Interview with Owen Flanagan (excerpts)[1]

In America, there is a big problem about moral education in public schools. Because Americans are so used to religion as the moral source (thus the skepticism that atheists and agnostics can be trusted) and because we believe that there must be neutrality on matters of religion in public institutions (separation of church and state), the result is essentially that schools are not allowed to teach morals. As far as schools go you can't have sex in school, bring guns or dope to school, or cheat on tests. These school-side mores are justified prudentially. As for the rest of your moral beliefs, virtues, and values, we hope you get them elsewhere, at home, in church, synagogue, or mosque. This is a disaster.

It is not entirely false to say that the combined forces of secularism, liberalism, and multiculturalism have caused the vacuum in teaching ethics in schools because they share the same worry about privileging one comprehensive and substantive vision of the good life, especially because of the suspicion that it will sneak in or actually be a particular religion. What to do? Here are two ideas I have thought about and write about some in my forthcoming book, *The Geography of Morals*:

1. Identify values, virtues, and moral beliefs that are shared across great world spiritual and secular traditions, and teach them in schools. This will get you some substantive values— what Charles Taylor calls an "unforced consensus"—love your neighbor, be compassionate, be attuned to suffering, be charitable in interpretation, be courteous, kind, respectful, be honest, beware in-group chauvinism, work to mitigate bad luck. There are also shared beliefs across most traditions: selfish people are rarely happy. Teach all this.
2. Work to undermine the belief, or perhaps just let time have its way, in undermining the— what I take to be—false belief that ethics requires a religious foundation and thus that teaching any ethics always involves sneaking a religion in.

This still leaves us with this worry (plus a billion others)…on the issue of building communities with shared moral values: I think we are better off here than we might think. I believe that there is in fact an "unforced consensus" at a fairly deep level about the things that a good person is like and ought never to do. In my work, I find that although different traditions, secular and sacred, differ some about the most important virtues, e.g., justice has pride of place in the North Atlantic, whereas compassion is emphasized more in East, South and Southeast Asia, you will almost never find that what one community or tradition thinks is a virtue is a vice somewhere else. Virtues, basic commandments, do's and don'ts show convergence. So you might wonder why isn't there more direct instruction in schools about this unforced moral consensus. One

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[1] Flanagan is currently the James B. Duke University Professor of Philosophy at Duke University. The full interview is found att: http://prosblogion.ektopos.com/2016/06/30/philosophers-and-their-religious-practices-part-22-comparative-philosophy-the-unforced-moral-consensus-and-the-charms-of-expressive-theism/

reason in America, as I said in an answer to a previous question, is that we confuse anything that looks like moral instruction with sectarian religious instruction. The unforced consensus says that one ought never to kill an innocent, to love one's neighbor, that one ought to never be mean, angry, cruel, a bully, one should be attentive to those down on their luck, be grateful for the gifts in one's life, do not lie, cheat, or steal, and never, ever treat another as less worthy based on their gender, skin color, or looks. But we resist teaching the kids these things in schools. Why? We worry that someone will give a liberal interpretation of down-on-their-luck, or will sneak in a religious view of abortion as involving innocents. So we cut off our nose to spite our face. In any case, the unforced moral consensus makes me hopeful that we could, even in very plural, multicultural, cosmopolitan worlds find ways to affirm our common values, which I claim are there.