When groups of “concerned parents” first voiced objections to the use of values clarification in the public schools, proponents of the method typically brushed aside their complaints as little more than reactionary right-wing response to educational innovation. After all, Lewis Raths, Merrill Harmin, and Sidney Simon, who had originated the method in the middle 1960s, had explicitly stated that they were interested not in teaching particular values, but only in clarifying the student’s own values. In contrast to earlier traditional attempts to teach values by filling the students’ minds with a predetermined set of “true” or “correct” values, values clarification, they maintained, was truly nonsectarian and noncommital about particular values.¹ Who would possibly object to it unless they were covertly trying to promote their own rigid and outdated value structures in the schools?

But the “concerned parents” and others did object, particularly about the way in which the method defined all values as subjective, personal, and relative, and the way in which it threatened to violate their children’s and their own privacy rights.²

Over the past six years a substantial body of scholarly criticism of values clarification has arisen that in many ways corroborates and reinforces at least some of the objections that have been raised by parents. This literature has been written by liberals as well as conservatives and by atheists as well as theists. Many school administrators are not yet aware of the scope of this literature and of the strength of its arguments. In part, this is because the proponents of values clarification have either ignored these criticisms or else responded to them only superficially and with little evidence that they have understood specific objections raised. It is for this reason that I shall summarize here the major criticisms that have appeared in this scholarly literature and on the basis of them argue that values clarification should not be used in the public schools or by such quasi-public agencies as Scouts, Planned Parenthood, and 4-H.

The Claim to Neutrality

Proponents of values clarification claim that the method does not teach values but is essentially values neutral. They say that it focuses on clarifying the values held by individual students, not on persuading the student to adhere to any particular set of predetermined values.

Insofar as particular values, say in the realm of family or sexual morality, are concerned, values clarification is partly (but only partly) successful in making good on this claim. That is, the authors do not appear consciously to push their own values on students. But what the proponents of the method have quite overlooked is that at the deeper methodological level of what philosophers call “meta-ethics” (that is, critical analysis and theory about the nature of ethics or values as such), their claim to neutrality is entirely misleading, for at this more basic level, the authors simply assume that their own theory of values is correct. That is, they assume that all values are personal, subjective, and relative and cannot be known to be true or false, good or bad, right or wrong, except by and for the individual directly involved. Values, they assume, cannot in any objective sense be known to be true or right. They hold that no good reasons (other than those that are strictly personal) can be given for or against the correctness of a particular value statement. A given value judgment, they say, cannot be shown to be more or less worthy of acceptance by persons other than the one making the value judgment, and, in the final analysis, all values are individual and personal.

This position, however, is only one among several that could reasonably be taken, and to present it as the truth about values without any discussion or serious presentation of alternatives is highly misleading. Despite its impression of neutrality, this approach in actuality is strongly committed to one particular position about the nature of values. The student is led to believe
that he or she has freedom to choose among meaningful alternatives, which on one level is partly true. But at the critical met-ethical level, no choices or even mention of serious alternatives are presented. In fact, whenever other positions are mentioned, they are almost without exception presented in highly biased language. (I shall return to this point later.)

Putting all of this together, it is fair to conclude that the proponents of values clarification are indoctrinating students in their position of ethical subjectivism and relativism. I use the term “indoctrinate” in its pejorative sense and do so deliberately, for the authors simply push their own view on their audience and never even suggest that there are other alternatives preferred by philosophers and other thoughtful and sensitive people. This component of indoctrination in values clarification is both subtle and powerful, and as far as the authors make claims about ethical neutrality, the theory fails completely. At the most basic level, it does not do what it claims to do.³

All values are personal, of course, in the sense that, to be fully meaningful, they should be personally (although probably not always consciously) embraced. On this level, it is good to be clear about one’s values and not to claim to value things that are inconsistent. Almost everyone will agree, then, that values are (at least to some extent) personal in a psychological sense. But whether or not they are personal (that is, subjective and relative) in a philosophical sense is an entirely different question. Many philosophers, theologians, and ethicists, for instance, hold, contrary to values clarification, that values can be known to be true or false, right or wrong, not just for the individual making the value claim but in a more general sense. For them, values are not just relative and subjective. As a part of or closely related to objective reality, they can be known to be true or false, more or less worthy of acceptance.

To take what is admittedly a rather extreme example, I share the position of most ethicists that it is wrong for any human being to torture another human being just for the hell of it. I would be standing upside down!” If they say to me, “But some people don’t agree with your value about torture, so how can you claim it to be true for anyone but yourself?” I will reply, “But there are also some people who do not believe the earth is round or that it revolves around the sun. That does not shake my confidence in these statements, nor will it shake my confidence in this claim about torture if some sadist or even some learned college professor claims it not to be true.”

