

The Holocaust and Moral Education

The belief that schools have a responsibility to teach values is a very old idea in American education. In recent years, however, the aims and methods of programs in moral education have become a subject of intense debate. Some critics believe that such programs distract schools from their essential academic mission. Religious conservatives, wary of curricula that they perceive as favoring moral relativism, insist that the teaching of values should be left to parents and religious institutions. Their distrust extends to classroom efforts to foster "critical thinking" by inviting students to discuss their personal responses to texts and historical events.

One of the most widely adopted — and controversial — approaches to moral education addresses the specific issues of prejudice, conformity, and individual responsibility. It does this by examining the rise of Nazism and its culmination in the Holocaust. Facing History and Ourselves, an organization created in 1976, has produced a curriculum and resource book and conducts workshops for teachers. Its materials are now offered, in some form, to 500,000 students — mostly eighth and ninth graders — each year. The program received an unexpected burst of attention last fall, when a political scientist who had criticized it for not presenting the "Nazi point of view" was named historian of the House of Representatives. Once her comments attracted public notice, Christina Jeffrey was abruptly dismissed. But her remarks provoked a spate of articles and letters in national publications concerning the teaching of the Holocaust.

Most commentators spent little time refuting the charge that Facing History had failed to achieve "balance or objectivity" in its exploration of Nazism. Other, more significant questions about the program — its assumptions and moral purposes — engaged them instead. Was the Holocaust a "unique" event in human history? Is it legitimate to compare the Holocaust to other historical crimes, such as those perpetrated in the Soviet Union in the 1930s; Cambodia in the 1970s, Rwanda and Bosnia in the 1990s? Should the Holocaust be used as a reference point for teaching children about racism and social injustice in general — about scapegoating, intolerance, and prejudice that can occur in any society?

History and Ourselves

The moral education dimension of Facing History and Ourselves has two elements. The first is attention to features of the students' own lives, development, and identities, especially as these bear on issues of moral responsibility and civic engagement. Before focusing on Germany, the curriculum raises issues of group identity and asks how individuals are pressured into acting against their better judgment. These themes are taken up again as the curriculum turns to the period immediately prior to the Holocaust, when a series of laws deprived Jews of rights and status within German society. Students are asked to imagine themselves (to the degree that this is possible) in the place of ordinary Germans, some of whom go along with these Nazi policies, and some of whom resist them. Students are invited to consider how they would and should act in comparable circumstances.

The second moral focus of the Facing History curriculum is a consideration of a broad set of social injustices, linked to elements of the history the students have just explored. The curriculum calls attention to racism in various manifestations, especially, but not only, in the United States, involving prejudice against African-Americans, Native Americans, and other groups. Several small sections of the resource book are devoted to the Turkish genocide against the Armenians. In this strand of the curriculum, emphasis falls on the social and psychological processes that played a role in the Nazi horrors — scapegoating, fear, intolerance, isolation, the definition of "others" as inferior or alien. Students examine these processes in different historical contexts and reflect on their operation in their own lives.

Among the objections that have been made against Facing History, many have been ill-founded and based on a cursory or egregiously selective reading of the organization's material. However, some raise substantial issues for Holocaust teaching, and for moral education. The more important criticisms, not all fully distinct from one another, are these: (1) The Holocaust is a unique event in human history, and Facing History fails to honor this fact. (2) The Holocaust should not be taught in the context of moral

education, but as part of the European or world history curriculum. (3) Facing History draws illegitimate comparisons between the Holocaust and other social horrors and injustices, thereby implying that current or historical American treatment of, for example, African-Americans is on the same moral level as the Holocaust. (4) Facing History does not give sufficient attention to anti-Semitism, in its historical and contemporary manifestations. I shall consider each of these criticisms in turn.

