THE WAR for Children’s Minds

‘Should be read by every teacher, every parent, and every politician.’ Philip Pullman

Stephen Law
The War for Children’s Minds
STEPHEN LAW

The War
for Children’s Minds
For Anoushka
“Ideas are more powerful than guns. We would not let our enemies have guns, why should we let them have ideas?”

Joseph Stalin

“We should always be disposed to believe that which appears to us to be white is really black, if the hierarchy of the church so decides.”

St Ignatius Loyola
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ix</td>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>x</td>
<td>About Notes and Appendices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The Enlightenment’s Twisted Legacy</td>
<td>One</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Liberal with a Capital ‘L’</td>
<td>Two</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Liberal and Authoritarian Educational Methods</td>
<td>Three</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>Why Be Liberal (with a Capital ‘L’)</td>
<td>Four</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56</td>
<td>Different Kinds of Authority</td>
<td>Five</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>68</td>
<td>The Moral Malaise and Moral Relativism</td>
<td>Six</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85</td>
<td>What’s Wrong with Moral Relativism?</td>
<td>Seven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90</td>
<td>The Great Myth and the War for Children’s Minds</td>
<td>Eight</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reason and Morality  Nine  108

Good Habits and the Rise of ‘Character Education’  Ten  122

Tradition and Community  Eleven  131

Keeping the Masses in Line  Twelve  147

Conclusion and Recommendation  Thirteen  164

The Enlightenment and the Holocaust  172

Appendix one

MacIntyre on Authority and the Enlightenment  178

Appendix two

Notes  182

Bibliography  193

Index  197
Acknowledgements

I have received valuable help from the following, to whom I’m most grateful:

Anthony Baxter
Tony Bruce
Tony Carroll
Tom Crowther
Peter Gallagher
Rodas Irving
Aurelian Koch
Michael Lacewing
Marilyn Mason
Richard Norman
Mick O’Neill
Tom Pilling
Patrick Riordan
Jeremy Stangroom
John Storey
Karenza Storey
Taryn Storey
Bridget Gilfillan Upton
Michael Walsh
Nigel Warburton
This book is written primarily for those with little if any knowledge of philosophy who are interested in the question of how liberal we should be in our approach to moral and religious education. However, I realize these arguments will also be of interest to some more academically-inclined readers who may want more detail than is provided in the main text. Where I have guessed that is the case, I’ve supplemented the text with endnotes that develop the argument in more depth. If you want to read the endnotes along with the main text, I suggest you read with a finger tucked in the relevant page at the back. Readers who can’t be bothered with the endnotes need not worry, however – the main argument is intended to be robust enough to stand on its own.

I have also included two Appendices. Appendix One deals in more detail with the suggestion that the Enlightenment, and more specifically Enlightenment as Kant famously characterized it, was responsible for the Holocaust. Appendix Two looks at the work of the philosopher Alisdair MacIntyre and its relevance to this debate.

Stephen Law has a website at www.thinking-big.co.uk
How do we raise good children? How do we make moral citizens? Most of us find ourselves drawn to one of two traditions when it comes to moral education. These traditions disagree about the kind of attitude we should encourage in the young about morality. One tradition – I’ll call it the authoritarian tradition – says that the right attitude is one of deference to authority. Should you steal from supermarkets? Is abortion wrong? Are same sex marriages morally acceptable? It’s important, says the authoritarian, that you realize that the answers to these questions are not for you to decide. You should consult an appropriate moral authority. A good moral education, according to this tradition, involves getting the young to defer to a higher authority that can determine right and wrong for them.

What sort of authority should it be? Often, it’s religious. The authority might be a particular religious book such as The Koran or The Bible. Or it might be a religious individual: a rabbi or an imam for example. It might be your ‘faith community’. It might even be God himself. But secular cultures can be authoritarian too. In a totalitarian communist regime, young people wanting to know the answers to moral questions might be encouraged to defer to their local communist party official.

The other tradition, which I’ll call the liberal tradition, insists that people should ultimately make up their own minds about morality. Rather than encouraging them to defer to authority,
we should confront young people with their responsibility to think for themselves about right and wrong. A good moral education, on this liberal view, involves making sure new citizens have the skills they need to discharge that responsibility properly.

