

## Spiritual Values and Public Education: A Case for Reductionism

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### INTRODUCTION

Broadly conceived, spiritual values are concerned with those attributes or conditions which foster an individual's — or communities' — reconciliation with life's complexities, tragedies, and mysteries. Until recently, it has been widely accepted that authoritative insights into "spiritual values" were the exclusive jurisdiction of religion; its institutions and/or individuals. However, as John Dewey predicted in *A Common Faith*, it was only a matter of time before scientific inquiry shed new light on those conditions which effect a "deeper and enduring adjustment in life" — a fundamental goal of spiritual values.<sup>1</sup> Research on biological stress and epidemiology alone has provided many of these insights and, consequently, may have changed the terms and conditions for any attempt at a recurring endeavor in American culture: widespread, spiritual renewal or regeneration.

Every period of American History inspires a call for spiritual regeneration. The "Great Awakenings" of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries sought to promote spiritual renewal in this country long before the forces of industrialization, urbanization, and immigration helped accelerate our culture's secularization. However our culture's secularization has not only inspired the present calls for spiritual renewal, but as suggested above, recent developments may have changed the terms or conditions for any widespread effort at "spiritual regeneration" — at least insofar as the public schools are concerned. Chief among these terms or conditions is the role of science as a measure of valid knowledge as well as the need to address the competing demands of a pluralistic, democratic society like our own.

One way to view the requisite conditions for a program of spiritual renewal which includes the public schools is with regard to three forms of validity to which a claim for inclusion into a school's curriculum may be seen to appeal: *external validity*, *internal validity*, or *traditional validity*. External validity is what Dewey describes when he refers to the "open" and "public" nature of the method of intelligence (that is, science).<sup>2</sup> An understanding which holds external validity does so by virtue of its public nature, and replicability, which enables it to generate a significant measure of *consensual validation*. Because of this open and public dimension, such understandings are more readily included in the public school curriculum. In contrast, an understanding which emerges from personal, subjective experience — such as religious insight — may hold great validity for an individual or a community of individuals who have shared that experience, but must remain questionable to those who have not yet shared such an experience. On these accounts, many meaningful experiences and understandings of diverse individuals and communities are controversial when included in the course of study of a public school. And, finally, traditional authority in the spiritual domain is invoked by an

appeal to either the authority of religious scriptures themselves, or individuals deemed to be religious or spiritual leaders. The veneration of traditional sources of understanding may or may not be commendable; nonetheless, it does not constitute a sufficient rationale for inclusion in a public school — especially if such scriptures (their authenticity and/or interpretation) are hotly contested — as is often the case in religious and spiritual matters. The upshot of this discussion is, when it comes to spiritual values, unless the proposed ideas and understandings reflect a measure of external validity, we are not justified in including them in a course of study for a public school.

There are three ways in which the aforementioned conditions of external validity can be viewed with regard to the question of spiritual values and our public schools: 1) By those who perceive traditional religious or spiritual topics as primitive, naïve or chauvinistic remnants of our superstitious past, these terms are a welcomed defense against ignorance and intolerance. 2) For those most distressed by their perceptions of our spiritual malaise, these terms are nothing less than examples of the very problems which plague our culture. 3) For others — including myself — these terms are currently being met by a growing body of highly relevant research. In many ways our challenge is one of addressing the spiritual dimensions of human life in a manner more appropriate to our period of history — and thereby address them in the context of the objective study of the mind, body, and brain, domains of knowledge which hold a considerable measure of external validity. I believe this is what Dewey had in mind when he sought to free religion from its “historic encumbrances.”<sup>3</sup>

In recent years Nel Noddings and Warren Nord have provided their own insights into the terms and conditions of a widespread reassessment of the role of religion and spiritual values for individuals and public schools in our society.<sup>4</sup> The perspective which appears shared by these authors is that religious and spiritual concerns have been unnecessarily overlooked in our culture and in our public schools as our society has become increasingly secularized. Nonetheless, they believe public schools need to play a role in addressing this deficiency.

What makes the works of Noddings and Nord difficult for educators to ignore is that they underscore an important paradox in American Culture. While the question of religion or spiritual values is deemed very important to a vast majority of Americans, the academic world in general — and educational theorists from major universities in particular — have all but ignored these topics of supreme significance to so many citizens. Yet, as reasonable as the recommendations of Noddings and Nord appear, they are not without serious shortcomings. Furthermore, as suggested, I believe there is an alternative to the options offered by these authors.