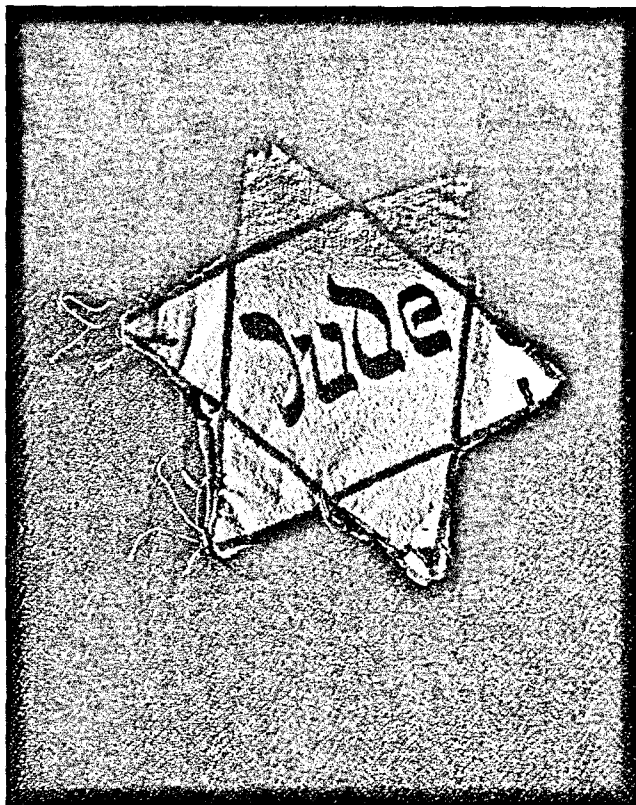
The Uniqueness of the Holocaust

The claim that the Holocaust is unique can mean several distinct things. On one level, every historical event is unique: no historical evil is like any other in all respects. The Holocaust is distinct from all other examples of mass murder; American slavery is different from other forms of oppression and even from other forms of slavery (as practiced in ancient Greece, Latin America, or Arabia). Understood in this sense, uniqueness is a quality that always deserves recognition, if only for reasons of historical accuracy.

However, assertions of the Holocaust's uniqueness usually involve more than a claim that the Holocaust is unlike other historical events *in some respects*. The central idea (though it is not always made explicit) is that the Holocaust is *uniquely evil*. Yet this claim is itself ambiguous. It can mean that the Holocaust has evil features shared by no other historical evil; or that, taken as a whole, it is the *worst* evil ever perpetrated.

Neither of these claims entails the other. It is sometimes argued, for example, that the Holocaust is the only time in recorded history when a state attempted to annihilate an entire people; the concept of "genocide," invented and reflected in the United Nations Convention on Genocide in 1948, is meant to mark the moral difference between this sort of killing and other mass murders. Yet the Holocaust, though it may have given rise to the concept of genocide, is not the only historical instance of genocide. The Turks' violence against the Armenians between 1915 and 1923, the United States' treatment of some Native American tribes, the Hutu government's massacres of Tutsis in Rwanda — all are arguably cases of genocide.

It can, no doubt, be plausibly claimed that the Holocaust is the *worst* instance of genocide — given the number of people killed, and the systematic mobilization of a modern state's resources for the purposes of extermination. Still, it does not follow that the Holocaust is the *worst historical evil*. Consider Stalin's starvation of millions of peasants in the 1930s, during the era of forced collectivization. This is a mass murder that is not a genocide, since it involved the targeting not of a people defined by religion, nationality, or race, but rather of a social grouping defined by status. But does this distinction have greater moral significance than the number of people killed?



Arnold Kramer,
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

It is doubtful that we can achieve any final reckoning of degree of evil. Moreover, even if there is some analytical and historical value in making the attempt, the uniqueness dispute is not of paramount importance to moral education. Indeed, an emphasis on the "uniqueness" of the Holocaust, in any sense other than that shared by other historically significant events, is likely to have deleterious consequences for moral development. One of the primary goals of moral education is to increase awareness of, sensitivity to, and concern for human suffering and injustice. An acute awareness of, and constant attention to, the Holocaust as "unique," as the worst evil in human history, can thwart the development of this moral consciousness. Suppose students are learning about ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, or slavery in the United States. Appropriate moral awareness of the evil and injustice in these situations is an integral part of understanding them. But the constant refrain, "Well, that atrocity is not as bad as the Holocaust," would inhibit this moral understanding. Ironically, some Afrocentric writers use a similar moral move to deflect appropriate moral concern *from* the Holocaust: "You lost six million, but we lost 100 million to slavery." The "more oppressed than thou" gambit is inimical to a proper concern with the sufferings and injustices experienced by groups other than one's own.

Moral Education and History

The second criticism — that the Holocaust should not be taught as part of moral education at all, but only as part of the history curriculum — does not depend on a uniqueness claim. It does rest on a questionably firm distinction between the teaching of values and the teaching of history. Education about the Holocaust cannot help but be moral education as well. A student who knew in great detail about the Nazi policies that led up to the Holocaust, who was thoroughly familiar with the means by which the mass killings were carried out, but who did not recognize that these events constitute a moral horror, would lack historical understanding of the Holocaust. Similarly, a student who failed to grasp that American slavery dehumanized the people who were slaves would not understand slavery. As students confront these historical phenomena, their moral capacities are necessarily engaged. The Facing History teacher who helps students articulate and explore the bases of their moral reactions is only building on a response that occurs in any case in the teaching of history.

