is far from indisputable, conceiving of moral reflection as a reciprocal relationship between historically evolving revelation and the growth of moral understanding from secular sources is certainly a defensible philosophical position. Recognising it as such helps explain why many religious students (whose moral judgements likely reflect this relationship) found the either/or choice demanded in Nucci's fourth question to be incoherent.

### **Theonomy: a dialectic of religion and morality**

The philosopher Robert Adams (1987) offers a balanced approach to the tension between moral autonomy and religious heteronomy, arguing instead for theonomy, a term borrowed from Paul Tillich. Adams writes, "Let us say that a person is *theonomous* to the extent that the following is true of him: he regards his moral principles as given him by God, and adheres to them partly out of love or loyalty to God, but he also prizes them for their own sakes, so that they are the principles he *would* give himself if he were giving himself a moral law" (p. 126).

Here Nucci might respond that if divine law and human morality are the same, then we have escaped the need to deal directly with religious doctrine in the moral



sphere. In fact, part of his concluding claim is that since “basic moral concerns are shared across the range of human societies and groups ... this means that there can be moral education compatible with, and yet independent from, religious moral doctrine” (p. 51). But this response overestimates the congruence between the two, and more importantly, underestimates the extent to which religious belief can influence broader concepts of human flourishing, which in turn affect one’s judgements of others’ interests. As Eamonn Callan (1989) points out, “If I had faith, my relationship to God would not just be added to my existing scheme of values, like a new interest in stamp-collecting, say, which governs choice only within a segment of life I assign to the interest. The life of faith is driven by *devotion* to God, which means that embracing it would oblige me to think altogether differently about what matters in my life and the lives of others” (p. 273).

One theological manifestation of this view is forwarded by Stanley Hauerwas (1981), whose notion of “narrative ethics” maintains that moral principles only make sense within a broader conception of virtuous human life (a view argued in philosophical terms by Alasdair MacIntyre and others). At the same time, Hauerwas does not seek to privilege teleological ethics over deontological principles. Rather, the religious notion of the good life informs a range of possible moral choices, as I suggest Nucci’s interviewees are doing in seeking reflective equilibrium between their religious beliefs and moral judgements.

A theonomous believer, then, while probably sharing many basic values in common with the non-religious, will also probably have moral sources that shape aspects of moral life in significantly different ways. Many Christians, for instance, share with broader society the pragmatic view that forgiveness is an important step toward reconciliation in human relationships, but also believe deeply that they are required to forgive because God through Christ has forgiven them. Even if the eventual actions associated with certain moral virtues end up being similar, an approach to moral education that only allows for consideration of secular rationales will not connect with the motivations of many religious believers. For instance, the common religious belief that humans are precious children of God, perhaps even made in God’s image, is a powerful motivation for believers to treat others with love and respect. While various secular arguments for the dignity of all people might also inform believers, such arguments will probably prove to be a secondary motivation for them. Even though many religious believers will accept a variety of secular moral sources, they will arguably do so through a process of reflective equilibrium with religious beliefs.

The possibility that emerges here is a dialectic of sorts between divine command and moral reflection. Basil Mitchell (1980) criticises the type of dualism Nucci poses, pointing out that “it is one thing to hold that religious belief may profoundly affect a man’s belief as to how he should live, and why he should live that way, and another to claim that morality must be wholly based upon considerations which are specifically religious” (p. 147). It need not be an either/or decision. As Callan (1989) argues, a rational morality necessitates at least some moral reflection about divine command, but does not invalidate the influence of religious belief in moral judgement. He writes, “In ascribing goodness to God’s will theists may have to admit that

they employ some non-religious understanding of moral goodness, and that admission is tantamount to saying that morality is at least weakly autonomous *vis-à-vis* religion. But all this is entirely consistent with the possibility of a clear deductive path from claims about what God commands to conclusions about what we ought to do” (p. 270). The exact nature of such a reflective process may differ from believer to believer, but its reasonable existence suggests that a process of moral education that rejects such a possibility outright will not speak to many religious believers.

To re-emphasise, my purpose in this brief philosophical foray has not been to show that indisputable philosophical proof exists for the connection between morality and religion. Rather, the question is still very much in dispute in the field, and the philosophical perspective I just sketched is recognised widely as one of several reasonable competitors. To the extent that such reasonable yet conflicting arguments exist, we should resist accepting normative claims about the disconnection between morality and religion as settled matters.