This essay has two objectives. First I will consider the principal deficiencies of the proposals of Noddings and Nord regarding the place for religious studies and the consideration of spiritual values in our public schools. Second, I will advance an alternative. I believe the scientific study of the mind, body, brain, and human health is providing a basis for reconsidering the role of spiritual values in the life of any individual — even atheists and agnostics of a pluralistic society. In a sense, I believe

that science is merely (albeit appropriately) updating the terms in which many if not all spiritual and religious questions can be discussed by placing important concepts in the public domain whereby they can acquire the external validity necessary for inclusion in a public school. Unlike Noddings and Nord, who in many ways — and out of respect for the religious traditions marginalized by our secular society — are renewing an old dialogue on spiritual and religious issues (but with a care and respect designed to make it more palatable to all parties), I wish to avoid the question of traditional dialogue on spiritual and religious concerns altogether. The nature and range of such dialogue cannot transcend the *internal* or *traditional* forms of validity from which they emerge. Like Dewey and Abraham Maslow, I believe we can legitimately *externalize* the spiritual domain when empirical inquiry directly or inadvertently illuminates the spiritual dimension of life — providing it a measure of *external* validity.<sup>5</sup> In some respects this *externalization* of the spiritual domain can be defined as a *reductionistic* approach to spiritual questions — insofar as it aims to *reduce* or minimize the range of dialogue with which Noddings and Nord are concerned. However, unlike behaviorist or materialistic reductionism, I advocate a reductionistic approach out of respect for both traditional religious conceptions and the demands of a secular, pluralistic society which is committed to science — especially as a method of treating disease and enhancing health. In this sense reductionism is not the opposite of “holism” (the integration or reconciliation of competing ideas, as implied by Noddings and Nord) but rather a “best bet” effort toward identifying some least objectionable common denominators which represent an alternative, or complementary, course of study to that recommended by either Noddings or Nord. Whether viewed as an alternative or complement to the efforts of these other authors, the reductionistic approach I wish to advance may represent the *sine qua non* of religious dialogue in public schools today.

#### NODDINGS AND NORD: THE LIMITATIONS

The limitations of the recommendations of Noddings have already been well stated by Paul Farber.<sup>6</sup> Noddings wishes for teachers to be “released from the taboos” which inhibit them from “exploring the questions that matter deeply to us” in their classrooms.<sup>7</sup> Yet, the kind of dialogue she would encourage would certainly offend many of the citizens the schools are enlisted to serve. For significant segments of our society, open, skeptical dialogue on religious questions is highly threatening to a system of belief which is deemed the basis of religious faith and spiritual life. Notwithstanding the work of individuals like James Fowler, religious faith *is* equated with doctrinal belief among a large portion of our population, and the endeavor to subject these beliefs to skeptical inquiry will be perceived as a major threat to religious freedom.<sup>8</sup> One does not need to be a fundamentalist to see her recommendations as intellectually invasive. I do not imagine many school boards — or teachers — will have the nerve to carry out her recommendations: There are too many lawyers waiting and willing to serve the many “injured” parties that would emerge as a direct fallout of an attempt to apply her recommendations.

On the other hand, Nord makes a recommendation that, on the surface, certainly appears less threatening. Nord argues that religion has been marginalized in American Culture and its public schools. Consequently, he advances a call for what

may be termed religious literacy: the study *about* religious tradition and belief.<sup>9</sup> This, on the surface, is a much more modest proposal than Noddings', yet it too offers serious pitfalls. For example, Nord acknowledges that we may not be able to address every claim by a large number of religious groups and sects. Herein lies a problem. Immigration to this country during the last 20 years has greatly increased the number and diversity of non-Western religious traditions represented in many schools. For instance, a large influx of Indian nationals has dramatically increased the number of Hindus living in the United States and attending public schools. While Nord is aware of such trends, I do not believe he has considered the implications of this and related developments in our society for his proposal. Consequently, while he does not hesitate to dismiss "New Age" trends and astrology as inappropriate subject matter for the course of study he proposes, I am uncertain how he would respond to Hindu parents who felt that the study of *gyotish* — the Hindu system of astrology — was a significant element of their culture and religion. Furthermore, according to a survey conducted by Public Agenda, only 33% of the general public deems it appropriate to teach a lesson about the beliefs and practices of non-Christian religions in a public school.<sup>10</sup>

The fundamental shortcoming of the recommendations made by both Noddings and Nord is that they each attempt to enliven the study of, and dialogue on, topics which are no less divisive today than they were nearly 500 years ago. While we have enjoyed a significant reduction in overt religious violence and persecution during that period of time, this alone can not be taken as a measure of progress.

