
Grace and Courtesy: A Foundation for Moral Development

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Abstract

An exploration of the progression of the exercise of grace and courtesy from simple manners to human morality is the topic of this presentation. Because work alongside others is the form in which human beings form their personalities, it is imperative that grace and courtesy be practiced in order for the work to occur. As grace and courtesy are practiced by all in the community, good work habits arise, and people of sound moral character emerge.

The moral development of human beings is a topic much thought about and discussed throughout human history. The word moral comes from the Latin *moralis*, meaning of manners or customs. Although its etymology would suggest that morality has to do with etiquette, the common meaning of morality is the ability to distinguish right from wrong. Nonetheless, there is a close link. Etiquette derives meaning from practices that become the norm just because they are mindful of others' rights. Manners and customs that lend themselves to harmonious living are the right thing to do in human relations. The exercises of grace and courtesy found in the Montessori environment clearly show this link. First one sensorially, then consciously, experiences harmonious living through acts that in themselves are cognizant of right from wrong in terms of living with others. Since we in the Montessori class are concerned with the development of human beings, what does it mean for a person to be morally developed? It means that there exists within the person a consciousness of right from wrong. It further means that this person, when faced with the choice, chooses the right and turns away from the wrong. This can be stated as the ability to live in harmony with others.

Who sets the standard by which one is to assess moral development? There are codes of behavior in all cultures: the *Code of Hammurabi*, the *Torah*, the *Ten*

Commandments, the *Koran*, to name a few. These codes continue to be presented to us, many in the form of religious practice. Books of etiquette and manners are widely known and consulted when faced with a question of the proper manners in a certain situation. In many current newspapers one can read *Miss Manners*, the current sage on manners. Many answers concerning manners, customs and morals have been given throughout the ages.

People through the ages have also pondered the development of morality in children and have expressed different theories of moral development. No matter whether the proposed theory focuses on the enforcement of a code of conduct or reasoning about moral situations, the fact is that it is the adult who establishes the moral standard and brings the child along to this point of view. Now if the child in question is compliant, this approach is successful. But if the child is not compliant, this approach may not be successful. Is there any other way? Verily, a better life is lived by the moral person. The question is this: Can we avoid the issue of a compliant versus a non-compliant child? Can we attend to moral development without preaching a moral code? The question appears for each of us as we confront a new life, a child who begins the human journey anew. We are given some help for our questions by Maria Montessori. I propose some thoughts on moral development based on Maria Montessori's guidance. First, we look at Montessori's views on human development, within which moral development occurs.

Among Maria Montessori's many legacies, her idea that we should continually look at the child, the human being in the process of development, is an idea to which we should pay full and wholehearted attention. It is our duty to observe the child because observation of the child is the very foundation of all the work proposed for Montessori

classes. While Montessori's observations and analyses serve us well with regard to the child, we must verify for ourselves so that we can with confidence serve the child.

Who is the child that we are to observe? The child is an undeveloped human being, and each individual child must develop by constructing or building a human personality. (From the Latin *com+struere*: to pile up, build; Old English: *strewen*: to extend, to stretch out.) How is this construction achieved? It is achieved, as is true of any construction, by means of work within a human environment. Further, the end result of the construction of an individual human personality has two aspects: individual and social. Therefore, one can say that the process of human development is the expected construction of the human personality, both as to the self and as to the other. Moral development, the ability to live in harmony with others, is a consequence of this construction.

The topic of this conference, *Grace and Courtesy: A Human Responsibility*, addresses this question of moral development because it focuses on the construction of the social human being. Grace and courtesy are terms used to describe acts which reveal what are harmonious social relations among human beings. The terms will therefore signal actions performed by the child that aid the development of the social self, the ability to live in harmony with other human beings. This in turn aids the development of the moral self, for to choose the right from the wrong creates harmony in social relations. However, it would be remiss not to mention the necessity of harmony among all things, living and non-living, in the universe. Yet that is a topic for another day. Only the social relationships of the human being will be discussed.