The authors of values clarification have tended to see the only viable alternative to subjectivism and relativism as that of rigid authoritarianism with claims of absolute certainty. This is unfortunate and only confuses the issue. The most fruitful discussion is not about the claims of relativism against the claims of absolutism, but rather whether values are entirely subjective and relative, or whether they are in some sense objective (or refer reliably to the world apart from the individual making the value claim) and can with varying degrees of assurance be known to be true or false, right or wrong. Is it possible to give good reasons for the acceptance of a particular value? Are some values more worthy of acceptance than others?

I would claim to know very little about anything with absolute certainty, whether in the realm of science or in the realm of values. But that is not important. Functionally, I am not terribly concerned about absolute certainty, but rather with the question, What degree of confidence do I have in the truth of this particular scientific statement or of this particular value claim? I seldom use the term “certainty” when speaking of most of the more important knowledge claims in life. But that does not leave me with the alternative of no knowledge at all, and to imply that it does is to confuse the issue.

It might be objected that the authors of values clarification have the right to define values however they choose. In one sense they do, but if they want to be part of the mainstream of the social and philosophical discussion of values in our society, then their definition must be open to criticism and must be
close enough to other widely understood meanings of the term to communicate meaning fairly and honestly. Actually, insofar as values clarification simply assumes the relativity and subjectivity of all values and ignores the important distinction between moral and nonmoral values, it tends to equate the term “values” with the terms “likes” and “dislikes.” When all is said and done, values clarification presents a theory of personal preferences and aversions. Rather than “Values Clarification,” it might quite legitimately be called “Likes and Dislikes Clarification.”

Assumptions about Ethical Relativism

Raths, Harmin, and Simon seem to be aware of at least some of the criticism that has been made of values clarification regarding ethical relativism. In this connection, their comments in the Preface to the 1978 edition of Values and Teaching are worth quoting at some length:

... One belief of ours, strongly emphasized, was that children should be free to state their own interests, their own purposes and aspirations, their own beliefs and attitudes, and many other possible indicators of values. Some readers thought that we were claiming to be value-free, and that our book was value-free... We also expressed the idea that different groups of people might have different values and that, where these were within the laws of the country, all views should be open for discussion, examination, possible affirmation, rejection, or doubt. In other words, people should be free to differ in their value indicators, and their positions should be respected. For this we were labeled ethical relativists. In one interpretation, the label is correct: we do believe that in the world today there is not one true religion, one true morality, one true political constitution. But a second interpretation does not describe our point of view: we do not believe that any one belief, or purpose, or attitude is as good as another. We too have preferences; we too have made choices; and while we do not believe that our views are eternal, or that they should be made universal, with some small modicum of doubt we do believe they are to be preferred.

So far as I know, critics have not charged the authors of values clarification with being value-free as individual persons. Indeed, if anything, one of the complaints has been that their own individual values and biases have far too much influenced both the theory and practice of values clarification. Thus the authors’ comments here seem to miss the point. They were not labeled ethical relativists because they personally believed that one value was as good as another. Clearly, that is not the case. The charge of relativism stems rather from the fact that the theory of values clarification presents only a highly relativistic view of values.

To be sure, the authors as persons prefer some values to others. Everyone does. But their method claims that values cannot be known to be true or false, right or wrong, and that there is no truly rational basis for preferring one value to another. In fact, one does not need to believe that values are eternal or that they will never change to believe that some values are true and some false. The authors’ response to their critics is thus beside the point. It misses the most fundamental charge that critics have made against values clarification (that is, that it simply assumes the truth of ethical relativism) and gives the reader no evidence that they have even understood the nature of the charge.

A telling example of the authors’ confusion about values can be seen from a passage in Values and Teaching that is found in both the 1966 and 1978 editions. It is taken from a longer conversation the authors have included to illustrate how a teacher can adhere to values clarification theory and yet not permit dishonest behavior in the classroom.

Ginger: Does that mean that we can decide for ourselves whether we should be honest on tests here?
Teacher: No, that means that you can decide on the value. I personally value honesty; and though you may choose to be dishonest, I shall insist that we be honest on our tests here....

Ginger: But then how can we decide for ourselves? Aren’t you telling us what to value?
Teacher: Not exactly. I don’t mean to tell you what you should value. That’s up to you.... All of you who choose dishonesty as a value may not practice it here. That’s all I’m saying.

Kenneth Strike points out that the teacher here is in an absurd position, which the authors do not seem to see. Strike writes:

The teacher is in this dilemma because he apparently accepts Raths’ view that values are just matters of opinion. He cannot, therefore, be authoritative about them. He cannot claim that one ought to be honest, only that he personally values honesty. It, of course, follows that any attempt to enforce honesty is simply arbitrary and unjustified. But the teacher wishes to enforce such a policy. He tries to solve the problem by expressing the absurd view that it is OK to compel others to act in accordance with one’s personal values so long as one does not seek to compel them to agree with one’s values.

As Strike points out, the authors leave us completely in the dark as to why we should accept this strange view of tolerance. The authors’ view seems hardly consistent with a sentence of their own found later in the book in a section captioned “Blend Freedom and Safety”: “This does not mean that the teacher must be extremely permissive, although it probably does rule out an arbitrary or autocratic climate.”

All of this points up a disturbing implication: underneath the apparent freedom and tolerance of values clarification lies a dimension, almost certainly unintended by the authors, of potential intolerance and tyranny. When all is said and done, freedom, tolerance, justice, and human dignity are not values that we can know to be right and true or for which we can present valid arguments or good reasons. They are simply choices some people make, and values clarification theory in principle indicates no way for
us to be clear about whether they are better choices than such opposite values as tyranny and intolerance. In the end, we are at the mercy of individual selves, viewed as autonomous, as the final arbiters of truth in the realm of values, with no possibility of appeal to good reasons for the truth of statements about basic rights and principles.

Raths, Harmin, and Simon make a feeble attempt to resolve some of these difficulties when they write about values being “within the laws of the country” and when they state that “the issues that should be left to the child [for discussion and choice] are (1) those that contain alternatives the consequences of which the child is able to grasp to a reasonable extent and (2) those whose alternatives are neither very distasteful nor dangerous so that any choice can be tolerated.”

But who is to say what is distasteful or dangerous? The authors give us no help in deciding this important issue. For parents who consider abortion to be murder, it certainly would be distasteful to have their children discuss the rights and wrongs of abortion in class. Similarly, try to imagine how Jewish parents would feel about their children discussing the rights and wrongs of the German death camps in class. And many parents would consider it dangerous for their children (in terms of moral consequences) to have them seriously discuss in school whether premarital intercourse is a good or a bad practice.

Does the values clarification teacher claim some inside knowledge about these questions? If not, why should the teacher's judgment about them be preferred to the judgments of the parents? Most public school teachers have had no formal training and can claim no special competence in the field of ethics. Regarding the reference to values “within the laws of the country,” one would also want to ask: “Are there then no situations where it would be morally correct to disobey the laws of the country? Is there any legitimate basis for civil disobedience?” But here again, values clarification offers no help whatsoever. The theory utterly fails at such points as these.

Most of these issues are complex and quite beyond the ability of elementary school students to understand. If public school administrators are to protect the interests of their students and defend the right of children not to be indoctrinated in one particular philosophical position as the truth about the nature of values, they must reexamine earlier commitments they may have made to the use of values clarification. To fail to do so will be to lend support to a form of manipulation and indoctrination that should not be permitted in a pluralistic, democratic society.

Assumptions about Human Nature and Society

Not only does values clarification presuppose one particular view of values to the exclusion of other views, but it also presupposes a number of very specific views about human nature and society. Most of these views are by no means obviously true, and some of them stand in direct opposition to other widely held views on these basic issues. The authors present no serious defense of their positions but simply assume them to be true.

For instance, the authors apparently believe that value truth resides within each individual and that, given enough time and encouragement, it will finally manifest itself. (Thus, in a certain sense, it is consistent to see the individual as the final arbiter of value truth.) But again, this position is only one among many that responsible ethicists have taken. It stands in sharp contrast to an understanding of ethics based on natural law, to the Marxist view of ethics, to the major views of the Judeo-Christian heritage, and to others. Once again, I would ask: “In a pluralistic and democratic society, how do the authors justify presenting their view as the one proper position, particularly when they have presented no significant discussion of alternatives?”

Similarly, the authors simply assume that the individual is free to make his or her own value choices in an open and rational manner. Such a position can be defended, but it is important to note that many outstanding thinkers in Western culture—including Augustine, Calvin, Pascal, Dostoevski, Marx, and Freud, to name but a few—have taken quite a different position on this question. Augustine, for example, understood true freedom to be life according to the will of God. Anything less than this involves varying degrees of slavery. When the Stoics philosophers of antiquity spoke of living “according to Nature,” they were expressing a similar view. Marx viewed people as slaves to a money-capital economy, with liberation coming only with a communist revolution and the eventual introduction of a classless society. Freud worked with a very different intellectual framework than either Augustine or Marx, but he too seriously doubted that man was really free rationally to direct his own life. Most individuals, according to Freud, are slaves to various dark and only dimly understood dimensions of the unconscious. Or, finally, one could point to Madison Avenue with its powerful influence on our patterns of consumption or to the pervasive influence of television, particularly on young and impressionable minds. It is by no means obvious, then, that people are genuinely free to make value choices. But once again, Raths, Harmin, and Simon simply assume their position to be the correct one and incorporate it into their theory with no discussion of alternatives. Here, too, the advertised openness and neutrality of values clarification turns out to be illusion, and, judged by its own criteria, the theory fails.

