# Chapter 1 Violence and the Demand for Moral Education

> TV VOICE: 'Millions of viewers saw the two astronauts struggling at the foot of the ladder until Oates was knocked to the ground by his commanding officer . . . Captain Scott has maintained radio silence since pulling up the ladder and closing the hatch with the remark, "I am going up now. I may be gone for some time."' (*Jumpers*, p. 23)[1]

## THE POPULAR EQUATION

Next time some more-than-usually striking act of violence hits the headlines, consider the opinions expressed in the media. Will you find a reference to education? Quite possibly, if the violence has not involved schools or young people, you will not. But if children or young people who have only recently left school are involved as perpetrators, it will be surprising if you do not encounter the view that there must be something amiss in education; that if young people were getting a proper moral education, events like these would never happen. This kind of view was expressed, for instance, after the murder of two-year old James Bulger by two ten-year old boys, after the murder of the headteacher Philip Lawrence, and after the shooting of children in a school in Jonesboro, Arkansas, by two classmates.

Such a view is often expressed in a rather unsophisticated way; thus it will be appropriate to refer to it here initially in a deliberately simplistic form, in the formula: 'more morality in schools = less violence in society'.

This is not intended strictly as an equation. Rather the suggestion is of a causal relationship: more morality in schools will lead to less violence in society. I use the form of words 'more morality in schools' as an indication, not just of a demand for more moral education, but of a demand for moral education according to a certain conception of what it is. My impression has been that the view that schools should do something about the 'moral crisis' in society often goes with an understanding of morality as a matter of conformity to certain basic rules, and of moral education as essentially a matter of inculcating this conformity. Whether this is an appropriate way of seeing morality and moral education will be one of my central topics.

On the other side of the equation I have written ‘violence in society’. Yet if the event in the news is, say, terrorist bombings, or ‘ordinary’ violent crime by ‘mature’ adults, the question ‘What has gone wrong with these people’s education?’ is not usually prominent. It is when the violence is committed by young people that one is most likely to hear the popular formula. Perhaps the thought is that while children are actually attending school, or for young people who have only recently left school, the influence of their education must be especially strong.

Yet it does not seem entirely rational that education should be expected to make a difference especially for these categories. Is it that the influence of education is expected gradually to wear off with time, so that it would be unreasonable to expect the moral education that someone received as a child to have any influence at all on whether that person behaves violently at the age of fifty? This would fit oddly with the very common idea that education is a preparation for adult life.

In any case, even if the thought expressed in my slogan does tend to appear in the media especially after violence committed by children, there may be a thought of more general applicability behind it. Many people see our society, our culture, as being violent, or as putting insufficient constraints on violence; and they do think that schools should have some effect on the nature of the culture. So it is right, I think, to express the right-hand side of the equation as ‘less violence in society’, not just as something like ‘less violence in and around schools’. It is also necessary, of course, to ask whether schools can reasonably be expected to have an effect on the whole culture.

That there is an argument *for* the slogan is fairly easy to show. The argument could go like this:

1. Violence is morally wrong.
   *Therefore*
2. People who behave morally will not be violent (*by definition*).
3. People who are morally educated will behave morally.
   *Therefore (putting 2 and 3 together)*
4. People who are morally educated will not be violent.
   *Conclusion*
5. Moral education will reduce violence.

Perhaps the connection with the nature of the wider culture could be initially indicated in some further steps:

6. Everybody in society, when they are young, receives some education.
   *Therefore*

7. If children, from now on, begin to receive an adequate moral education, there will come a time when everyone within the society has received an adequate moral education.
   *Therefore*
8. The effects of an adequate moral education will not just be on this individual or that; they will be on everybody in the society.
   *Conclusion*
9. This will constitute a change in the culture.

The argument appears simple. It is so simple that almost any element of it, and the transitions from one element to the next, can be challenged. Nevertheless, it does seem to constitute a *prima facie* case for the popular equation. Perhaps we can add yet one more stage to the argument:

10. If moral education can do something about violence, it ought to.
    *Therefore*
11. If an approach to moral education contains no adequate response to violence, that is a deficiency in the approach.

I am suggesting, then, that it is not unreasonable to see the issue of violence as a kind of test case for approaches to moral education. If a proposed programme for moral education, or more broadly a way of talking and thinking about moral education, seems to have nothing adequate to say to public concerns about violence, or seems likely in no way to affect the incidence of violence, this might be seen as a major weakness. If moral education can not make a difference in this way, it might be said, what good is it?

## THE CASE AGAINST

There is, of course, something to be said on the other side. If there is a widespread sense that moral education could, and should, be addressing violence more effectively than it now does, there is also the frequent thought that thinking or talking about morality is *not* the way to address whatever problems society has about violence. Perhaps this thought is found more frequently among academics and social commentators than among the general public; it too has a claim on philosophical attention.

The following example comes from the Report of The Commission on Children and Violence convened by the Gulbenkian Foundation (which is hardly a hotbed of radicalism or moral scepticism):

> In considering violence and how to reduce it, a concentration on moral judgements is unlikely to be helpful, acting as a distraction from issues amenable to change. (Gulbenkian Commission, 1995, p. 32).

Two things are not untypical here (though they are not necessarily to be attributed to the individual members of the Gulbenkian Commission): a certain suspicion about the making of moral judgements at all, and a conviction that it is the causes of behaviour that need most to be addressed.

Look again at the argument set out above. To accept the first step of the argument is to endorse a moral judgement: 'violence is morally wrong'. Many people are uncomfortable about taking such a definite moral stance. There may be various reasons for such discomfort (some of which will emerge later),[2] but the result is that some people would prefer to avoid moral talk altogether. That may be one reason why some people see moral talk as a distraction from the real job of tackling violence.

There is also the idea that to reduce violence it is necessary to identify the causes or contributory conditions of violence and do something about them. This is not a matter of moral discourse, but of other kinds of discourse, for example sociological or economic. The approach through such kinds of discourse can appear rational and empirically based where moral talk can appear woolly and subjective.

A possible argument, in outline, runs like this. When someone is violent, there will be in principle a causal explanation of that behaviour. Various factors may come into that explanation: the person's family background, social circumstances, ongoing frustrations and immediate provocation. Morality, or the absence of it, simply does not figure in the explanation. Perhaps certain observers may use moral language in talking about what has happened, but the explanation of what happens will often be presented as, in a strict sense, amoral. Morality in this kind of picture is not a causal force in the world at all;[3] or if it is, it is too weak to make much difference.

You may wonder how morality is the sort of thing that could be a causal force. I mean that moral ideas, people's moral thinking, people's use of moral language, might be among the factors which result in their acting in one way or another. It might be, for instance, that sometimes a person refrains from doing something because she thinks to herself 'this would be wrong'. Then the fact that she thinks in that way would be part of the explanation of why she does not do it. The view in which morality drops out of the explanation seems to be denying that this kind of thing can happen. (Some philosophers would invoke here a distinction between reasons and causes, saying that if a person's reason for not doing something is that she thinks it would be wrong, this cannot at the same time be a cause of her refraining. But even if that view is taken, the upbringing or education which the person received, which enabled such a consideration to be a reason for her, can be counted among the causal factors which contributed to her eventual decision.)

The extensive literature on bullying in schools illustrates the point. References to morality, and the use of any distinctively moral language,[4] are largely conspicuous in this literature by their absence. There will often be some moral evaluation made by the authors early on in identifying why bullying is a problem (e.g. people have a right not to be victimised).[5] But when the text goes on to make practical suggestions about how schools should respond to bullying and try to prevent it, the idea that pupils' behaviour might be influenced by any moral talk is as likely to be condemned as 'moralising' as to be advocated.

