

*“The Cognitive Anatomy of Moral Understanding
and the Moral Education Question”.*

A study in the Philosophy of Moral Education
by James A. Cooper BEd (Hons)

A thesis submitted in total fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

School of Religious Education
Faculty of Education

Australian Catholic University
Research Services
Locked Bag 4115
Fitzroy, Victoria 3065
Australia

June 2008

STATEMENT OF SOURCES

This thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis.

This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

Signed:..... Date:.....

Acknowledgments

I am eternally grateful for the enduring confidence and support of my supervisors, Professor Graham Rossiter and Dr John Quilter. Without their learned input and critical judgement I could not have completed this thesis. Thanks are also due to my wife Claire for her patience and understanding these past years, as well as to my Mum and Dad and my brother Adam for their invaluable feedback, guidance and prayers. For the interest and support of many other family members and friends, I am also very grateful.

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the problem of contemporary interpretations of the moral education question, as informed by rival moral-philosophical and epistemological traditions. In this study, the moral education question is taken to mean, *'What educational form and content may best assist students in becoming ethically minded and morally good people?'* Accordingly, this necessitates a consideration of what is meant by morality and what are the central characteristics of the moral life (i.e. moral philosophical perspectives), as well as how such accounts of morality are seen to relate to the educational aims of knowledge and intellectual development (i.e. underlying epistemology).

This study shows that current interpretations of moral education (as efforts to 'teach values') are predominantly informed by the 'juridical ethical tradition,' which, in turn, is underpinned by a distinctive epistemology (or 'Juridicalism'). The thesis proposes that Juridicalism is philosophically contestable because it leads to a partially distorted conception of the moral life and hence of moral education. Generally, by regarding the cognitive dimensions of moral thought and action as separate from and independent of the emotional-volitional dimensions, Juridicalism is an obstacle to understanding the proper moral educational task of schools. Notably, Juridicalism leads to a questionable emphasis on the importance of 'values', as expressed in generally agreed rules and principles, as opposed to particular and substantive moral judgements.

A critique of Juridicalism is developed, focussing on its underlying conception of human reason as inspired by a distinctly Modern mind-body/world dualism. I argue that the fragmented and reductive epistemology of Juridicalism signals the need for a richer and more variegated theory of cognition, marked specifically by

an *integrated anthropology* and *substantive theory of reason*. Further, such an epistemology is located in the realist philosophy of classical antiquity - particularly within the Aristotelian tradition. I propose a defence of what I call 'Classical Realism', in contrast to Juridicalism, highlighting its distinctively integrated account of the mind/soul and body/world relationship, and substantive conception of practical rationality or moral understanding. Classical Realism also makes central the notion of knowledge as 'vision' in order to explain how the rational and affective dimensions of human nature come together in moral thought and action.

Finally, the moral education question is reconsidered in light of the visional ethical perspective emerging from Classical Realism. In this light I interpret the moral education question as a matter of nurturing the (intellectual) capacity for and habit of correct vision and, relatedly, moral judgement. Further, this task is shown to be vitally connected with the school's focus on developing knowledge and the intellect through the teaching of traditional academic and practical disciplines. Some initial comments are made concerning the pedagogical implications of such an interpretation, while some associated challenges and questions for further research are highlighted.