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Are We Living in a Moral Stone Age?

Christina Hoff Sommers
W. H. Brady Fellow
American Enterprise Institute

Christina Hoff Sommers is the W. H. Brady Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, D. C. She is also a professor of philosophy at Clark University, where she has served on the faculty since 1980.

Dr. Sommers has appeared on such programs as *20/20*, the *McLaughlin Group*, *Donahue*, *60 Minutes*, *Nightline*, and *Crossfire* to discuss the future of feminism, gender bias in the schools, and moral education.



Her articles have appeared in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Journal of Philosophy*, *USA Today*, the *New Republic*, the *Washington Post*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and the *Times Literary Supplement*.

She has edited *Vice and Virtue in Everyday Life* and written *Who Stole Feminism?* Currently, she is at work on a third book, *The War Against Boys*. ♣

Philosopher Christina Sommers charges that today's young people are suffering from "cognitive moral confusion." They not only have trouble distinguishing right from wrong—they question whether such standards even exist. The threat this moral relativism poses to society is greater than any external danger.

Dr. Sommers spoke at the Shavano Institute for National Leadership fifteenth anniversary program, "Heroes for a New Generation and a New Century," last October.

We hear a lot today about how Johnny can't read, how he can't write, and the trouble he is having finding France on a map. It is also true that Johnny is having difficulty distinguishing right from wrong. Along with illiteracy and innumeracy, we must add deep moral confusion to the list of educational problems. Increasingly, today's young people know little or nothing about the Western moral tradition.

This was recently demonstrated by *Tonight Show* host Jay Leno. Leno frequently does "man-on-the-street" interviews, and one night he collared some young people to ask them questions about the Bible. "Can you name one of the Ten Commandments?" he asked two college-age women. One replied, "Freedom of speech?" Mr. Leno said to the other, "Complete this sentence: Let he who is without sin. . . ." Her response was, "have a good time?" Mr. Leno then turned to a young man and asked, "Who, according to the Bible, was eaten by a whale?" The confident answer was, "Pinocchio."

As with many humorous anecdotes, the underlying reality is not funny at all. These young people are morally confused. They are the students I and other teachers of ethics see every day. Like most

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professors, I am acutely aware of the “hole in the moral ozone.” One of the best things our schools can do for America is to set about repairing it—by confronting the moral nihilism that is now the norm for so many students.

I believe that schools at all levels can do a lot to improve the moral climate of our society. They can help restore civility and community if they commit themselves and if they have the courage to act.

Conceptual Moral Chaos

When you have as many conversations with young people as I do, you come away both exhilarated and depressed. Still, there is a great deal of simple good-heartedness, instinctive fair-mindedness, and spontaneous generosity of spirit in them. Most of the students I meet are basically decent individuals. They form wonderful friendships and seem to be considerate of and grateful to their parents—more so than the baby boomers were.

In many ways they are more likable than the baby boomers—they are less fascinated with themselves and more able to laugh at their faults. An astonishing number are doing volunteer work (70 percent of college students, according to one annual survey of freshmen). They donate blood to the Red Cross in record numbers and deliver food to housebound elderly people. They spend summer vacations working with deaf children or doing volunteer work in Mexico. This is a generation of kids that, despite relatively little moral guidance or religious training, is putting compassion into practice.

Conceptually and culturally, however, today’s young people live in a moral haze. Ask one of them if there are such things as “right” and “wrong,” and suddenly you are confronted with a confused, tongue-tied, nervous, and insecure individual. The same person who works weekends for Meals on Wheels, who volunteers for a suicide prevention hotline or a domestic violence shelter might tell you, “Well, there really is no such thing as right or wrong. It’s kind of like whatever works best for the individual. Each person has to work it out for himself.” The trouble is that this kind of answer, which is so common as to be typical, is no better than the moral philosophy of a sociopath.

I often meet students incapable of making even one single confident moral judgment. And it’s getting worse. The things students now say are more and more unhinged. Recently, several of my students objected to philosopher Immanuel Kant’s “principle of humanity”—the doctrine that asserts the unique dignity and worth of every human life. They told me that if they were faced with the choice

between saving their pet or a human being, they would choose the former.

We have been thrown back into a moral Stone Age; many young people are totally unaffected by thousands of years of moral experience and moral progress. The notion of objective moral truths is in disrepute. And this mistrust of objectivity has begun to spill over into other areas of knowledge. Today, the concept of objective truth in science and history is also being impugned. An undergraduate at Williams College recently reported that her classmates, who had been taught that “all knowledge is a social construct,” were doubtful that the Holocaust ever occurred. One of her classmates said, “Although the Holocaust may not have happened, it’s a perfectly reasonable conceptual hallucination.”