Of course, moral education can be more or less liberal. There’s a sliding scale between the liberal and authoritarian extremes. Not so long ago, most Westerners were morally educated in a fairly authoritarian way. We were simply told what we should and shouldn’t believe. Dissent might provoke a rap on the knuckles. Independent critical thought was rarely tolerated, and certainly not encouraged. But then things changed. During the second half of the Twentieth Century, the liberal tradition has been much more in the ascendant. The 1960s, in particular, saw it make huge inroads into Western culture. We were encouraged to liberate ourselves from the old religious authorities and traditions, which were increasingly seen as restrictive and oppressive. More and more emphasis was placed on personal autonomy and freedom of thought and expression.

But as we begin the Twenty-First Century many have begun to look back and wonder whether we didn’t go too far. Of course, not everyone wants to see a return to the do-and-think-as-you’re-told ways of the past. But more and more of us are now voicing the concern that the West has now become excessively liberal in the way it raises tomorrow’s citizens. Take the huge rise in crime over the last 50 years, the corporate shenanigans, the explosions in unwanted teenage pregnancies and the drug abuse. Consider the rise in delinquency, the prevalence of violent attacks and the breakdown of discipline within schools and families. What these things show, it’s argued, is that without the firm moral framework that only authority-based – or at least rather more authority-based – approach to moral education can provide, moral chaos is the inevitable result. There’s an emerging consensus that the West faces a moral crisis brought about by Enlightenment- and 1960s-inspired liberalism, and that it’s time to redress the balance. In 1996 a Gallup poll indicated that three quarters of the UK population believed both that society was less moral than it was 50 years previously, and that too much moral choice is left to individuals.
This diagnosis of where we went wrong unites many otherwise highly diverse individuals. That the West is now rather too liberal is one of the few things that a left-leaning politician like Tony Blair, a right-wing US neo-conservative like Irving Kristol, an Islamic terrorist supporter like Osama bin Laden and a moderate cleric like the Archbishop of Canterbury can probably all agree on. Across the globe, the pendulum is beginning to swing back in the direction of authority. In many parts of America, ‘liberal’ is now a dirty word.2

This book is about the ongoing debate between these two opposing traditions. Just how do we raise good people? Just how liberal, or how authoritarian, should we be? Parents, teachers and policymakers constantly find themselves confronted by this question. On the one hand, many of us seem embarrassed even to bring up the subject of morality with our offspring. Certainly, many are no longer confident about saying ‘Do as you are told’ or ‘I know best’. On the other hand, most of us fear that, if we give up on telling children what to think and do, they’ll grow up morally rudderless.

So what’s the answer? This book defends an increasingly unfashionable position. It argues that we should be very liberal indeed in our approach to moral education. It makes a case for a particular kind of liberal moral education, an education rooted in philosophy, not authority.

Whether or not you end up agreeing with the main thrust of the book, my hope is that it will provide you with an essential pocket-guide to the many ideas and arguments, new and old, about how to raise good citizens. It’s a book, in particular, for those parents, teachers and policymakers who are now being bombarded with a great deal of conflicting, muddled and sometimes downright silly advice. It should, at the very least, help them make a far more informed and confident choice.
The Enlightenment’s Twisted Legacy

One

The Age of Enlightenment

The kind of liberal approach to moral education argued for here has its roots in an intellectual movement that stretches from the Seventeenth Century to the beginning of the Nineteenth Century, a movement known as the Enlightenment. This chapter sets the scene for the argument that follows by explaining the pivotal role that the Enlightenment is commonly supposed to have had in shaping our current moral climate. In particular, we will see why the Enlightenment is commonly thought to be the root cause of many of today’s social problems – why it’s claimed that we’re now living with the Enlightenment’s ‘twisted legacy’ (Phillips 1998: 233).

The term ‘Enlightenment’ was intended to contrast the new ‘Age of Reason’ with the darkness of the middle ages, which were supposedly dominated by irrationality and superstition, authority and tradition. Prior to the Enlightenment, education very largely took the form of the handing down of truths by received authorities. This was particularly true of moral education. Children, and even adults, were expected to accept, more or less uncritically, the moral pronouncements of religious authority.

