

The Capabilities of Moral Leadership

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This paper will focus on the capabilities of moral leadership that are required in the context of a deepening global crisis and accelerating peace and change. The thoughts and reflections presented here on this subject have been greatly influenced and framed by a brilliant book that was written by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, entitled *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, in which he presents an exposition on the role of the learned in society and the requisite conditions and capabilities of their moral leadership.

At the heart of the global crisis currently afflicting humanity there exists a pervasive lack of moral leadership at all levels of human society, as sadly indicated by the increasing evidences of ethical laxity and corruption found among officials of the highest levels of society in both public and private institutions throughout the world. Yet, if ever there were a time in history when the whole world was in most need of effective moral leadership, today is that time. For this is the first time in history that the survival of the entire human race is at risk. Therefore, it is of great importance to identify and discuss some of the most essential capabilities that characterize effective moral leadership; capabilities that should be fostered and developed within the family and the school by a comprehensive and integrated program of moral education.

Before entering into the subject of capabilities, it is necessary to establish the appropriate perspective by considering briefly the current historical context in which moral leadership must function.

Age of Transition

We are living in a turbulent age of transition, in which humanity is moving from a stage of collective adolescence to a stage of collective maturity. Humanity has, in its social history, progressed through stages of unity from the family, to the tribe, to the city-state, to the nation. It now stands on the threshold of its maturity—the establishment of a global society.

The current period of transition from the adolescence of national sovereignty to the maturity of a world civilization is characterized by two pervasive processes that are dramatically shaping the fortunes of mankind. One process is “disintegration,” the tearing apart of the structures and belief systems that characterize the old world order. The second process is “integration,” the building of the institutions, relationships, and understandings that will give birth to a new world order. Although they may appear to be diametrically opposed, in reality the function of these processes are complementary in nature.

The disintegrative process is born from the inadequacy of antiquated social structures and belief systems to respond to the processes of accelerated change and the accumulating global crisis that has been experienced by humanity during the century. The origin of the integrative process emerges from those actions that are expressive of the growing consciousness that is in harmony with the spirit of the age. The operation of these twin processes releases life forces that are both destructive and constructive; as these forces accelerate and expand the range of their impact, they produce profound changes in the ordered life of mankind. These changes inspire the heart with both fear and hope for the future.

We are living in a time during which we can behold before us the rapid disintegration of the very structures of civilization; a time in which we are becoming fully aware of the dangerous environmental situation and extreme social disparity that have been created through the application of ill-conceived and irresponsible models of industrialization and economic growth; a time in which entrenched ideologies and cherished visions of utopian society have proven false and are being abandoned; a time in which, despite

our great scientific and technological advances, 40,000 children die every day on our planet from preventable diseases. It is a time of increasing poverty, violence and despair.

Yet there are glimmerings of hope in this darkness. It appears that the suffering of humanity brings in its wake a consciousness of the new lessons that we are all obliged to learn. In this aspect, the process of disintegration may possibly fulfill its most positive function by bringing down the walls that have divided humanity, and by forcing the members of the human family to consult and work together in the search for, and the application of, solutions that address global problems that deeply concern and affect us all. In this way, the disintegrative process is tilling the soil of our hearts and minds so that new seeds can be sown.

Abundant evidences of the vast process of integration are manifest throughout the world. While the disintegrative process has been clearing the ground, a simultaneous emergence of new forms of integration has been taking place. There are many examples of this phenomenon. The most salient example is that of the United Nations and its various agencies, which have served to initiate and sustain cooperative efforts on the international level in addressing the manifold needs of the world community. The parallel processes that are establishing economic communities in various regions of the world are also expressions of integration that may well represent an essential prelude to the development of a more just economic order on the global level. Other significant expressions of the integrative process are the numerous grassroots social movements that are gaining in strength and influence throughout the world in their diverse efforts to promote peace, human rights, equality of men and women, sustainable development, and many other noble objectives and universal principles. The dramatic increase in the number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) throughout the world is another significant indicator of the growing empowerment of common people to unite and organize themselves into innovative social structures that are designed to promote processes of social transformation and development. The great advances in communication and transportation technologies have facilitated the sharing of information and the establishment of numerous international networks and conferences.

The Concept of Moral Leadership

It is within the context of the age of transition that an appropriate approach and curriculum content for a program of moral education must be developed. The program should stimulate and nurture the formation of a new type of moral leadership that will possess the capabilities required for the transformation of human society and the development of an ever-advancing civilization.

The identification of the primary capabilities that should be developed by a program of moral education is a task of great import, in that the capabilities that are selected and are given priority will determine in great measure the nature of the virtues, qualities, values and actions of the future moral leadership of society. This paper will focus on two primary functions of leadership and four capabilities that are essential for the transformation of the individual and of society. There are, obviously, other capabilities that might also be considered and incorporated into an integrated program of moral education. At this point, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by moral leadership. The definition of the term "leadership" has many different connotations, some of which are contrary to the meaning used in this paper. When people are asked what it means to be a leader, they often respond with ideas like the following: "to be in charge or control," "to give orders," "to be in command," "to be number one." To meet the needs of humanity in its stage of maturity, this prevailing concept of leadership needs to be questioned and replaced with a concept that is centered on service. The goal of such new leadership is the empowerment of others to contribute to society, rather than the concentration of power over others. The primary characteristic of a moral leader should be the spirit of service: "he who serves the community most" rather than "he who dominates the community most."

