BUILDING CHARACTER
THROUGH
CORNERSTONE VALUES

by JOHN HEENAN
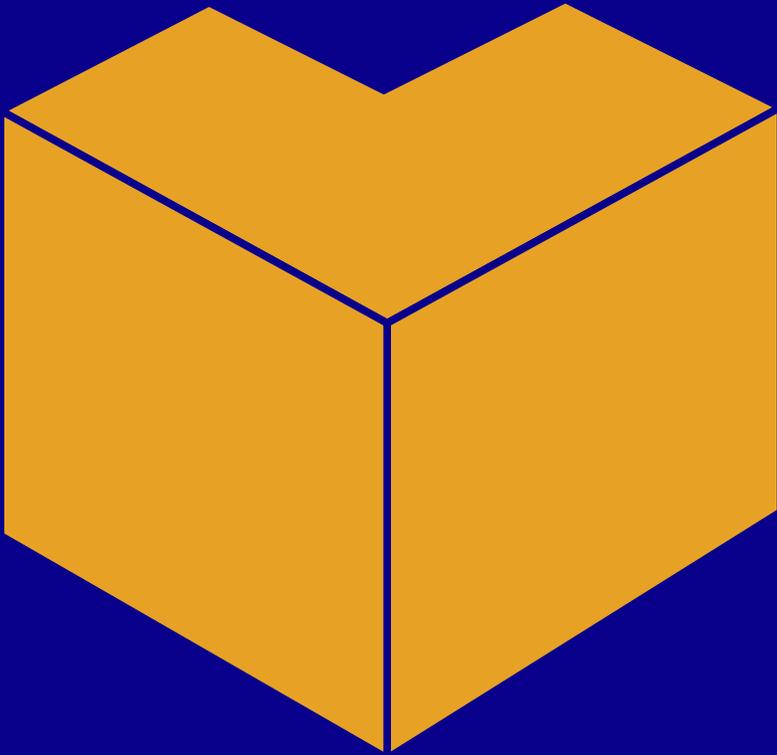
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Chapter One: From Virtues to Values

Historically, education all over the world has had two main goals: to help young people master the skills of literacy and numeracy and to help them build good character. Societies since the time of Plato have made character a deliberate aim of education. They have understood that to create and maintain a civil society there has to be education for character as well as for intellect, for decency as well as for literacy and for virtue as well as for skills and knowledge.

Until relatively recently, educational philosophers stressed the critical role of moral education. And almost without exception they assumed that adults, either as parents or as teachers, were primarily responsible for shaping the character of the young. [1]

It was only in the last decades of the twentieth century that educators moved away from character education to what has become known as "values" education. Central to the development of this was the introduction, in the 1960s and 1970s, of Louis Raths' [2] "values clarification."

Raths argued that schools should not teach values, Instead, he said, schools should encourage young people to "clarify" their own values. The idea that teachers, parents or other adults should directly instruct children in right and wrong or even try to influence their values was explicitly rejected. [3]

Values clarification spread like wildfire through schools in the Western world. It had an immediate appeal to busy teachers because it was so simple to use. No special training was required and dozens of recipe-like examples were provided. Preparation was minimised and teachers were offered instant activities that could be slotted into any part of the school day.

It became the overriding concern of values education that programmes should not favour any particular religious or philosophical viewpoint. It was seen as important that any moral values teaching be non-sectarian and non-doctrinaire. So educators developed approaches which were presented as "neutral."

What has been the outcome? Regardless of their social, racial and economic background, students have absorbed the clear message that right and wrong are relative, that they must not be judgmental, that what is right for one person may be wrong for another. Right and wrong they understand to be merely personal values, always dependent upon time, place and circumstance.

This is not a neutral position, however. It is the doctrine of situational ethics. As they have tried to eliminate doctrinal bias from the curricula, educators have simply traded the traditional understanding — that there is a core of universal moral precepts — for an alternative belief system. They have indoctrinated students in the ideology of moral relativism.

This ideology states that good and bad — even truth and falsehood — vary with the opinions of particular individuals or groups. Relativism rejects the idea of any objective, external measure of right and wrong. For the relativist the individual is the centre of the moral universe.

Values determined by belief

Despite relativism being the prevailing ideology of modern schools, at root all values education is based on one of two mutually exclusive beliefs:

• There are core moral precepts.
• There are no core moral precepts. [4]

And herein lies the dilemma for schools. Before a school can determine its approach to the attitudes and values requirement of The New Zealand Curriculum Framework [5] it must decide which of the two beliefs (or worldviews) above will be the foundation of that approach.