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In a recent essay, Deborah Lipstadt offers an example of how moral issues arise in the context of historical study of the Holocaust. Describing her university students' reactions to Claude Lanzmann's documentary film *Shoah*, she suggests the inescapability of moral discussion in a Holocaust history class:

As they listened to contemporary Poles decry the fate of the Jews and then, using imagery from the New Testament, seamlessly slip into explanations of why this was really the Jews' fault, the student sitting next to me groaned. "Blaming the victim. Again." My students recognized both the particular and universal component of what they had seen. For me, the most moving responses came from the Christian students in the class who spoke about the challenge of reconciling what they consider to be a religion of love with the history of contempt which they now recognized as intrinsic to it.

Even at the high school level, some students who learn about the Holocaust will face challenges like the one acknowledged by Professor Lipstadt's Christian students. This will occur whether the Holocaust is taught in history classes or as a component of moral education. In either case, we should expect teachers to offer their students the opportunity to address moral

questions they may never have confronted before. Some religious conservatives who oppose moral education appear to believe that *no* classroom should provide such opportunities, lest the students be encouraged to articulate ideas at odds with what they have been taught elsewhere. But this suggests that the true object of the critics' suspicion is not moral education, but education itself.

Making Comparisons

The third criticism holds that education about the Holocaust should not be used to do moral education about matters other than the Holocaust itself, for doing so will necessarily involve drawing false comparisons between the Holocaust and other examples of injustice, oppression, or mass destruction. This criticism is obviously related to the first, which insists on the Holocaust's uniqueness. It is also a criticism relevant to many programs of historical study and moral education, not only Facing History.

Last fall, for example, the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington opened an exhibition of documentary photographs from the Bosnian war. The question immediately arose whether the Museum was "equating" ethnic cleansing in the Balkans with the treatment of Jews during the Holocaust. In response, a spokesperson for the Museum explained, "Our mandate is to show the contemporary implications of the Holocaust. In Yugoslavia today, we see certain elements of the Holocaust repeating themselves: how genocide can be accomplished by the modern state, how the world can stand by."

For its part, Facing History invites teachers and students to make comparisons between the persecution of the Jews, especially in the years leading up to the Final Solution, and the racial injustices, stereotypes, prejudices, and discriminatory laws directed against African-Americans, Native Americans, and other groups in the United States. Seeing the horrors to which anti-Semitism and other Nazi racial attitudes led helps students appreciate that stereotyping and prejudice are neither innocent nor insignificant. Such lessons can be conveyed without implying that the errors or crimes of all societies are "equivalent." It is only necessary that there be *some* parallels, *some* similarities, not parallels in every respect. Deborah Lipstadt rightly says that teachers must be careful not to impart the message that every ethnic slur contains the seeds of a Holocaust. However, an appreciation of the hurt and danger of racial stereotyping does not, or need not, proceed by way of claiming that the Nazi situation is exactly comparable to that of the United States. Facing History never claims such direct comparability, and frequently suggests that students be asked to think about the differences.

Professor Lipstadt has criticized Facing History for explicitly drawing historical connections and parallels; she wants the students to draw their own connections, leaving to the instructor only the task of ensuring that the *distinctions* are appreciated. For junior high and high school students, however, this division of responsibility seems arbitrary; there is no less reason to help these students see the similarities than the differences.

What would be lost if a program like Facing History declined to invite discussion of both parallels *and* distinctions? First, teachers would miss an opportunity to help students become morally reflective and sensitive in a nation and world where such qualities are urgently important. For example, Facing History devotes considerable attention to rescuers and bystanders during the Holocaust. Included in this unit is an account of an African-American man in Los Angeles during the riots that followed the Rodney King verdict. Remembering his victimization by whites as a junior high student, the man rushes to help an Asian-American driver as rioters are throwing bricks and stones at his car. Now of course there are differences between the rescuer's situation in Los Angeles and that of rescuers who saved Jews from the Nazis; in the United States, there is no state policy to murder members of a stigmatized group and their would-be protectors, as there was in Nazi-occupied Europe. But would students be better off if we omitted the story of an ordinary citizen standing up for decency and humanity in the midst of our social disorders?

Beyond the missed opportunities, failing to help students make these connections does them a moral disservice. One thing we rightly expect from a moral education program is an enlargement of moral imagination and a willingness to face uncomfortable moral truths — not only to make well-informed judgments about past horrors. Our pluralistic society, with its tendencies to ethnic fragmentation, is particularly needful of people able to recognize and acknowledge their ties to and commonalities with others; promoting such recognition is an important goal of moral education.