### **Morality and Religion: educational implications for a complex relationship**

On the surface, at least, many of these religious students sought to make God the beginning and end of their moral framework, but their responses to Nucci’s questions reveal that weakly independent moral judgement is also at work. Nevertheless, reliance on religious decree for moral judgements is still vital to the overall moral frameworks of many students. The existence of weakly independent moral judgement and its distinct moral criteria, while important to recognise, tells us little about how religious believers actually function in the moral world.

My point here has certainly not been that moral education in public schools should teach that divine command is an adequate sole justification for morality, but neither should it discount or dismiss the role of divine command in the moral frameworks of students and society. Even more important, it is vital to note that the question of religion’s role in moral education ought to extend well beyond Nucci’s consideration of divine command. Many religious traditions—even among Islam, Judaism and Christianity—derive moral influence from sources other than divine command [1]. Nucci’s focus on divine command examines one element of religious belief; it should not be used as a sole basis for broader conclusions about religion’s proper role in moral education.

Nucci contends that his research supports “a more constrained use of moral language” when addressing the universal “moral core” in American public schools. However, if, *contra* Nucci, religion and morality cannot be clearly separated in the lives of religious believers, where does that leave efforts toward moral education in public schools? In the introduction to his argument, Nucci alludes to “the particular legal dilemma of teaching about morality without, at the same time, violating First Amendment freedoms and constitutional provisions regarding the separation of church and state” (p. 20). This legal principle of separation, however, need not preclude the consideration of religious influences on moral matters. The First Amendment Center, a non-partisan foundation which advocates a legally sensitive

inclusion of learning about religion in the public school curriculum (and has been deeply involved in the development of consensus documents, such as the Williamsburg Charter cited below) affirms as much in their publication *Finding Common Ground*: “Public schools may teach about the various religious and nonreligious perspectives concerning the many complex moral issues confronting society, but such perspectives must be presented without adopting, sponsoring or denigrating one view against another” (p. 102). Curricula that help students explore and understand various moral rationales and motivations from a variety of cultural sources, religious and otherwise, provide the opportunity for students to engage with difference and develop the capacity for mutual respect and (when necessary) reasonable disagreement.

Such curricula are vital in public schools. Ideologically diverse groups have sponsored various consensus statements on the role of religion in public life, including education. One such effort, the Williamsburg Charter (1988), affirmed that:

Too often in recent disputes over religion and public affairs, some have insisted that any evidence of religious influence on public policy represents an establishment of religion and is therefore precluded as an improper “imposition.” Such exclusion of religion from public life is historically unwarranted, philosophically inconsistent and profoundly undemocratic (p. 257) [2].

The clear belief is expressed here that citizens should engage respectfully with the diversity of religious beliefs, moral and otherwise; but to expect this of citizens who have not had the opportunity to develop these skills and virtues in the public educational realm seems unrealistic.

More fundamentally, recognising the intertwined relationship between religion and morality also suggests the need for a fuller conception of moral education, one that includes the broader notion of “ethics” as the ancient Greeks defined it. This included not only a focus on moral obligation, but also a concern for what makes a full and meaningful life. So whereas much modern civic and character education is concerned primarily with our responsibilities toward others, ethical education would also involve broader questions about the good life and human flourishing. Lawrence Walker (2002) advocates this broader concern for “moral identity” when he contends, “Morality is also an intrapersonal enterprise because it is integral to the how-shall-we-then-live existential question—it involves basic values, lifestyle, and identity” (p. 66). As more than morality-as-obligation, ethical education would be an endeavour of even greater complexity, but one with much deeper resonance with students’ lives.

In the conclusion to his argument, Nucci contends that there is “considerable common ground on which deeply religious people from different religious perspectives, along with nonreligious people, can come to terms regarding the central concerns of their children’s moral development” (p. 510). I certainly agree, but cultivating this common ground does not depend on the wholesale exclusion of religious perspectives and how they inform ethical beliefs. In fact, as I have argued,

such exclusion will hinder educational efforts to engage students with ethical complexities as they play out in their lives and the society in which they live. I concur with Nucci's call for "tolerance based on the moral principles of mutual respect and fairness" (p. 510), but such respect calls for efforts to understand the moral and ethical motivations of others, and these sources will often be religious.

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### NOTES

- [1] For examples, see John Stratton Hawley's (1987) *Saints and Virtues*.
- [2] Signatories included not only religious representatives but also leaders of groups such as People for the American Way and Americans United for Separation of Church and State, as well as educational groups such as the American Federation of Teachers and the National School Boards Association.

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