Egocentric forms of leadership have unfortunately dominated the pages of history and tend to prevail in current world affairs. Autocratic, paternalistic, totalitarian, manipulative, and "know-it-all" modes of leadership disempower the groups they claim to serve. Such leadership forms concentrate decision-making power in the hands of a few so that others will serve them. What the world needs now is exactly the opposite of this approach—a new type of leadership that is based on moral values and principles and

that sincerely devotes its capabilities to the service of the common good.

The Twofold Purpose and Moral Responsibility

In constructing a framework for moral education, there are many basic issues that must be answered in a coherent and convincing manner in order for the framework to be useful for meaningful curriculum development. Questions related to the definition of the purpose of human existence and to the definition of moral responsibility are of primary relevance.

The framework that we propose affirms that there is a twofold purpose of human life that provides direction and meaning to existence. When this twofold purpose is recognized and accepted by an individual as his personal purpose for existence, it provides the primary orientation for an active moral life.

The first aspect of this twofold purpose is related to the process of personal transformation. The aim of this process is to transform the latent potentialities of the individual into a living reality, in which the physical, intellectual and spiritual aspects of the human being may attain their fullest and most noble expression. The fulfillment of this purpose requires the constant exertion of individual effort in the search for truth and the acquisition and application of knowledge, wisdom, virtues, and spiritual qualities in all the aspects of daily life.

The second aspect of this purpose has to do with the complex process of social transformation. The ultimate aim of this process is the promotion of an ever-advancing civilization based on principles of justice and love. The development of a just society, in which the common good is fostered through structures that facilitate collaboration and cooperation, and in which the benefits of individual initiative and creativity are safeguarded and encouraged, is indeed the challenging and highly complex task facing humanity.

These two aspects of the purpose of human existence are intimately inter-related. On the one hand, it is impossible to conceive of social transformation without individuals, who are actively engaged in the process of personal transformation, working towards its achievement. On the other hand, it is likewise impossible to achieve personal transformation in a social vacuum. Only when an individual is engaged in serving the processes of social transformation can he develop his highest and most noble potentialities.

In our framework of moral education, truth forms the basis for defining moral responsibility. It is proposed that there are two fundamental moral responsibilities that every individual must fulfill: 1) the search for and recognition of truth, and 2) the application of truth in the processes of individual and social transformation, and in all other aspects of daily life. When each individual sincerely strives to fulfill these two moral responsibilities, then the light of truth can guide the fulfillment of the twofold purpose of human existence. By "truth" we do not limit our meaning to only that which is discovered by scientific research, but we also refer to the spiritual truths that have been revealed by the great religions of the world, which have provided the moral and spiritual basis for human civilization. These two sources of truth are not contradictory, but rather complementary. Both are needed for the promotion of an ever-advancing civilization.

The Concept of Capabilities

At this point it is necessary to further clarify what is meant by the term "capabilities" as used in this paper, and why the development of capabilities is a central concern in our approach to moral education.

Traditional approaches to moral education – whether the development of character or virtues, value clarification, or moral reasoning approaches – tend to promote a passive concept of the moral person. To be moral is to be "good," to keep out of trouble. We want to change this concept to one in which the moral person is an individual who is consciously and actively engaged in performing actions that promote individual and social transformation. Thus, to be moral is to "do good." This concept of the moral person implies that the moral person must possess certain capabilities that empower him to perform moral

actions.

The building blocks of an individual's moral structure include attitudes, qualities, skills and abilities, as well as knowledge and understanding of essential moral concepts. Rather than examining these attributes individually, it is useful to consider them in related groups that make up a major moral function of an individual—a moral capability. A capability is the ability of a person to perform specific types of actions that are essential to individual and collective development and well-being.

Consider, for example, a farmer. The capability to produce a crop depends upon an understanding of biological and agricultural concepts, certain attitudes towards science and innovation, and development of practical skills and abilities that constitute sound agricultural practice. The capabilities of a moral person would involve the virtues, skills, attitudes and knowledge that would enable the person to make appropriate moral choices and take appropriate action to achieve some aspect of the twofold purpose of individual or collective transformation in the context of the needs of humanity's coming of age.

In developing a program of moral education based on this concept, the first task consists of identifying the set of capabilities to be nurtured and developed by the program. Each capability must then be analyzed and its component elements (i.e. knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, and virtues) determined to provide the focus for the design of curricular elements and the selection of appropriate teaching methods. The remainder of this paper introduces two functions and four capabilities of leadership as a starting point for analysis toward the development of a curriculum for moral leadership.

Group Functions of Leadership

Sociological studies indicate that there are two basic functions of leadership within a group. One function has to do with promoting the unity of the group. The other has to do with promoting the fulfillment of the goals or needs of the group through actions. Both functions are essential for the life and well-being of any group, whether it be a family, an organization, or a local, national, or world community.