If morality is seen in this way as impotent, then so is moral education. Whether the level of violence in our society in the years to come increases or decreases may have nothing to do with anything that moral educators do or fail to do.

The view that morality is impotent in changing the behaviour of those people who are, or who may become, violent, may be complemented by the view that for other people, morality and moral education are irrelevant because unnecessary (so far as any likelihood of violence is concerned). Most people most of the time are not violent; perhaps many people are unlikely to behave violently anyway. For such people, their non-violence may have nothing to do with their moral education or lack of it. As John White says about not killing people (in a passage I shall quote at greater length in the next chapter): 'with few or no exceptions children don't need moral education programmes in order to learn not to do it.'

So, if the concern is to reduce violence, it can easily seem that moral education must be either irrelevant, because most people are not going to be violent anyway, or impotent, because moral education lacks the capacity to prevent violence. Then the popular equation will be simply wrong. And if morality and moral education are either impotent or irrelevant, in relation to something like violence, which can be such a negative factor in the quality of human life, then what, one could say, is the point of morality? Why do we bother with it? Why not forget all about it?

In the face of such a challenge, I would like to defend the popular equation. At the same time I have to recognise that the popular equation, as it stands, is simplistic, and that it may often be associated with views I do not share. Defenders of the equation may often have over-simple views both about violence and about morality and the nature of moral education. If I am to defend the popular equation, I cannot take the popular understanding of its vocabulary for granted.

You might think that this is the point at which I need to define my terms. What is 'violence'? What is 'morality'?

## ON NOT DEFINING ONE'S TERMS AT THE BEGINNING

Students writing essays often think they should start by defining their terms. So, sometimes, do writers of reports. This is not necessarily a good idea. For instance, the Gulbenkian Commission report already referred to prints at the beginning of its 'Definition of Violence':

> Violence is defined as behaviour by people against people liable to cause physical or psychological harm (p. 4).

Unfortunately, there is no particular reason to think that all the mentions of violence throughout the 300 or so pages of the report actually conform to this definition. The Gulbenkian Commission drew heavily on other reports from other bodies, and on many research studies. It would hardly have been doing its job if it had tried rigorously to exclude any work which was not written with an eye to just the same definition. In particular, the Gulbenkian Commission no doubt had good reason for including in its definition behaviour liable to cause psychological harm, even in the absence of any physical harm. But most of the other work on which the Commission drew was probably working, explicitly or implicitly, with a narrower notion of violence, closer to everyday usage, in which physical force is an essential element. The discussion throughout the report also reads generally as if this narrower notion is the focus.

Definitions at the beginning, then, can too easily be left idle, like pivots on which nothing in the argument actually turns (the same phenomenon which can often be observed in student essays). Where philosophical writing is concerned, much of the argument may be about the understanding of terms; there is no point in trying to pre-empt the necessary discussion by stipulating the answer at the beginning. So far as this book is concerned, both 'morality' and 'violence' are contested concepts (as is 'education', but so much has been written on that notion within philosophy of education that it — the concept, not the reality — will be a lesser focus here).

Apart from the general reasons for not stipulating the meaning of one's terms at the beginning, there is the particular reason that understandings of violence and morality can interact. First, few uses of the word 'violence' are morally neutral. It may look as if it is possible to define the term in such a way that we can tell whether violence is taking place purely by observing what goes on. We see one person hitting another: that appears to be a central case of violence, which we can describe as such before and independently of any moral judgement of its rightness or wrongness. But even in the apparently simplest cases we make assumptions about the intentions of the persons involved. We need to know, or assume, for instance, that we are not watching two people pretending, perhaps in a piece of street theatre (most violence on stage and in screen fiction is, after all, not actually violence: it is a representation of violence, in which people are pretending to be violent).