The Enlightenment revolutionized Europe both intellectually and politically. One of the most revolutionary features of the Enlightenment was the vigorous way in which philosophers and other thinkers began to scrutinize, and sometimes reject, the pronouncements of religious and other authorities. They started to
place far more importance on the individual and his or her powers of reason. The French intellectuals Diderot and d’Alembert defined the Enlightenment thinker as one who,

    trampling on prejudice, tradition, universal consent, authority, in a word, all that enslaves most minds, dares to think for himself (Phillips 1998: 190; emphasis added).

Daring to think for yourself is a core Enlightenment value. As we’ll see, it was with the dramatic rise of this value that the seeds of our current ‘moral malaise’ were supposedly sown.

**Galileo’s Telescope**

The Seventeenth Century astronomer Galileo was an important figure in the run up to the Enlightenment, and he nicely illustrates this core value in action. For centuries the Catholic Church had taught that the Earth is fixed at the centre of the universe. This belief was backed up by the Bible – which says that the Earth is fixed and immovable – and by the teaching of the Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, who, along with the Bible, was the source of most of the Church’s scientific and cosmological beliefs at that time. Aristotle taught that all heavenly bodies revolve around a stationary Earth.

In 1632, Galileo started to question this traditional model of the universe. He developed a telescope through which he could observe the heavens in more detail. Galileo’s telescope revealed that the planet Jupiter had moons that slowly revolved around it. By daring to use his own eyes and his own understanding, Galileo revealed powerful evidence that Aristotle was wrong: not everything revolved around the Earth. Galileo eventually came to accept the Copernican model on which the Earth moved about the sun, not vice versa.

What was the reaction of Church Authority to Galileo’s independence of thought? He was intimidated into retracting his theory. When Galileo was alleged to have again claimed his theory was literally true, the Inquisition showed him the instruments of
torture and imprisoned him for life (the sentence was later reduced to permanent house arrest).

Galileo got off comparatively lightly: his friend Giordano Bruno was burnt at the stake for daring to voice similarly heretical views. But of course, Enlightenment thinkers eventually won this particular battle with the Church. By daring to trust their own intelligence and figure things out for themselves, they finally succeeded in throwing off an authoritarian straightjacket that had for hundreds of years stifled man’s attempts to understand the world around him. By so doing, they gave birth to modern science.

**Kant on Enlightenment**

Enlightenment is also about daring to think for yourself on moral issues. A key figure here is Immanuel Kant, perhaps the greatest of all the Enlightenment philosophers. Kant locates the responsibility for making moral judgements, not in some external authority or tradition, but in the individual. Individuals should dare to apply their own powers of reason and make their own moral judgement rather than defer to some external authority (such as their imam, rabbi or the Pope).

In fact, Kant didn’t just believe that each individual should make their own judgement, he also thought that pure reason, applied independently of any external authority or tradition, can provide the individual with a firm moral foundation. Kant thought that, when it comes to determining right and wrong, reason is all you need (clearly, this is a much stronger, and rather more controversial, claim than the claim that individuals ought to think for themselves and make their own judgements).

In 1784, Kant wrote a short magazine article entitled ‘What is Enlightenment?’. Kant, not normally known for his brevity, came up with one of the most quoted characterizations of Enlightenment:

>[Enlightenment is the] emergence of man from his self-imposed infancy. Infancy is the inability to use one’s reason without the guidance of another. It is self-imposed, when it depends on
a deficiency, not of reason, but of the resolve and courage to use it without external guidance. Thus the watchword of enlightenment is: *Sapere aude*! Have the courage to use one’s own reason! [Kant, quoted in the entry on ‘Enlightenment’ in the *Oxford Companion to Philosophy* 1995].

This book is, in effect, a defence of Kant’s Enlightenment vision of a society of morally autonomous individuals who dare to apply their own intelligence rather than more-or-less uncritically accept the pronouncements of authority.

**Two Kinds of ‘Enlightenment’**

We need to be careful what we mean by ‘Enlightenment’, for at least two things go by that name.

