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Redefinition of Plurality

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**REDEFINITION OF PLURALITY:
ON THE VALUE OF DOUBLE MESSAGES**

The notion of 'double message' is commonly perceived as a negative one in the educational context. Many believe that an educational institution, and even better, a whole community, must convey a consistent moral message to the youth. This paper aims to show that the consistency of a message is not always good, and that truly educational moral message is always a double message, an ambivalent and a self-contradicting one. To preserve the polyphony of a moral message, I argue, is more important than to observe the cohesion of such a message.

Greater Expectations by William Damon (1995) presents a strong argument in favor of moral consistency. Damon advocates for a 'youth chapter,' that is a unified consensus on core values conveyed to youth by the society.

> Children everywhere seek a coherent framework of guidance. Without a strong community, there can be no such coherence. A parent may offer a sterling example for the child, a teacher may provide a moving insight or admonition, but in the long run the child will experience confusion unless the child finds synchronous notes elsewhere in the community. This confusion sows the seeds of demoralization. In turn, demoralization inevitably will lead to either apathy or rebellion, depending upon the child's inclination and circumstances (Damon, 1995: 227).

Damon acknowledges that the contemporary society is by nature pluralistic. Yet this pluralism for him does not exclude the possibility of reaching a consensus about the basic messages communities convey to their youth. The expressions of a community's moral voice, for which he advocates, should adhere to three principles: (1) The expressions must come from a variety of sources. The variety will insure the 'cumulative influence,' enhance each other's credibility, and help the youngster 'to understand the various ways that moral aims may be pursued in different relationships and circumstances.' (2) These expressions must be consistent with one another, which means that 'parents, teachers, peers and others should advocate roughly the same goals and expectations for young people.' Damon has 'core' goals and expectations on his mind here, as opposed to cultural and political matters 'about which civilized adults differ.' (3) A community must express its moral voice in a manner understandable and compelling to the youth (Damon, 1995: 239).

I would like to argue several related points in connection with Damon's claim that the inconsistency of moral message leads to confusion and demoralization: (1) a consistent moral message may also lead to confusion and demoralization, (2) an inconsistent moral message (a double message) does not necessarily lead to confusion and demoralization, and (3) any truly educational moral message is intrinsically inconsistent and ambivalent, although not all inconsistent moral messages are truly educational.

Damon offers some examples of the consistent moral voice of a community. He approvingly quotes Frank Furstenberg's description of a working class community in

Philadelphia, one of those many that 'have fought hard to preserve their safety and their solidarity in the face of deteriorating societal circumstances' (Damon, 1995: 232). This is a community where people watch out for other people's children. 'On matter of core standards, the community speaks to the young with one voice' (Damon, 1995: 233). And yet this particular community manifests 'fierce racism' that helps contain discord among neighborhood residents. Damon does not see a connection between the two facts. For him, the consistency of the community's moral voice is one (good) thing, and the racism is another (unfortunate) thing. From my point of view, these two are intrinsically linked. This example raises the red flag about the price of the consistent morality of tightly knit neighborhoods. This example also makes one wonder about the golden age of America's fifties, to which Damon constantly refers. Did that paradise consist of communities like the one from Philadelphia? Being kind and attentive to your neighbor's kids, while being cruel and unjust to the kids from another neighborhood, whose skin happened to be of another color – is it not the kind of society to which Damon wants us to go back?

The consistency of a moral message for the young people was just the other side of the exclusion towards whole groups of people. How else could you achieve the consistency of moral values which are to be conveyed to youth? Consensus is agreeing on one position, one point of view. Even if one assumes such an agreement is possible to achieve voluntarily, (which I doubt very much) still, the question remains, what would happen to all those *voluntarily* withdrawn dissenting voices? Even a voluntary self-exclusion from the conversation is still a form of exclusion. Consensus and general harmony sound wonderful, truly utopian. And any utopia leads to cruelty, which our century's turbulent history proves only too well. I will not go into generic postmodern criticism of 'grand narratives,' confining myself to yet another specifically educational example.

I grew up in a society which methodically, consistently, over and over again promoted the same consistent moral message. In the Soviet Union, the moral voice of community was about as coherent as it is practically possible to achieve. As a child I was never confused about moral principles, they were explicitly stated and promoted by mass media, school, and other institutions. And yet Soviet Union of 70-s and 80-s was a very cynical society. The coherent message of moral authority was completely irrelevant to the complex lives we all lived.

One may object by saying that the reality of Communist domination itself conveyed a message in contradiction to that of Soviet educators'. However, there will always be a gap between a moral message we convey to our youth and the realities of the adult world, regardless of political and economical arrangements. After all, Damon does not propose to reform the society so it reveals itself to the youth in a better light. He persuades us to *tell* something different to the youth, not to *become* different. Thus if we treat the notion of a message in its precise sense, as something being intentionally communicated to the youth, the Soviets achieved remarkable consistency in their educational message.

This line of argument does not imply in any way that everything Communist did was wrong simply because it was done by the Communists. On contrary, historical experiments of autocratic societies such as Soviet Union may offer valuable illustrations to some 'what if' questions. Reasons similar to those offered by Damon motivated Soviet

educational policy-makers. There is no reason to believe that American attempts to do the same thing would have much different effect.

Soviet scholars had developed an elaborated educational theory about 'the uniformity of educational expectations,' which was promoted in the sphere of moral education (See Korotov, 1966). It was very much a part of educational rhetoric and practices at the time when I was a student in the 70-s and when I began my own teaching career in mid-eighties. It was also the least successful of all Soviet educational policies. Soviet educators failed to get their message across not because it was a morally deficient one. Quite to the contrary, it very much boils down to what Damon calls 'core values' – work, honesty, integrity, respect for elders, personal responsibility, altruism, social activism, etc. The hope was that if only the same message is repeated over and over again, from different sources, so that youngsters would have nowhere else to go, then such a message would be accepted. This hope has never been realized.

It is the wholeness and internal consistency of the message, and not its content that makes it implausible. A fully consistent message simply does not capture the complexity of moral life. Consistency cannot be always considered an advantage, and moreover, as I am trying to show, there are a few deep problems with the very idea of consistency of a moral message intended for youth. Consistency was grossly oversold as an educational value. One of the main reasons of such overvaluing of consistency is a simplistic understanding of plurality of moral voices in the community. One insists on consistency because one considers plurality to be something superfluous and accidental.

Damon accepts plurality, but certainly does not view it as something intrinsic to a moral voice of community, perhaps only as something inevitable. For him, it is not plurality of moral voices but rather plurality of sources from which the same moral message is reiterated. Mikhail Bakhtin offered very different way of viewing plurality. I will rely here on Mikhail Bakhtin's notions of dialogue and polyphony, developed in his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Bakhtin suggested that one single voice is not capable of telling the truth. Only a multitude of simultaneous voices together may constitute truth. In other words, no message alone can be truthful. The capacity to produce truth is directly linked to the multiplicity of voices that deliver the message, or, rather, a number of messages. This suggestion contradicts the very definition of truth fostered by the European thought for centuries. Truth was always supposed to be singular in contrast to plurality of errors. However, Bakhtin thought that truth is a number of simultaneous and inconsistent messages rather than one and unified message. Bakhtin elevates pluralism to the status of necessary prerequisite of a truth, rather than simply a condition of truth, external to the content of the truth. Now, for Bakhtin, truth is an ethical category, when it reflects human being and not merely an inanimate object. Ethics and epistemology resist separation when we deal with people rather than with things.

Bakhtin's theory warrants a revision of our understanding of the moral self. An individual should internalize the multiplicity of voices in order to sustain his or her capacity for moral judgment. One might argue that moral consciousness consists of several interacting but mutually contradicting voices. A moral person is one who can bring up an internal dialogue among these voices every time the situation of moral choice arises. The outcome of such debate is unpredictable by definition. One or the other of

internal voices may win this particular round of debate, which does not guarantee its right to win in all the future debates. For instance, one may keep both pro-choice and pro-life arguments active in one's mind; that is not as simply a number of abstract arguments, but as an ongoing dialogue between the two. Moral mind functions not unlike a democratic government, where separation of powers makes sure none of the major voices gets too powerful. None of the three branches alone is democratic, only the combination thereof makes democracy possible (although does not guarantee it). Similarly, the very multiplicity of internal voices makes moral consciousness possible, and no single voice is moral; neither masculine voice of rational reasoning nor feminine voice of love and mercy; neither principles nor attention to particulars are *by themselves* moral. Only simultaneous representation of many, preferably *all* relevant voices can constitute a moral self.

Now I must go back to the issue of moral message for youth. Even with such revised notion of the moral self I cannot simply sing praise to all double messages. In this regard, Damon is right; abundance of double messages *as such* does not do anything good for our children. Double message is necessary, but not satisfactory condition of moral education. I need to find criteria that separate the 'good' plurality from the 'bad' plurality, a 'good' double message from a 'bad' double message. There must be an underlying principle of organization of multiple voices, other than consistency. Such a principle should work both for the internal polyphony of a moral mind, and for a community that tries to organize its polyphony of voices in an educationally sound moral message for youth. In search for such a principle I will turn to Margret Buchman and Robert Floden's paper, which explores the notion of coherence in opposition to the notion of consistency in the context of developing teachers education programs. Consistency, from their point of view implies logical relations and the absence of contradiction, while coherence allows for many kinds of connectedness.

> Educational coherence is found where students can discover *and* establish relations among various areas of sensibility, knowledge and skill, yet where loose ends remain, inviting a reweaving of beliefs and ties to the unknown. (Buchman and Floden, 1992: 8)

I find it a useful distinction. However, Buchman and Floden settle for the notion of coherence that looks like a compromise, a not-quite-consistency, rather than a qualitatively different kind of connectedness. They view coherence as overlapping number of metaphors or messages, which are not logically consistent, and yet partially agree with each other, or show common themes and patterns. Bakhtin had something else in mind when he wrote on the notion of polyphony. Here is how Bakhtin describes Dostoevsky's ability to see the polyphonic truth:

> Where others saw a single thought, he was able to find and feel out two thoughts, a bifurcation; where others saw a single quality, he discovered in it the presence of a second and contradictory quality. Everything that seemed simple became, in his world, complex and multi-structured. In every voice he could hear two contending voices, in every expression a crack, and the readiness to go over immediately to another contradictory expression; in every gesture he detected

confidence and lack of confidence simultaneously; he perceived the profound ambiguity, even multiple ambiguity of every phenomenon. But none of these contradictions and bifurcations ever became dialectical, they were never set in motion along a temporal path or in an evolving sequence: they were, rather, spread out in one plane, as standing alongside or opposite one another, as consonant but not merging or as hopelessly contradictory, as an eternal harmony of unmerged voices or as their unceasing and irreconcilable quarrel. Dostoevsky's visualizing power was locked in place at the moment diversity revealed itself – and remained there, organizing and shaping this diversity in the cross-section of a given moment (Bakhtin, 1984: 30).

Bakhtin's polyphony is not a multitude of overlapping metaphors. He thought of a multitude of different disagreeing voices, each existing through and with another voice. The very notion of difference he perceived as another form of connectedness. Being different for him was not a reason for an independent and isolated existence. Rather, one can only live out one's difference through others. In other words, just like sameness and similarity can serve as both grounds for connection, or as grounds for separation; similarly, the difference may be both an excuse to part ways and a reason for relations. The relational understanding of difference is the foundation for Bakhtin's notion of polyphony.

I will now attempt to characterize this principle of organizing the multitude of voices without consistency. I will call it the non-teleological dialogicality principle, which provides for three things.

1. Perpetuity. Dialogue in its polyphonic, Bakhtinian sense should have no end. The voices in it never merge, never achieve a formal consensus, and if such a consensus arises, it is a by-product not an aim of dialogue. Dialogue has no purpose but continuation of dialogue; it is not a means toward some other aim, but an aim in itself. Although it may serve a useful purpose, dialogue may not be treated as a means toward some other end. One should place higher value on dialogue compare to all practical aims achieved with its help.
2. Mutual addressivity. Voices of dialogue do not simply present themselves to each other as finalized principled opinions. They define themselves with and in relation toward each other. One should never have an opinion about anything unless one knows who is the audience, who listens, and what is another opinion on the matters discussed. Voices should explicitly or implicitly address to each other.
3. Inclusion. Truth in the dialogical sense is approachable when most or all of those who have something to say on the subject are included. For instance, when a conversation turns to the gay rights, and none of the conversants is gay, one can feel a void, a missing voice, without which truth is unachievable. That is why one could feel compelled to recreate the absent voice, to speak from a gay person's position as well as one could. This may not be a best solution, and yet such 'modeling' of a live voice is much better than simply representation of an abstract argument of gay activist group, or ignoring gay voices completely.

The non-teleological dialogicality is not an absence of any connection. It is a principle that allows for inconsistent messages to be organized in a non-hierarchical and

inclusionary manner, it is a way of staying engaged and talking while not leading towards more or less violent, or more or less exclusionary consensus. Community must present its complex and contradictory moral voice as a multitude of mutually addressed voices, not as unified and consistent whole. Instead of avoiding giving the youth double messages, we must pay attention to how we construct our double messages.

One can imagine a society that is not concerned with how to overcome differences, but, rather, with how sustain its polyphony without losing any of the voices. Such a society will have only one shared moral belief, namely, that all its groups, movements, political parties, etc. must abandon their claims for universal truths in any form, except for the sake of an argument. This postmodern pluralism will imply that there never will be an agreement among its members on most fundamental values. However, the postmodern pluralism forbids both exclusion and withdrawal from a conversation. In fact, one's beliefs and values will only then come alive, when one constantly brings them into contact and interaction with values and beliefs of other groups and individuals. People will generally loosen up their attachment to principles, valuing change and challenge over consistency and stability. Adults will not even consider trying to relate a single unified moral message to the youth; they will make sure all the variety of beliefs and opinions will be properly conveyed to the young generation, with all the connections, past discussions, and contradictions among them.

This postmodern pluralist society will still have to enact laws and make other collective decisions. Yet it will generally consider dialogue, which might have preceded such a decision, to be more important than the decision itself. Making a collective decision will be perceived as a sad if inevitable fact of life, as a necessary closure of possibilities, always imperfect and always open for further revisions. The postmodern democracy will discuss and change the rules of discourse as often as it changes other laws and policies. The definition of good life for all will include value of never ending dialogue.

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