When we make a moral evaluation of some action (to put explicitly what may take place implicitly) we are often evaluating an intention. Was one person hitting the other for reasons which we regard as justifying the action? If so, will we still describe the action as violence? Often, too, we cannot grasp what the intention was without knowing the moral evaluations *of the agent*. Perhaps the person hitting was an adult and the person hit was a child. What was the adult's intention? To hurt? To frighten? Or perhaps the action as the adult saw it was a 'smack' as an act of moral education: 'you were naughty (evaluation) and I know better than you (evaluation) and I have a right (evaluation) to teach you a lesson'.

Many people are less likely to call an action violent if they believe that it is justified; many will not describe an action as violent at all without at the same time and by the same token seeing it as wrong. This means that how we conceive of violence is not independent of how we conceive of moral evaluation. If moral evaluation is indeed primarily a matter of seeing whether an action conforms to certain rules or principles, then counting an action, of hitting, say, as unjustified and therefore as violent will be a matter of seeing it as a violation of norms. And indeed academic discussions of violence have often written into their definitions that an action which is violent is — besides other conditions — one that violates norms or is illegitimate (i.e. violating laws or quasi-legal norms) (e.g. Garver, 1981, Honderich, 1980, Wolff, 1969).

For the virtue ethics of which so much has been heard recently (more on this below: see pp. 41 ff.), moral (or ethical) evaluation is not primarily a matter of reference to norms. Evaluation is primarily of persons, or of the quality of character of persons. So we might expect that a virtue theorist would be more interested in the grounds on which we might describe someone as a violent (or non-violent) person. This does not mean that a virtue theorist cannot focus on individual actions, but when she does it will be the motivation of the action which will be central, rather than whether it conforms to norms. If she sees the motivation of the adult smacking the child as good — if she sees this as the kind of action one would expect from a caring responsible parent, or the kind of action which could flow from a loving disposition — she might not describe the action as violence. If she sees the action as manifesting a malicious or sadistic character, she will be much more ready to describe it as violence.

Is this all a matter of verbal quibbles, of no relevance to the practical business of education? Not at all. This is partly for the reason — which is of application far beyond the present context — that we cannot respond to practical situations without conceptualising them in some way. How teachers respond to violence in schools has a lot to do with what they recognise as violence and with the moral evaluations they make. But they are not only using these notions in their own thinking: they are also inevitably, even if unconsciously, engaged in teaching them. No child's use of language is complete by the time the child starts school. The child's encounters with the concepts of violence and of morality within school themselves constitute part of the child's education. Whether teachers use these notions in a clear or a confused way, then, does make a difference to the education of the children passing through our schools. It is because of this that the idea that schools could change the culture does have some purchase.

Is that not an argument for laying down a usage of the terms, so as to impose some clarity and coherence? It is not, because we are dealing with ideas which are of common currency in our language, not the technical terms of a specialised discipline. A recommendation to use a term in a particular way, even if it is backed up by an argued case, may have no effect, or a very gradual one, on entrenched linguistic habits.

Consider a teacher who is taking a part-time Masters course in the sociology of education. Perhaps she has become acquainted with the notion of 'systemic violence', which 'has been defined as any institutional practice or procedure that adversely impacts on individuals or groups by burdening them psychologically, mentally, culturally, spiritually, economically or physically' (Epp and Watkinson, 1996, p. i). Talking to colleagues in the staff room, worrying about the incidence of violence in the school, she could, by this definition, be uneasy about the school's collective worship marginalising Muslims, or about a particular teacher's tendency to use sarcasm towards pupils; but she is far more likely to be concerned about fighting between pupils or physical attacks by pupils on teachers.

It is the physical kind of violence which is likely to come to mind first in most contexts in which the term is used (except where its use seems clearly to be metaphorical; someone might think, for instance, that the notion of systemic violence does violence to the ordinary understanding of the word).[6] Up to this point it is likely that most readers have tacitly been taking the term this way, though some may indeed have been questioning my usage. It is physical violence of person against person which I shall take as the central case. There are arguments for extending this usage, but these arguments will almost invariably be appealing to moral evaluations. It will be said, for instance, that certain ways in which people can be humiliated, perhaps by calling them names, are morally equivalent to physically hurting people; that is, they are morally as bad, and for similar sorts of reason (consider the different ways in which one person can treat another which may be counted as bullying). Thus the notion of psychological violence comes into use (and is perhaps now gaining a wider currency).