Admittedly, making valid comparisons and drawing necessary distinctions are by no means simple or uncontroversial matters. Whenever members of a particular group find that their historical experience is being compared with that of another group, they may object that the comparison is an insensitive appropriation of their sufferings and struggles. For example, some African-Americans dismiss the suggestion that the prejudice directed against gays and lesbians is comparable to racial prejudice, and they are indignant when gay rights advocates draw on the language and symbolism of the civil rights movement. Between those who see

parallels in the two struggles and those who do not, there is a wide divergence of perception and historical understanding.

There are two lessons here. First, comparisons are politically charged and controversial; for just this reason, we have an obligation to draw them as responsibly as we can. Second, there is no formula for getting either the comparisons or the distinctions right. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr., observes with respect to analogies between the predicaments of African-Americans and gay Americans, the difficulty "isn't that there's simply no comparison; it's that there's no *simple* comparison." We can only proceed according to our own best lights. In any case, we cannot dispense with efforts to apply the understandings we have gained in one area (including our own experience) to another.

Studying Anti-Semitism

Finally, some critics worry that to teach about the Nazi era for the broader purpose of moral education is to "de-Judaize" the Holocaust. In a widely reprinted column from the *Boston Globe*, appearing after the dismissal of Christina Jeffrey, Jeff Jacoby argued that the central focus of a program like Facing History ought to be the anti-Jewish hatred that made the Holocaust possible. "If the Final Solution was about anything," Mr. Jacoby wrote, "it was about the uniquely virulent power of anti-Semitism, a hatred older than and different from any other in human history."

In fact, Facing History devotes considerable space to anti-Semitism, as even a cursory examination of its resource book makes clear. Certainly any study of the Holocaust must include the history of European anti-Semitism. However, those who press for attention in a Holocaust curriculum to *contemporary* anti-Semitism, particularly in the United States but also in Europe, cannot escape the issues of comparison and differentiation that, as we have seen, affect all efforts to link the Holocaust with other examples of persecution and hatred. The continued presence of timeworn anti-Semitic stereotypes in America is no more a portent of, or cousin to, a Nazi-like persecution of Jews than is contemporary prejudice against African-Americans a portent of a return to slavery or Jim Crow. Contemporary forms of American anti-Semitism have no *more* claim to relevance in a Holocaust curriculum than do other mass murders, other forms of racism, other forms of state-initiated persecution. Contemporary anti-Semitism is a serious cause for concern, and a course on the Holocaust should certainly attend to it. But those who argue for its inclusion share the same responsibility for analogizing and disanalogizing that is assumed by those who link Nazism with contemporary forms of racism,

stereotyping, and prejudice not specifically directed at Jews.

Oddly enough, the complaint that Facing History's treatment of the Holocaust pays insufficient attention to Jews and Jewish concerns has sometimes come from people who oppose multicultural education on the ground that it emphasizes the distinctness of groups at the expense of unity and common values. Moreover, the idea that the Holocaust is exclusively "about" anti-Semitism, that our central focus must always be on the Holocaust as a Jewish tragedy, is curiously reminiscent of one of the criticisms made by Christina Jeffrey in her 1986 evaluation of Facing History. The program, she wrote, "may be appropriate for a limited religious audience, but not for widespread distribution to the schools of the nation." Defenders of the former position will rightly distinguish their view from Professor Jeffrey's, since they want this Jewish tragedy to be of universal concern, not of concern to Jews only. Nevertheless, a willingness to appreciate the sufferings of others, a lack of possessiveness about a tragedy that affected millions of non-Jews as well, is much more likely to foster this general concern.

This past spring, the Los Angeles Jewish Federation arranged an evening on which five Japanese-American judges reflected on the relocation and internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II, and on the current wave of anti-immigrant hysteria and resurgent anti-Japanese prejudice. The Federation speaker

observed that "while no wartime experience could compare with the Holocaust, no group had a monopoly on suffering." There are no such monopolies now. This is a central lesson of moral education programs, and one to which Facing History and the Holocaust Memorial Museum have helped point the way.

— Lawrence A. Blum

Lawrence A. Blum, professor of philosophy at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, and member of the Center for Ethics and Social Policy, is the author of *Moral Perception and Particularity* (Cambridge University Press, 1994). Sources: Melinda Fine, *Habits of Mind: Struggling Over Values in America's Classrooms* (Jossey-Bass, 1995); *Facing History and Ourselves Resource Book: The Holocaust and Human Behavior* (Facing History and Ourselves National Foundation, 1994); Berel Lang, *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Deborah Lipstadt, "Not Facing History," *The New Republic* (March 6, 1995); Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Blacklash?," *The New Yorker* (May 17, 1993); Jeff Jacoby, "Facing History: What it Really Teaches," *Boston Globe* (January 17, 1994); "Japanese-American Judges Reflect on Internment," *New York Times* (May 19, 1995).