That decision will determine the values that inform all aspects of the school curriculum, governance, management and administration — in fact the complex web of relationships that is a school. It will also determine the school's teaching and learning methodology and the criteria for the selection of resources.
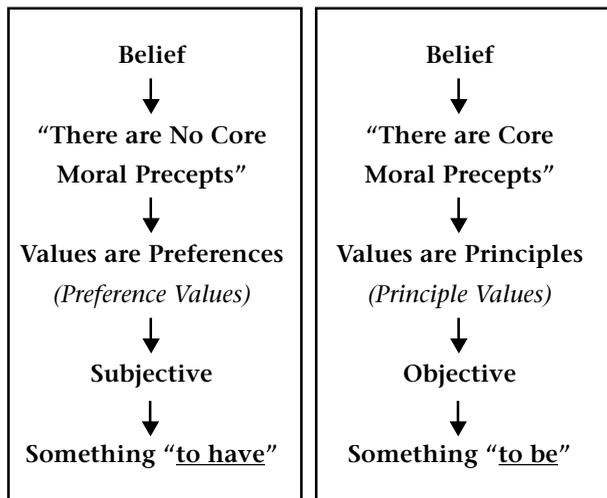
Two kinds of values

The values belief which a school accepts determines the values it will uphold and communicate. If it believes there are no core moral precepts, the values it produces will be *preferences*. By contrast, if it believes there are core moral precepts, it will produce values that are *principles*.

Like the beliefs from which each category stems, preference values and principle values are mutually exclusive.

Preference values, like all preferences, whether for tea or coffee, for long rather than short hair, for a Mazda rather than a Maxima, are personal choices. They are always subjective and open to a change of mind. They are neither right nor wrong. For this reason, the individual can rightly claim of preference values, "My values are as good as yours."

On the other hand, the measure of values that are *principles* lies beyond the choice of the individual. These values arise from the belief that core moral precepts exist objectively. To claim of them that "My values are as good as yours" is as absurd as claiming "My virtues are as good as your virtues." Virtues are traits of character that aspire to moral excellence. They include honesty, compassion, courage and perseverance, and these transcend personal preference. The defining difference is that preference values are something "to have" while principle values are something "to be."

Graphic 1: Belief Determines Values

Belief	Belief
↓	↓
"There are No Core Moral Precepts"	**"There are Core Moral Precepts"**
↓	↓
Values are Preferences *(Preference Values)*	**Values are Principles** *(Principle Values)*
↓	↓
Subjective	**Objective**
↓	↓
Something "to have"	**Something "to be"**

Until recent decades it was accepted for centuries that the measure of right and wrong lay beyond the individual. There were universal assumptions about truth and morality, including such virtues as honesty and truthfulness, respect, compassion, responsibility, courage, loyalty and trust.

It did not matter whether this shared assumption of an external system of morality came from an unknown god of the Greeks, the Yahweh of the ancient Jew, the Christ of the gospels or enlightened thinkers who called it Natural Law. What did matter was that there was a shared consensus about what was right and what was wrong, and this guided individual behaviour. This consensus also impacted on society by creating responsible citizenship, a sense of community and social obligation. In short, it promoted a civil society.

Parents considered it important to teach their children such simple virtues as honesty, thoughtfulness and respect.

The watershed came in the 1880s when the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche began to speak of "values" in the present sense — "not as a verb, meaning to value or esteem something; nor as a singular noun, meaning the measure of a thing (the economic value of money, labour or property); but in the plural, connoting the moral beliefs and attitudes of a society."[6]

In *The Demoralization of Society,* Gertrude Himmelfarb says of Nietzsche:

"...He used the word ['values'] consciously, repeatedly, indeed insistently, to signify what he took to be the most profound event in human history. His 'transvaluation of values' was to be the final, ultimate revolution, a revolution against both the classic virtues and the Judaic-Christian ones. The 'death of God' would mean the death of morality and the death of truth-above all, the death of any morality. There would be no good or evil, no virtue and vice. There would be only 'values.' And having degraded virtues into values, Nietzsche proceeded to de-value and trans-value them, to create a new set of values for his 'new man.'

"When early in the twentieth century, shortly after Nietzsche's death, the sociologist Max Weber borrowed the word 'values' he had no such nihilistic intentions, which is perhaps why he did not comment on the novelty of the term, still less attribute it to Nietzsche. Instead he used the word matter-of-factly, as if it were part of the accepted vocabulary and of no great moment. For that reason, because it seemed so familiar and

unthreatening, it was more effective for it was absorbed unconsciously and without resistance into the ethos of modern society, as it was absorbed into the vocabulary. 'Values' brought with it the assumptions that all moral ideas are subjective and relative, that they are mere customs and conventions, that they have a purely instrumental, utilitarian purpose, and that they are peculiar to specific individuals and societies (and in the current intellectual climate, to specific classes, races, and sexes." [7]

And so the verb *value* became the plural noun *values*. It was no longer objective but subjective, not something "to be" but something "to have."

Graphic 2:
Friedrich Nietzsche
1844 - 1900. " The
Father of Values"

The near-universal acceptance of moral relativism shifted the measure for moral behaviour from a shared consensus of what was right and wrong to personal values based upon what the individual considered right and wrong in the circumstances. The significance of these personal values came not from a core of moral precepts but from what individuals considered to be appropriate.

With relativism, values have become whatever any individual, group or society chooses for any reason. Universal and enduring virtues have been reduced to values that are varied, transitory and private.

Gertrude Himmelfarb has pointed out that values as we now know them can be beliefs, opinions, attitudes, feelings, habits, conventions, preferences, prejudices and even idiosyncrasies [8]. Shared assumptions, historically passed on by parents, are no longer the measure of the difference between right and wrong.

This paradigm shift from virtues to values occurred in the short space of a hundred and twenty years. While the form of virtues may have changed, their substance and effect remain constant. By contrast the concept of subjective values has had a profound impact on both the individual and society.