First, there is Enlightenment as Kant characterizes it above. Notice that Kant’s characterization is of something like a state of mind. If you’re an Enlightened individual, in Kant’s sense, then you are not cowed and afraid, mindlessly accepting the pronouncements of tradition and authority. You are courageous: you dare to apply your own powers of reason; you dare to think for yourself. Indeed, Kant believes each of us is morally ‘autonomous’ in the sense that we ultimately must take on the responsibility for making moral judgements. That duty is unavoidable. The Enlightened individual is one who recognizes this.

Secondly, there is the Enlightenment – the historical, intellectual movement. The boundaries of this movement are not precise. There is a whole raft of beliefs associated to varying degrees with the Enlightenment, and in characterizing the Enlightenment different commentators tend to put the emphasis in different places and on different individuals. Of course, not everything about the Enlightenment was noble, and not every Enlightenment thought was true. For example, some Enlightenment philosophers believed that through the application of reason progress would be inevitable – indeed, some supposed that all mankind’s fundamental problems would finally be solved. In retrospect that seems ridiculously naïve.
Other Enlightenment thinkers believed that morality could be given a wholly rational foundation (as we’ve just seen, that’s Kant’s view). In fact some contemporary thinkers, such as MacIntyre (1985) and Gray (1995a: 147), maintain that giving morality a wholly rational foundation was the core ‘Enlightenment project’.

One reason why it’s important not to conflate these two senses of ‘Enlightenment’ is that there may be valid criticisms of the Enlightenment that are not valid criticisms of Enlightenment as Kant characterizes it. One of the most popular criticisms of the Enlightenment – a criticism made by MacIntyre and Gray, for example – is that the core ‘Enlightenment project’ of providing morality with a foundation in reason alone had inevitably to fail. Morality cannot be rationally underpinned in the way the Enlightenment philosophers thought. But then, because the Enlightenment had kicked away the old moral foundations of tradition and authority, it left morality without any foundations at all. And so, as a direct consequence of the Enlightenment, morality began to collapse.

This is a serious charge. But whether or not it’s a cogent criticism of the Enlightenment, notice that we can still sign up to Kant’s Enlightenment vision – we can still agree on the importance of getting individuals to think and judge independently rather than defer to a religious authority – even while admitting that morality cannot be given a wholly rational foundation. This is a point I will be exploring in more detail later (especially in chapter nine and the appendix on MacIntyre). But it’s worth clarifying at the outset that when this book speaks of the importance of Enlightenment, it’s talking specifically about what Kant means by ‘Enlightenment’.

**Modern Critics of Enlightenment**

Enlightenment, as Kant characterizes it, is increasingly viewed with suspicion. It’s claimed that the rise of Kantian Enlightenment in the West has resulted in the undermining of external moral authority and its replacement by individual moral autonomy. This in turn has resulted in the collapse of morality itself, with all the attendant anti-social consequences we see around us today: the escalation in
crime and delinquency; sexual irresponsibility and the rise in single parent families; a greedy, self-serving, individualistic culture. According to many social commentators, as a direct result of Kant’s Enlightenment vision, the fabric of Western civilization is now under threat. As one well-known British journalist puts it,

[the great paradox of the Enlightenment was that, in liberating human thought in order to enhance civilization, it lit a slow fuse beneath it] (Phillips 1998: 197).

Jonathan Sacks, the UK’s Chief Rabbi, is another of those who believe that the Enlightenment and, in particular, Kant’s Enlightenment vision is the fundamental cause of many of today’s social problems. Sacks (1997: 176) comes down particularly hard on Kant, whose view he sums up like so:

[According to Kant ... [t]o do something because others do, or because of habit or custom or even Divine Command, is to accept an external authority over the one sovereign territory that is truly our own: our own choices. The moral being for Kant is by definition an autonomous being, a person who accepts no other authority than the self. By the 1960s this was beginning to gain hold as an educational orthodoxy. The task of education is not to hand on a tradition but to enhance the consciousness of choice.

Sacks rejects Kant’s insistence on individual moral autonomy. He claims that once Kant’s idea that each individual was morally autonomous caught hold in schools and colleges, the seeds of our current moral calamity were sown. For morality was then reduced to a mere personal ‘preference’ or ‘choice’. The cure, Sacks argues, requires that we move back in the direction of external religious authority and tradition.

You’ll also find within Sacks’ writings another popular refrain: that contemporary society is dangerously fragmented and individualistic. It’s all very well encouraging individuals to think independently, but the result of promoting Kant’s view that the moral being is, as Sacks puts it, ‘an autonomous being, a person who accepts no other authority than the self’, is an atomized society of
free-floating individuals. Once we lose our anchor in one of the
great, shared religious traditions we are left morally all at sea, with
no way of telling right from wrong other than how we happen to
feel. Moral chaos is the inevitable result. We need to return to those
faith traditions and authorities that once wove us together into
moral communities and provided us with a moral compass.

While it’s usually left-leaning liberals that get the blame for the
moral malaise, Sacks is clear that the cultural movement he takes
himself to be attacking is not uniquely politically left-of-centre.
The right’s enthusiasm for selfish individualism also bears some
responsibility. The individualistic ‘greed is good’ mentality of the
1980s is supposedly yet another legacy of the Enlightenment’s
insistence on individual autonomy.

Enlightenment has always had its critics, and the kinds of
criticisms levelled by Sacks are not new. But these criticisms are
now being taken much more seriously, and are beginning to impact
on policy. The UK government’s enthusiasm for faith schools
would seem to be one manifestation of this trend.

In fact, some counter-Enlightenment thinkers go so far as to
suggest that the West is now in the grip of a full-blown ‘culture war’
between, on the one hand, liberal defenders of Kant’s Enlightenment
vision of a society of morally autonomous individuals, and, on the
other, those who wish for a return to traditional Judeo-Christian
values and authority-based moral education. Many of these culture
war theorists warn we are teetering on the edge of disaster. They
write books with panicky titles like On Looking into the Abyss
(Himmelfarb 1994) and The Death of Right and Wrong (Bruce 2003).
Unless action is taken quickly to rehabilitate traditional (that’s to
say, religious) sources of moral authority, the West is likely to
become a moral wasteland. Moral and religious education is, of
course, at the front line in this culture war. Indeed, as these culture
war theorists see it, their war is, above all, a war for children’s minds.

Islam and Enlightenment

It’s not just Westerners who are urging us to move back in the direc-
tion of religious tradition and authority. You’ll hear dire warnings
of our moral rot coming from non-Westerners too. The ‘blame it on Enlightenment’ diagnosis is particularly popular in the Islamic world.

Unlike the West, Islam never really experienced a full-blown Enlightenment of its own (which is not to say it has not had Enlightened thinkers, nor to deny its contribution towards Western Enlightenment\(^2\)). Muslim countries still tend to be dominated by religious authority. The Kantian idea that individuals should think independently and make their own moral judgements is widely frowned upon. The questioning of religious belief is strongly discouraged – indeed, it’s rarely tolerated, even within an academic setting. To reject the Islamic belief system within which you were raised is, in many places, to risk your life. In Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Yemen, Iran, Sudan, Pakistan and Mauritania, those whose independence of thought has led them publicly to cast off the Muslim faith are liable to be executed.

But, even in supposedly secular Islamic states, the power of Islamic religious authorities to gag dissenting individuals is immense. A colleague working in the humanities at a university in a non-theocratic Arab state tells me that she would certainly face censure, and would probably lose her job, were she to arrange a conference at which religious ideas were open to criticism.

And yet these restrictions on freedom of thought and expression are perceived by many Muslims to be a good thing. They justify it by pointing to the West’s moral malaise. ‘See?’ they say. ‘That’s what happens when you allow people to turn their back on religious authority.’

**Blame it on the Sixties**

While some social commentators and academics suggest that the Enlightenment is ultimately to blame for the West’s moral decline, it’s a more recent period that tends to bear responsibility in the public imagination: the 1960s. The 1960s was a time when Kant’s core Enlightenment value of daring to question authority and think for yourself came still more powerfully to the fore. It’s precisely this feature of 1960s thinking that many now blame for our current moral meltdown.
Here, for example, is the US neoconservative D’Souza putting his finger on precisely what, from the conservative point of view, was wrong with the 1960s.