A creative writing teacher at Pasadena City College wrote an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* about what it is like to teach Shirley Jackson’s celebrated short story “The Lottery” to today’s college students. It is a tale of a small farming community that seems normal in every way; its people are hardworking and friendly. As the plot progresses, however, the reader learns this village carries out an annual lottery in which the loser is stoned to death.

It is a shocking lesson about primitive rituals in a modern American setting. In the past, the students had always understood “The Lottery” as a warning about the dangers of mindless conformity, but now they merely think that it is “Neat!” or “Cool!” Today, not one of the teacher’s current students will go out on a limb and take a stand against human sacrifice.

The Loss of Truth

It was not always thus. When Thomas Jefferson wrote that all men have the right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” he did not say, “At least that is my opinion.” He declared it as an objective truth. When Elizabeth Cady Stanton amended the Declaration of Independence by changing the phrase “all men” to “all men and women,” she was not merely giving an opinion; she was insisting that females are endowed with the same rights and entitlements as males.

The assertions of both Jefferson and Stanton were made in the same spirit—as self-evident truths and not as personal judgments. Today’s young people enjoy the fruits of the battles fought by these leaders, but they themselves are not being given the intellectual and moral training to argue for and to justify truth. In fact, the kind of education they are getting is systematically undermining their common sense about what is true and right.

Let me be concrete and specific: Men and women died courageously fighting the Nazis. They included American soldiers, Allied soldiers, and resistance fighters. Because brave people took risks to do what was right and necessary, Hitler was eventually defeated. Today, with the assault on objective truth, many college students find themselves unable to say *why* the United States was on the right side in that war. Some even doubt that America *was* in the right. To add insult to injury, they are not even sure that the salient events of the Second World War ever took place. They simply lack confidence in the objectivity of history.

Too many young people are morally confused, ill-informed, and adrift. This confusion gets worse rather than better once they go to college. If they are attending an elite school, they can actually lose their common sense and become clever and adroit intellectuals in the worst sense. George Orwell reputedly said, "Some ideas are so absurd that only an intellectual could believe them." Well, the students of such intellectuals are in the same boat. Orwell did not know about the tenured radicals of the 1990s, but he was presciently aware that they were on the way.

The Great Relearning

The problem is not that young people are ignorant, distrustful, cruel, or treacherous. And it is not that they are moral skeptics. They just talk that way. To put it bluntly, they are conceptually clueless. The problem I am speaking about is *cognitive*. Our students are suffering from "cognitive moral confusion."

What is to be done? How can we improve their knowledge and understanding of moral history? How can we restore their confidence in the great moral ideals? How can we help them become morally articulate, morally literate, and morally self-confident?

In the late 1960s, a group of hippies living in the Haight-Ashbury District of San Francisco decided that hygiene was a middle class hang-up that they could best do without. So, they decided to live without it. For example, baths and showers, while not actually banned, were frowned upon. The essayist and novelist Tom Wolfe was intrigued by these hippies who, he said, "sought nothing less than to sweep aside all codes and restraints of the past and start out from zero."

Before long, the hippies' aversion to modern hygiene had consequences that were as unpleasant as they were unforeseen. Wolfe describes them: "At the Haight-Ashbury Free Clinic there were doctors who were treating diseases no living doctor had ever encountered before, diseases that had disappeared so long ago they had never even picked up Latin

names, such as the mange, the grunge, the itch, the twitch, the thrush, the scroff, the rot." The itching and the manginess eventually began to vex the hippies, leading them to seek help from the local free clinics. Step by step, they had to rediscover for themselves the rudiments of modern hygiene. Wolfe refers to this as the "Great Relearning."

The Great Relearning is what has to happen whenever earnest reformers extirpate too much. When, "starting from zero," they jettison basic social practices and institutions, abandon common routines, defy common sense, reason, conventional wisdom—and, sometimes, sanity itself.

We saw this with the most politically extreme experiments of our century: Marxism, Maoism, and fascism. Each movement had its share of zealots and social engineers who believed in "starting from zero." They had faith in a new order and ruthlessly cast aside traditional arrangements. Among the unforeseen consequences were mass suffering and genocide. Russians and Eastern Europeans are just beginning their own "Great Relearning." They now realize, to their dismay, that starting from zero is a calamity and that the structural damage wrought by the political zealots has handicapped their societies for decades to come. They are also learning that it is far easier to tear apart a social fabric than it is to piece it together again.