Yet, our culture has progressed in its capacity to reassess the spiritual domain of life from the context of scientific inquiry which has — sometimes inadvertently — shed new light on old topics. In doing so it has, as Dewey predicted, liberated religion from its "historic encumbrances" — encumbrances still embraced by Noddings and Nord as well as many of their critics and defenders.

#### SPIRITUAL VALUES AND THE PUBLIC DOMAIN

In his text *Descartes' Error*, neuropsychologist Antonio Damasio discusses some of the fascinating discoveries stemming from brain research in recent years.<sup>11</sup> In this text he offers a summary statement of that research which also underscores the rationale for my position: His observation that the complex of biological processes that link innate drives, emotions, and feelings forms the "base for what humans have described for millennia as the human soul or spirit."<sup>12</sup> Acknowledgment of such a base need not be viewed as an invitation for a materialistic dismissal of the spiritual domain of human life. Rather as not only Damasio has suggested — but Dewey and Maslow before him — these discoveries represent an opportunity to advance a new dialogue on the spiritual domain that can overlook (if not entirely exclude) traditional religious belief systems which have often obscured, as well as illuminated, the nature of spiritual values.

In an essay of this length, I can not examine all of the emerging research that is making a new dialogue on spiritual values possible. Rather, I would like to propose a framework of secular spiritual values that I believe may be examined in the light of this research. For such a dialogue, traditional sources of spiritual understanding

are optional — albeit useful. Consequently the secular taxonomy I am proposing may provide a more palatable option to public schools that wish to address spiritual values. Furthermore, my recommendations should not be viewed as mutually exclusive with those of Noddings or Nord. Rather, these options can be combined in accordance with the inclination of a community, its school board, and their teachers (for whom the *internal* validity of these other proposals is already sufficiently appealing). Nonetheless, I believe my recommendation could provide the proper context within which the recommendations of Noddings or Nord could be applied. What follows then, is my estimate of a taxonomy of spiritual values which holds a measure of external validity, and thereby may prove amenable to the constraints of appropriate dialogue for public education in a pluralistic, democratic society.

#### A TAXONOMY OF SPIRITUAL VALUES

I propose four dimensions of spiritual values: 1) emotional endurance; 2) contentment (or a reduction of depression); 3) a sense of meaning or purpose; and 4) the ethical domain. While I acknowledge the tentative nature of my proposal, these four domains may prove sufficiently comprehensive — and yet amenable to specific examples — to accommodate a wide spectrum of measurable spiritual values.

Furthermore, these domains are complementary and will be seen to overlap. Neither should they be viewed as absolute measures. Rather, I consider them trends which define an increasingly spiritual existence for human life. Insofar as they define the spiritual values of human life in all of its diversity, these domains need to be understood in relativistic terms. That is, the growth of these values is relative and idiosyncratic to each individual. Just as the capacity to manifest various degrees of these values will differ with each individual, so must “spiritual growth” be deemed relative to a somewhat subjective “baseline” that is defined by each individual. For instance, the starkest contrast may be seen in two individuals who may be said to be progressing in the development of contentment: one becoming more cheerful, another less depressed.

In the remaining portion of this paper, I will try to summarize and defend the rationale for my selection of these four dimensions of spiritual values — values which are consistent with what we understand about the human brain and body, and are consequently, consistent with what we know about some of the conditions for human health and well-being.

#### EMOTIONAL ENDURANCE

Emotional endurance has long been held as a fundamental dimension of the spiritual life. Dewey aptly described this capacity as one of “persistence in the face of the disagreeable.”<sup>13</sup> A primary thesis of *A Common Faith*, is that the “open” and “public” method of intelligence (that is, science) needs to be applied to the study of those experiences which can bring about this “deeper and enduring adjustment in life.”<sup>14</sup>

In designating this value as “emotional” endurance, it is being contrasted with purely physical endurance. Our capacity for emotional endurance is highly relevant

to the area of research pioneered by the endocrinologist Hans Selye.<sup>15</sup> This century's foremost authority on biological stress, Selye pointed out that the stress which arises from interpersonal conflict and life's frustrations was much more likely to create distress and disease than excessive muscular work. Managing this stress is a principal task in life. Today, modern medicine has become increasingly sensitive to this interaction of emotional endurance and physical health, and has provided the research, which Dewey anticipated, into those conditions which foster a deep and enduring adjustment to the process of living. The role of moderate physical exercise, relaxation therapies, and positive social relations for enhancing our psychological and physical well-being is widely accepted — and in the case of physical exercise and relaxation strategies, is even funded by some health plans. These are among the insights which I believe Dewey anticipated when he sought to free us from the “historic encumbrances” of religion.

#### CONTENTMENT/REDUCTION OF DEPRESSION

Eight hundred years ago, the Medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides advanced prescient insights into both our contemporary model of medical care and the model of spiritual values I wish to advance. As a practicing physician as well as a religious thinker, Maimonides provides a stark contrast to his contemporary Christian counterparts — many, if not all of whom expressed a contempt for the human body (reflecting St. Paul's influence). As a physician, Maimonides was more inclined to see the profound relation between emotion, mood, conduct, and human health. As he observed, all the organs of the body — both internal and external — are the “instruments” of the soul. Consequently, as modern research has begun to suggest, an understanding of the organs and processes of the body is fundamental to an understanding of the soul and is thereby indispensable to any conception of spiritual values and their development.<sup>16</sup> The special relation between the soul, body, and spiritual values in the writings of Maimonides is reflected in his observation that in certain ways “the art of medicine is given a very large role with respect to the virtues.”<sup>17</sup> These relations become apparent in the manner in which moral and spiritual integrity are conceptualized, as involving a state of physical and psychological *equanimity*. The notion of equanimity advanced by Maimonides has a modern parallel in the concept of *homeostasis*, and thereby links emotional health and happiness with his model of physical health and spiritual integrity.

A specific way in which the thinking of Maimonides anticipates contemporary medical knowledge concerns the role of positive emotions like happiness. As an individual who perceived himself as a physician of the soul as well as the body, Maimonides recommended that all physicians “should desire that every sick person and every healthy person be constantly cheerful and relieved of the passions of the soul causing depression.”<sup>18</sup> In recent years it has become clear that depression can have a formidably negative impact on our health. The reduction of lymphocytes, the ensuing impairment of the immune system, and the onset of illness — all as a consequence of depression — have been well established in modern medicine during this century.<sup>19</sup> We also know that certain activities which improve our mood also boost the brain's production of *endorphins*, a neurotransmitter of the brain. Endorphins have been associated with “natural highs,” such as those attributed to

jogging and other forms of exercise.<sup>20</sup> Most importantly, endorphins have an equally positive impact on our body's immune system and overall health. None of these findings would have been a surprise to Maimonides. He also understood the therapeutic role of the aesthetic experience provided by art, music, and nature in reducing melancholy — long before endorphins were identified with such experiences. These research findings also underscore a fundamental belief of Dewey's: Spiritual values are *human values*; and as human values, they are amenable to the study of those conditions which "lend a deep and enduring support to the process of living."

Clearly, one may detect overlap between the first two domains of spiritual values. I acknowledge that for some, the notion of human happiness in the face of life's inevitable tragedies may seem fanciful at best. Consequently, for those who perceive life in terms of reducing depression and misery, emotional endurance may be seen to encompass both of these domains. Yet, for those whom the experience of joy and happiness is either more commonplace or an acceptable goal, a distinction between these emotions and basic endurance in the face of disagreeable circumstances appears in order. These two categories also permit us to distinguish the perseverance of emotional endurance from an oblivious, blissful Pollyanna. Finally, it must be understood that individual variability and genetic variations preclude the possibility of establishing an absolute standard of physical health by which spiritual health and integrity can be measured.

#### A SENSE OF MEANING OR PURPOSE

In *The End of Education*, Neil Postman makes his case for a secular, spiritual idea that gives meaning, purpose, and clarity to learning in our public schools.<sup>21</sup> As he writes: "Without meaning, learning has no purpose. Without a purpose, schools are houses of detention, not attention."<sup>22</sup> Postman proceeds to outline his own recommendations for infusing a sense of purpose and meaning into public schooling.

In his text, Postman provides his own rationale for the significance of this domain of spiritual values. Yet, in his epilogue he acknowledges the formidable obstacles to this endeavor. If nothing else, he underscores the need to be willing to entertain a dialogue on this domain of spiritual values. Once again, what provides additional impetus for engaging in some form of dialogue on this matter is an observation from medical research. Harvard Medical School's Herbert Benson is among a growing number of medical researchers to suggest that human beings are "wired" for meaning and purpose.<sup>23</sup> Without a sense of meaning and purpose in life, our health, endurance, and well-being are undermined. Quite relevant to this point is the Nietzschean aphorism which Postman quotes: "He who has a *why* to live can bear with almost any *how*."<sup>24</sup>

Within this domain lie the contributions of Noddings and Nord. However, this domain remains the most contentious and difficult to accommodate in our public schools. It is fraught with the kind of controversies that can only appeal to shared understandings which appeal to internal or traditional forms of validity. Therefore, this domain is more readily accommodated by private or parochial schools.

## THE ETHICAL DOMAIN

Without the cultivation of ethical sensibilities one is left with a rather impoverished notion of spiritual values. Indeed, both this domain and that concerned with contentment appear to have the most dire consequences when they are compromised and/or neglected. In my estimate, their absence can account for the intolerance and cruelty which has marred the history of religion.

Perhaps the most compelling link between spiritual values and our ethical sensibilities is that made by Antonio Damasio in *Descartes' Error*. Damasio argues that, contrary to widespread philosophical assumptions regarding the role of reason in decision making and conduct, our emotions, feelings, and the processes of biological regulation all play a central role in the exercise of human reason and our capacity to act on — not just reason about — ethical principles. He concludes that our capacity to act upon ethical principle is intimately tied to the functioning of a special complex of internal organs and systems coordinated by the brain's *ventromedial prefrontal cortices* and controlling the emergence of emotion and feeling — the very complex that forms the basis of what humans have described for millennia as the human soul or spirit. The work of Damasio, as well as other writers and researchers like James Q. Wilson and Daniel Goleman, have underscored the impact of the environment on the young developing human brain — how experience ultimately shapes brain structure and thereby the emotional responses which will drive and guide human conduct, moral or immoral, with or without our best intentions.<sup>25</sup>

Unlike many contemporary studies on moral development which have focused exclusively on reasoning, the spiritual component of the ethical domain is concerned with the psychobiological dimensions of human emotion, character, and conduct. Accordingly, as suggested by Maimonides centuries ago, moral integrity is linked to a state of equilibrium within the individual: a state of equilibrium that enables the individual to strike a balance — in his or her everyday actions — between the competing claims that invariably distinguish moral conflict. Consequently, striking such a balance appears to require an understanding of — and sensitivity to — both the external or environmental and the internal or biological processes that shape the development of our brains, and the emotional responses which will guide and drive our conduct, ethical or criminal.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper I have attempted to delineate a taxonomy of spiritual values which may be amenable to the constraints under which our public schools operate. Herein are potential categories of discussion — with a measure of external validity — for addressing the absence of spiritual values in public schools. While I believe there is compelling evidence for the advancement of such a taxonomy, I share Postman's lack of confidence that a strategic consensus will emerge so that this framework of secular spiritual values can be used to guide the content of a public school curriculum. Perhaps as research continues to accrue, and we deepen our appreciation of the relation between these spiritual values and our health and well-being, school texts will more or less spontaneously reflect this appreciation. Nonetheless, until

then, one must question the viability of a public school system which is so impoverished that it cannot address its present spiritual void.

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1. John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934), 14.
  2. Dewey, *A Common Faith*, 39.
  3. Dewey, *A Common Faith*, 6-9.
  4. Nel Noddings, *Educating for Intelligent Belief or Unbelief* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993) and Warren A. Nord, *Religion and American Education: Rethinking a National Dilemma* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995).
  5. Dewey, *A Common Faith*, and Abraham H. Maslow, *Religions, Values and Peak Experiences* (New York: The Viking Press, 1970).
  6. Paul Farber, "Tongue Tied: On Taking Religion Seriously in School," *Educational Theory* 45, no. 1 (1995): 85-100.
  7. Noddings, *Educating for Intelligent Belief or Unbelief*, 138.
  8. James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper, 1995).
  9. Nord, *Religion and American Education*, 213-35.
  10. Jean Johnson and John Immerwahr, *First Things First: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools* (New York: Public Agenda, 1994), 47.
  11. Antonio R. Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Grosset/Putman, 1994).
  12. Damasio, *Descartes' Error*, xvi.
  13. John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1957), 164.
  14. Dewey, *A Common Faith*, 13-15.
  15. Hans Selye, *Stress Without Distress* (New York: Signet, 1974).
  16. Raymond L. Weiss and Charles Butterworth, eds., *The Ethical Writings of Maimonides* (New York: Dover Publications, 1975), 63.
  17. Weiss and Butterworth, *The Ethical Writings of Maimonides*, 75.
  18. Weiss and Butterworth, *The Ethical Writings of Maimonides*, 106-07.
  19. Damasio, *Descartes' Error*, 119-20.
  20. Charles F. Levinthal, *Messengers of Paradise: Opiates and the Brain* (New York: Anchor Press, 1988).
  21. Neil Postman, *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 5.
  22. Postman, *The End of Education*, 7.
  23. Herbert Benson, *Timeless Healing: The Power and Biology of Belief* (New York: Scribner, 1996), 195-217.
  24. Postman, *The End of Education*, 4.
  25. James Q. Wilson, *The Moral Sense* (New York: The Free Press, 1993); Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam Books, 1995).