Other Criticisms of Values Clarification

Numerous other criticisms of values clarification have been explored more fully elsewhere. For the sake of brevity, I will simply outline them here.

- The right to privacy. Values clarification threatens the right to privacy of students and their families. Alan L. Lockwood has pointed out that “teachers are not trained in the use of psychologically probing strategies and, particularly in the case of younger children, the reasonable assumption that students may be unaware of the negative consequences of extensive
self-disclosure." To be sure, the method includes the possibility of saying "I pass" when a student does not wish to respond to a particular question. But many of the techniques are designed in such a fashion that it is highly unlikely that the student will be forced to reveal anything about himself or herself. As the presence of the teacher as an adult authority figure and pressure from the peer group make it difficult for all but the most self-confident students to pass as often as they might really want to, for the method itself incorporates a pressure toward self-disclosure.

- Values clarification as psychotherapy. In another article, Lockwood writes that "similarities between client-centered therapy and Values Clarification are significant enough to conclude that Values Clarification is, in essence, a form of client-centered therapy." Lockwood's judgment is particularly significant in light of the fact that many schools employ values clarification not just in one or two optional courses but also as a technique to be used in various required courses. Using the power of the state to require students to participate in what is, in effect, a form of psychotherapy has ominous overtones indeed.

- A threat to pluralism and a liberal democracy. Insofar as values clarification understands values in highly relative and subjective terms, it is not only problematic for many Christians, Jews, and others, but it also threatens to undercut the philosophical basis of a liberal democracy. If all values are finally matters of individual choice and preference, the criterion of tolerance of other people's ideas, equality, and basic social justice are also matters of personal choice and preference. Such a situation may be tolerable so long as the majority remains strongly committed to such values, but it is certainly not a position likely to give much comfort to Jews, blacks, Mennonites, atheists, and other minorities, for under even slightly different historical circumstances, majority opinion might shift, and there would remain no legitimate appeal to the truth of basic ethical principles and rights.

- Bias against authority, traditional morality, and duty. One of the most objectionable aspects of values clarification is its pronounced bias against authority, traditional morality, and a sense of duty and self-sacrifice. According to Raths, Harmin, and Simon, traditional teachers of morals do not teach; they "moralize," "preach," "indoctrinate," "manipulate," and so forth. Their positions are "rigid," and the idea of free inquiry, thoughtfulness, reason seems to be lost." If a student has not been taught to examine and weigh his own values," say Simon and Polly deSherbinin, "he is prey to the next Fast-talking moralizer who comes down the road." Unfortunately, this almost total lack of objectivity and fairness toward other positions is characteristic of values clarification literature.

Equally clear is its bias against a sense of duty or self-sacrifice and toward self-gratification. William J. Bennett and Edwin J. Delattre point to the following values clarification "strategy," which is recommended for discussion with family or friends over lunch or dinner:

Your husband or wife is a very attractive person. Your best friend is very attracted to him or her. How would you want them to behave?

-Maintain a clandestine relationship so you wouldn't know about it

-Be honest and accept the reality of the relationship

-Proceed with a divorce.

Commenting on this exercise, Bennett and Delattre write:

Typically, the spouse and best friend are presented as having desires they will eventually satisfy anyway; the student is offered only choices that presuppose that relationship. All possibilities for self-restraint, fidelity, regard for others, or respect for mutual relationships and commitments are ignored.

Bennett and Delattre conclude that, besides assuming self-gratification above all else, this and other exercises "offer severely limited misleading options for conduct. Moreover, the exercises are indifferent throughout to relevant facts—except those that Simon wants the student to consider."

- Values clarification as a "religious" position. The radical relativism of values clarification represents something more than one among a number of philosophical options. Insofar as it presents the individual as the final arbiter of truth in the realm of values, it becomes a kind of "religious" position in its own right, one that conflicts with other important religious positions in our society. Let me clarify what I mean. The statement, "God is the final arbiter of truth in the realm of values," is a religious statement, "God is not the final arbiter of truth in the realm of values" is also a religious statement, albeit in negative form. This latter statement is directly implied by values clarification, for insofar as it presents the individual as the final arbiter of value truth, it excludes God from this position.