America, too, has had its share of revolutionary developments—not so much political as moral. We are living through a great experiment in "moral deregulation," an experiment whose first principle seems to be: "Conventional morality is oppressive." What is right is what works for us. We question everything. We casually, even gleefully, throw out old-fashioned customs and practices. Oscar Wilde once said, "I can resist everything except temptation." Many in the Sixties generation made succumbing to temptation and license their philosophy of life.

We now jokingly call looters "non-traditional shoppers." Killers are described as "morally challenged"—again jokingly, but the truth behind the jokes is that moral deregulation is the order of the day. We poke fun at our own society for its lack of moral clarity. In our own way, we are as down and out as those poor hippies knocking at the door of the free clinic.

We need our own Great Relearning. Here, I am going to propose a few ideas on how we might carry out this relearning. I am going to propose something that could be called "moral conservatism." It is based on this premise: We are born into a moral environment just as we are born into a natural environment. Just as there are basic environmental necessities, like clean air, safe food, fresh water, there are basic moral necessities. What is a

society without civility, honesty, consideration, self-discipline? Without a population educated to be civil, considerate, and respectful of one another, what will we end up with? Not much. For as long as philosophers and theologians have written about ethics, they have stressed the moral basics. We live in a moral environment. We must respect and protect it. We must acquaint our children with it. We must make them aware it is precious and fragile.

I have suggestions for specific reforms. They are far from revolutionary, and indeed some are pretty obvious. They are “common sense,” but unfortunately, we live in an age when common sense is becoming increasingly hard to come by.

We must encourage and honor institutions like Hillsdale College, St. Johns College, and Providence College, to name a few, that accept the responsibility of providing a classical moral education for their students. The last few decades of the twentieth century have seen a steady erosion of knowledge and a steady increase in moral relativism. This is partly due to the diffidence of many teachers who are confused by all the talk about pluralism. Such teachers actually believe that it is wrong to “indoctrinate” our children in our own culture and moral tradition.

Of course, there are pressing moral issues around which there is no consensus; as a modern pluralistic society we are arguing about all sorts of things. This is understandable. Moral dilemmas arise in every generation. But, long ago, we achieved consensus on many basic moral questions. Cheating, cowardice, and cruelty are wrong. As one pundit put it, “The Ten Commandments are not the Ten Highly Tentative Suggestions.”

While it is true that we must debate controversial issues, we must not forget there exists a core of noncontroversial ethical issues that were settled a long time ago. We must make students aware that there is a standard of ethical ideals that all civilizations worthy of the name have discovered. We must encourage them to read the Bible, Aristotle’s *Ethics*, Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, the Koran, and the *Analects* of Confucius. When they read almost any great work, they will encounter these basic moral values: integrity, respect for human life, self-control, honesty, courage, and self-sacrifice. All the world’s major religions proffer some version of the Golden Rule, if only in its negative form: Do not do unto others as you would not have them do unto you.

We must teach the literary classics. We must

bring the great books and the great ideas back into the core of the curriculum. We must transmit the best of our political and cultural heritage. Franz Kafka once said that a great work of literature melts the “frozen sea within us.” There are also any number of works of art and works of philosophy that have the same effect.

American children have a right to their moral heritage. They should know the Bible. They should be familiar with the moral truths in the tragedies of

Shakespeare, in the political ideas of Jefferson, Madison, and Lincoln. They should be exposed to the exquisite moral sensibility in the novels of Jane Austen, George Eliot, and Mark Twain, to mention some of my favorites. These great works are their birthright.

This is not to say that a good literary, artistic, and philosophical education suffices to create ethical human beings; nor is it to suggest that teaching the classics is all we need to do to repair the moral ozone. What we know is that we cannot, in good conscience, allow our children to remain morally illiterate. All healthy societies pass along their moral and cultural traditions to their children.

And so I come to another basic reform: Teachers, professors, and other social critics should be encouraged to moderate their attacks on our culture and its institutions. They should be encouraged to treat great literary works as literature and not as reactionary political tracts. In many classrooms today, students only learn to “uncover” the allegedly racist, sexist, and elitist elements in the great books.

Meanwhile, pundits, social critics, radical feminists, and other intellectuals on the cultural left never seem to tire of running down our society and its institutions and traditions. We are a society overrun by determined advocacy groups that overstate the weaknesses of our society and show very little appreciation for its merits and strengths. I would urge those professors and teachers who use their classrooms to disparage America to consider the possibility that they are doing more harm than good. Their goal may be to create sensitive, critical citizens, but what they are actually doing is producing confusion and cynicism. