

## Even When No One is Looking: Fundamental Questions of Ethical Education

Jan Habl

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How can we teach a person to know the good, desire the good, do what is good, and to do it “even when no one is looking”? Is it possible to teach virtue? What are the fundamentals upon which an ethical or moral education stands? Whence does moral or ethical awareness arise? Jan Habl’s purpose in writing this book is to shape children and adults who through ethical education have a good reason to behave well (moral knowing), behave well towards others (moral feeling), and behave well alone (moral action).

Habl claims that people are suffering from moral malnutrition, ethical deficits, and a decline in social capital. We disagree about right and wrong. We may even refuse to admit fault or guilt, or transfer blame, especially in politics. This state of affairs is tragic, undesirable, and dangerous (4).

According to Habl, the Enlightenment metanarratives of continual upward human progress and cultural diversity as the solution to cultural differences result in the delusion that right knowledge will produce right action. He turns to Czech philosopher and theologian Jan Amos Comenius [1592-1670], with his focus on “samosvojnost” (human narcissism, selfishness, and self-centeredness) which has alienated us from God and from each other, to puncture this delusion.

The book’s central hypotheses are: First, because people are both noble and depraved, lifelong moral education is irreplaceable and helps us become who we should be (4). Second, effective moral educators must teach by disciplined example and must enact their teaching through service to others. Third, ethicists who model a critical openness will help shape people who value freedom, independence, self-control, rational reflection, and competence. Fourth, ethical education should start when children are young, before “ill manners and vice begin to nest.” And finally, knowledge, skill, and competence can be used for both good and for evil.

The book’s hypotheses invite further questions. Is ethical education just for children? What about ethical education for adults? What happens when the chief institutions charged with teaching ethics are themselves ethically deformed? How do those who have been ethically malformed find teachers who will help them reform?