Similarly, Biblical religion regards the love of God and the service of one's fellow human beings as the highest goals of man. But values clarification's emphasis on self-fulfillment and action on the basis of one's own desires and preferences stands in direct conflict with this religious value. In reference to human behavior, it presents its own "religious" view of life, a view that centers in the individual and his or her own self-fulfillment. Philosophically, the authors' view is a form of hedonism. Religiously, at least from the perspective of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, its unrestrained emphasis on the individual self constitutes a form of idolatry.

Whether or not values clarification is correct in these estimates of values and of human nature, its "religious" position is only one among many, and it is intolerable in a society such as ours to have the authors press it on a semicaptive audience of students in a public school setting as the truth about values and human beings. Such a procedure represents a gross violation of the doctrine of the separation of church and state and is no more acceptable

(continued on page 36)
than it would be for a group of Bible-believing Christians or radical Marxists to indoctrinate students in their own particular views about values and human nature.

- Coercion to the mean. John S. Stewart has criticized values clarification for "a tendency toward coercion to the mean in many activities." He argues that many of the values clarification activities leave the student far too exposed to peer pressure from the stronger and more popular students, particularly insofar as students are encouraged publicly to affirm their values. As an example, he points to a strategy called the "Values Continuum," which asks students to take positions on various issues where the alternatives are presented on a continuum.

One of the exercises asks, "How do you feel about premarital sex?" The end positions listed are Virgil Virginia (sometimes called Gloves Glady) and Mattress Millie. Virgil Virginia "wears white gloves on every date," and Mattress Millie "wears a mattress strapped to her back." (The 1978 edition, perhaps in response to parent criticism, has replaced Mattress Millie with "Wild-Oats Winnie—Never passes up an opportunity.") Stewart questions whether it is reasonable to expect students, especially the shy or insecure ones, to take anything other than a middle-of-the-road position in the face of such extremes.

Teaching Values

If the above arguments are sound and the conclusion is accepted that values clarification should not be used in public schools or by quasi-public agencies, is it then necessary to give up the teaching of values altogether? Not at all. Just how it should be done is still an open question, but at least broad outlines of acceptability are already becoming clear.

The common distinction between public and private values makes it possible for public schools to emphasize such basic values as fairness, equality, tolerance, courtesy, honesty, and responsible citizenship. The courts have certainly left open the way for teaching such values as these, and few groups have objected to their being included in the public school curriculum.

The U.S. Supreme Court has also left open the way for the public schools to teach philosophy, religion, and ethics, so long as it is done in an objective and nonpartisan manner. It is entirely appropriate, in other words, for schools to expect students to become familiar with the major value commitments and ethical thinking that have informed Western culture, including some exposure to classical Graeco-Roman thought on values, basic values of the Judeo-Christian heritage, and such modern positions as those of humanism and Marxism. The student would be expected to learn what these various groups taught about the good life and about right and wrong, but they would not be indoctrinated in any one position. Teachers would be expected to be fair to positions not their own.

Moreover, in a world growing increasingly small, it would also make sense for schools to expose students (as some schools are doing in any case) to the ethical and religious teachings of non-Western cultures.

Even though values clarification as a whole should be rejected for use in public schools, there are aspects of the method that could be used to advantage. The focus of the method on clarifying values can, within definite limits, be advantageously used. It is indeed a benefit for students to grow in clarity about what they value and to become aware of inconsistencies in their value commitments and in the relationship between their words and deeds. Moreover, virtually all students would benefit from a higher degree of sensitivity on the part of their teachers. Teachers need not operate in the lecture mode all or even most of the time, but can focus more on trying to understand the needs and interests of their individual students. Clarifying and nondirective statements from the teacher can be helpful in this connection. And finally, a nonjudgmental attitude on the part of the teacher that focuses on the inherent worth of each student is also critical for long-term success. Such an attitude should (but often does not) find wide support in American society.

As students move into junior high and high school, they can be taught not just value content, but the process of how valuing takes place within different ethical, religious, political, and philosophical traditions. For instance, it would be important for anyone attempting to understand Judaism to know that ethics are always intimately related to the divine covenant and that God's acts of grace always precede the demands of morality. Similarly, to understand Marxist ethics, it would be essential first to be familiar with basic aspects of Marxist political ideology. Finally, in the highest grades, students might be given case studies to "resolve" as a humanist, a Marxist, a Christian, or others might resolve them, or they might be asked to think through the issue in a way that would be consistent with their own basic life commitments and give reasons for their choices.

Notes