If we extend our notion of violence by treating one kind of behaviour as morally equivalent to another, which we already count as violence, then what we count as violence is going, as before, to depend importantly on what kind of moral evaluations we give priority to. Do we count one kind of treatment as equivalent to another because it has consequences which are bad in the same sort of way? Then we open the way to notions such as that of systemic violence, where it is ‘adverse impact’ that counts, not the motivation of any person responsible for the adverse impact, or even whether there is any identifiable person who is responsible at all. Or do we count one kind of treatment as equivalent to another because it stems from a similar motivation, or similar state of character? Then we might count as morally equivalent both physical and psychological violence which is seen as stemming from maliciousness, but not ‘systemic violence’ which may be an unintended by-product of arrangements made for quite other purposes.

## HOW TO PROCEED

I have not so far tried to lay down a way of conceiving either of violence or of morality; I have only shown that the questions are complex, not least because of the interactions between them. In particular I have mentioned some of the variety of conceptions of violence, but I have also touched on some different ways of conceiving of morality. Do I then, need to review all possible conceptions of morality and relate them to all possible conceptions of violence, or is there some less exhaustive, and exhausting, way to proceed?

Here, I suggest, it will be helpful to go back again to the popular equation. If this equation is to have any plausibility, it must be drawing on an understanding of morality which has certain features. It must be possible to see morality as having a point, as being good *for* something (as opposed to just good in itself), because the popular equation in effect wants to *use* morality as a means to an end. And it must be possible to see morality as being at least in some respects shared and public. There must be sufficient agreement in the language people use for them not to be merely talking at cross purposes; and there must be some actual agreement on the judgements people make within their common language (a broadly Wittgensteinian point which will recur in the next chapter). The outline argument, as an argument within public discourse, assumes agreement on its premises: the rest of the argument would not go through if the first premise were merely '*some people think* that violence is morally wrong'.

One question we have to consider, then (and would have to consider even if we were not taking violence as our central example), is: 'Do we have, or is there available to us, a conception of morality which can fulfil the public role that popular demands for moral education presuppose?' This is the question I wish to pursue. I have already suggested that the popular view tends to think in terms of basic rules or constraints which are not to be overstepped. How far that way of thinking will survive within a more reflective consideration of morality remains to be seen. Initially I want to ask how philosophical writing on education, and on moral education in particular, has responded to public concerns about violence. Later I shall go on to recommend — for certain public and educational purposes — a particular way of conceiving of morality. I shall not, in this book, recommend a way of conceiving of violence. Rather, I shall say that, given a certain understanding of morality, the question of how we conceive of violence is itself a question to be addressed publicly within that understanding of morality. This book will not, then, be telling teachers, or anyone else, what to do about violence. Like much philosophy, it will be a set of prolegomena — which is simply Greek for 'things which need to be said in advance'.

## NOTES

1. See sources and acknowledgements in the Introduction.
2. See also Chapter 6, 'What's wrong with morality?' in *Teaching about Values*.
3. In philosophical jargon, it is an epiphenomenon.
4. I shall say more later about what kind of language counts as moral.
5. For example Tattum and Lane (1988), p. 1.
6. The distinction between the literal and the metaphorical may not be clear-cut. I am inclined to count the notions of 'systemic violence', 'structural violence' (Galtung, 1969) and 'the Marxist concept of violence' (Harris, 1980) as extensions of the literal meaning of the term (it being a further question whether there is good reason for the extensions). On the other hand, the notion of 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1994) seems to me metaphorical. But perhaps nothing substantial hangs on the literal/metaphorical distinction.