The first function is in alignment with the process of integration described above. The effective promotion of unity requires the ability to facilitate consultative processes that allow collective decision-making based on a rigorous and sincere search for truth. This requires not only the ability to articulate clearly one's views but also the ability to transcend self in order to listen to the diverse views of others who are participating in the consultative process. The virtues of humility, courtesy, compassion and truthfulness are essential for his process and for the achievement of a broader and deeper understanding of reality – an understanding that should ultimately form the basis of unity of thought in decision-making.

The second group function has to do with facilitating the process of carrying thoughts into action. The effective fulfillment of a group's purpose and goals requires capabilities that are oriented towards action. An example is the capability to take creative initiative for the realization of decisions. The exercise of volition in taking initiative often requires the courage that is born from a conscious knowledge of and commitment to truth. The faithful application of moral principles in guiding action is at the core of this capability. When moral principles form the basis of our actions, this inspires our collective efforts with the necessary commitment and perseverance that will enable our actions to transform our noble and creative vision into reality.

Capabilities of Moral Leadership

The first capability of moral leadership is continuous learning in the acquisition of human perfections, both in the intellectual and spiritual spheres. First and foremost among human perfections is the acquisition of knowledge that is useful for the progress and development of humanity. By this is not meant the acquisition of sciences that begin in words and end in words, but rather of those sciences that promote the individual and collective well-being. The cultivation of the mind in the sciences and arts in this case is understood as a basic moral responsibility of each individual. But this endeavor must be balanced with the understanding that the true excellence of the individual cannot be attained, except through service to

the common good.

“And the honour and distinction of the individual consist in this, that he among all the world’s multitudes should become a source of social good.” (Secret of Divine Civilization, page 2)

Knowledge alone, however, is not enough. The capability for continuous learning must not only focus upon the development of those spiritual virtues and qualities that form the ultimate basis of the civilized life of mankind. For example, it has been stated that the foundation of all individual virtues is truthfulness, and that without truthfulness an individual cannot acquire other virtues. The expression of the virtue of truthfulness should not be limited to the individual, but it should also be extended to the collective level of society as well. The individual has the moral responsibility not to passively tolerate the perpetuation of institutionalized lies and prejudices that are fostered by corrupt vested interests and ignorance.

If an individual does not reflect in his life the noble virtues that must distinguish man’s station, how could he be considered as a worthy example for others to emulate?

The second moral capability has to do with the activity of educating others. This capability refers to teaching one’s acquired wisdom, knowledge and skill to others. A true moral leader is one who bends his efforts towards the education of the masses, and works day and night until all are sheltered within the stronghold of knowledge. For he realizes that the greatness and progress of a nation depend upon the degree of knowledge possessed by its people, and that ignorance is a primary cause of human degeneration and backwardness. A moral leader empowers others in their service to humanity.

The third capability has to do with inner discipline and self-control. This refers to the capability of opposing one’s passions, which is not an easy capability to develop, especially in an environment that is dominated by the corrupting influences of materialistic society. It is precisely the lack of discipline that is one of the most conspicuous characteristics of consumer society. Yet in the final analysis it can be said that the capability of self-discipline is the balance wheel of human behavior. Without it, we cannot hope to achieve our noble aims and destiny, for we will easily become the victims of our own fleeting passions and corrupt inclinations.

“How often has it happened that an individual who was graced with every attribute of humanity and wore the jewel of true understanding, nevertheless followed after his passions until his excellent qualities passed beyond moderation and he was forced to excess.” (Secret of Divine Civilization, page 59)

The fourth capability has to do with the duty to recognize and obey truth. Though mentioned last, it is not least in importance. If a program of moral education were designed for schools to only develop this capability in children, the other capabilities would gradually develop as the result of its exercise. The ultimate basis of moral conduct is the recognition of and obedience to truth. When a man does not place himself above truth, then, and only then, can he become truly trustworthy.

This capability implies the acquisition of a set of specific values, skills and attitudes that are essential for the independent investigation of truth. When an individual seeks truth in all things and attempts to live his individual and collective life in accord with the truth he has discovered, he has then begun to walk the arduous and noble path of true moral leadership.

The moral responsibilities—to recognize and obey truth—are also binding for truth as expressed in the form of spiritual and social laws that govern and protect our individual and collective development and well-being. True moral leadership recognizes and understands the function of laws in developing and maintaining a civilized and just society. For this reason, a true moral leader would never place himself above the law. Even if he should think that a law is unjust, he would never deign to use violent means for change, but rather would seek to change the law through appropriate legal measures that are designed for this purpose. If such measures are not contemplated in the existing legal system, he will promote appropriate educational activities that will facilitate the reform of the legal system and the establishment of such legal measures.

These four capabilities are inter-related and mutually supportive. The acquisition of one facilitates the acquisition of the others. Together they form the basic structure of the character of the moral man and of the true moral leadership needed in the world today during this turbulent age of transition.

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