Before the sixties, most Americans believed in a universal moral order that is external to us, that makes demands on us. Our obligation was to conform to that moral order. Earlier generations, right up to the ‘greatest generation’ of WWII, took for granted this moral order and its commandments. [...] But, beginning in the sixties, several factions – the antiwar movement, the feminist movement, the gay activist movement, and so on – attacked that moral consensus as narrow and oppressive. They fought for a new ethic that would be based not on external authority but on the sovereignty of the inner self (emphasis added).

It is, above all, this championing of Kant’s Enlightenment ideal – getting individuals to question external authority and think and judge autonomously – that conservatives like D’Souza find fundamentally unacceptable about 1960s thinking.

The 1960s have always been attacked by conservatives. But now it’s not just conservatives who point the finger of blame. There’s hardly a week goes by that some political pundit doesn’t lay responsibility for the West’s alleged moral decline on the anti-authoritarian attitudes of 1960s hippies and liberals.

**The Return of Young-Earth Creationism**

Another illustration of this general counter-Enlightenment drift is provided by the extraordinary rise in the US of the young-Earth creationists, who believe that we should defer to the authority of The Bible, not just on moral matters, but on scientific matters too. Genesis says that God made the earth and all species of living thing in just six days, so that’s what young-Earth creationists believe, despite the overwhelming scientific evidence to the contrary. They also suppose that, rather than being billions of years old, the universe must have been created sometime in the last 10,000 years (probably about 6000 years ago).
Fifty years ago, the young-Earth creationists were a tiny, unimportant band of devotees. Polls indicate they now constitute a sizeable proportion of the American public. It would appear that a third or more of Americans defer to the authority of The Bible on the age of the universe and the way in which life appeared on Earth. It’s not just on moral matters that The Bible is held to be absolutely authoritative. It’s considered equally authoritative on scientific matters as well.3

Young-Earth creationism is not solely the preserve of the ill-educated. Many college graduates are drawn to it. A Tennessee academic who recently surveyed his own students writes that scientists like himself are having to fight

the battles of the Enlightenment all over again. Medieval ideas that were killed stone dead by the rise of science three to four hundred years ago are not merely twitching; they are alive and well in our schools, colleges and universities (The Guardian 2001: 14).

These medieval ideas are also taking root again outside the US. I recently gave a talk on the origin of the universe to the 12- to 14-year-old pupils of a London comprehensive school. My audience seemed strangely reserved. When asked what was wrong, they explained that they simply didn’t accept what I was telling them about the Big Bang. About two thirds of them, it turned out, were convinced that the Biblical account of creation was literally true. These south London children genuinely believed that Adam and Eve roamed the garden of Eden along with the dinosaurs just a few thousand years ago. From where had they got these bizarre ideas? From a local evangelical church with strong US links.

Because of the evangelism of American Bible-literalists, young-Earth creationism is on the rise around the world. Russia and Eastern Europe, in particular, are heavily targeted by Christian fundamentalists for whom states newly liberated from communism promise a new frontier in their global ‘culture war’. In 2004, the Serbian education minister Ljiljana Colic succeeded (if only temporarily) in removing the teaching of evolution from all state
Defending Kant’s Enlightenment Vision

Of course not every opponent of Kant’s Enlightenment vision is a religious fanatic. Some are only mildly critical. They couch their resistance to Enlightenment and their enthusiasm for tradition and authority in qualified, measured terms. They say, ‘Of course people should think for themselves!’ But then, fearing the moral disaster they think may ensue, they quickly follow this up with ‘… but not too early. And not too much. Let’s leave some room for authority and tradition!’

This book argues that there really is no good case for rejecting the principle that, particularly when it comes to making moral judgements, individuals should be raised and educated to question and think critically and independently rather than defer more-or-less uncritically to external authority. It argues for the increasingly unfashionable view that we should be very liberal indeed in our approach to moral education. Far from being of mere historical interest, the global battle for Enlightenment, as Kant characterizes it, is still well and truly on. This is a moment when those of us who believe in Enlightenment need to stand up and argue vigorously in its defence.