As has been said, the construction of the human personality consists of the development of the self and the devel-

when the child in the *Casa dei Bambini* may have an empathetic encounter with another child. The child around six years of age enters the plane with a predominate sense of the self moderated by the knowledge that I must sublimate certain desires in order to live among others, the knowledge that I *can* help others, and even with the desire to help others from time to time.

The idea of working together, consciously and cooperatively, is to be brought to consciousness in this second plane of development. But there is more. If one were only to take care of those in the localized environment, most of us would not have the things we need in order to live. The construction of the social self that occurs in this plane is the construction of the necessity of human social relations extended to those outside the immediate environment. A person has to do certain things in order to live in this universe. What a person does not only affects those in one's immediate environment but also affects persons not present, and perhaps even those not yet born.

For this constructive task the child again needs both adults and peers. Adults are present to give the child the ability to know about all of human life within the universe; peers are present to practice working together consciously and cooperatively. From the point of view of individual construction, the child of the second plane must still be centered in the self. It is quite all right that the child in the second plane of development still think that adults and peers are present to meet *my* needs. It is a point of arrival that the child construct the social sense to the point of consciously knowing that one can meet the needs of others. It is not necessary to demand that this child want to meet the needs of another. The construction of the social self in this plane is that I *can* meet the needs of another. In addition, I can and do affect persons not present either in time or space.

In summary, the first and second planes comprise the two stages of childhood and should therefore be seen as a unit. The normal construction of the

individual self and the social self occurring in childhood is one that results in a human personality that can and does acknowledge the existence and the needs of the other. The construction of the individual self is of great importance. There is no melding of all individuals into a single human personality. But the constructed individual self knows about others, wants to be with others, and knows how to be with others. Such an individual has a better chance to continue to develop into a mature human being, a social human being.

The Third and Fourth Planes of Development

Social development continues in the third and fourth planes of development. In the third plane, the major focus of social development is to learn to live with those who are no longer primarily charged with nurturing these adolescents as individuals. Rather, it is the adolescent who chooses to nurture the self in ways meaningful to the individual, while simultaneously being aware of and taking care of others in the environment. It is for the adolescent to reciprocally care for the adults present in the environment whilst still receiving care and gaining knowledge from adults as mentors and guides. It is for the adolescent to care for peers whilst taking comfort in their knowledge and support. In the fourth plane of development, the major focus of social development is turned outward. The person in the fourth plane of development works in the service of the self and the other. This person deepens a field of interest and sees this interest as both serving my needs and the needs of others. This maturing person often turns away from one's own personal interests as the necessity to serve arises. The outcome of this plane – the mature human being – is then one able to guide the development of children.

The Outcome of Development Over the Four Planes

An assumption of Montessori's theory is that part of one's life is lived as a human being who can assist the development of the children of the next

generation. In order to do this adequately, the human being must achieve maturity. This is why Montessori talks about the development of the *new teacher* who is then able to guide children. This new teacher is assumed to be the result of a constructed social self, a person able not only to live in harmony with the universe but a person who can assist the child to live in harmony with the universe. The development of the Montessori teacher seems then to be an even higher construction of the social self, which is to say, a complete awareness of the other and a willingness to subjugate the self as necessary. While the development of the adult guiding the child may be considered a side issue to the topic at hand, the consequence to the child is of great importance. Without the development of mature human beings who have the interest of the other as a guiding force, adults able to guide children may not be available to children.

What are the Helps to Social Development in Childhood?

As can be inferred from the previous discussion, the child in the first and second planes of development needs assistance in the process of construction of the social personality. Furthermore, in all planes of development, it is the individual who does the construction. The infant works in an absorptive process; the young child practices acts of grace and courtesy with more and more awareness and empathy for others in the environment.

Therefore, work is the key to the construction of the social human being. The very choice of the word *construction* signifies work. The wall is not constructed unless the individual works to construct it. Although it is the individual who does the work of self-construction, this work is accomplished within human society, first within the family unit and then within an ever-expanding human society.

What is the work to be done? How does the work get started? The idea that one is to work comes from the human society into which one is born. The knowledge that one is to work, and the process of work, must be assisted be-