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Ethics education is of great benefit

By David R. Keller

Citing the questionable behavior of some elected leaders, John Florez (Deseret Morning News, July 19) argues that school-age ethics education does not have much worth. According to Florez, unless the propensity to act properly is instilled early in life, long before a child hits the books, it is probably too late.

While part of what Florez says is certainly correct, he unfortunately misses, in a serious way, the purpose of the academic study of ethics. It is true, as Aristotle claimed 2,300 years ago, that the predisposition for moral behavior depends upon upbringing. But that is far from the end of the story, as Florez insinuates. The merit of ethics education, which Florez conspicuously does not mention, is to provide individuals who have the proclivity to be moral with the tools to do so.

To be sure, providing individuals who do not have good character with methods of ethical reasoning is not going to have much effect, because such individuals will not use those tools to begin with. Certain elected officials Florez has in mind fall into this category. On the other hand, providing individuals who do have good character with methods of ethical reasoning might be of great benefit. That is the value of ethics education.

Ethics is not the same as morality. Rather, ethics is the philosophical study of morality. Morality is the behavior of making value judgments, for example, deciding an action is right and another wrong, or saying that a person's character is good or bad. We all make these kinds of judgments. Morality, and immorality, are defining features of what it means to be human.

Of course, there are many ways to make moral decisions. You could pray or defer to religious authority, or you could try to have a mystical experience. Or you could simply flip a coin.

Ethics is different from these approaches in that it is based on reason. That does not mean it is incompatible with other approaches, say, for example, religion. Many religious people think that God gave us rationality for a purpose, and one of these purposes is to think about moral issues. Reason is useful for religious people because within any spiritual tradition, guidance on particular moral issues is not always clear-cut.

The study of ethics is useful in clarifying what to do and how to judge others' actions. For one thing, one's moral judgments should be based on sound reasoning. To mention a rather extreme example of bad ethical reasoning, a student of mine once argued that since all human life is intrinsically valuable, women who terminate their pregnancies should receive the death penalty, since they are, according to the student, guilty of murder.

Once it was pointed out to her that her argument was logically self-contradictory, she was compelled to improve her argument. In this case, the student's upbringing did not capture the

complete essence of her moral life. The study of ethics was useful to her insofar as it helped her clarify the subject at hand.

People with the predilection to act morally ought to think about other issues. For instance, is it better to stick to rigid principles, such as not lying or not injuring other people, or to act so as to bring about the best consequences in general, even if that would mean violating those principles? The study of German philosopher Immanuel Kant and English philosopher John Stuart Mill is especially enlightening on this question.

Thus, contrary to Florez's assertion, secondary and post-secondary ethics education can be very useful. And it also can be fun.

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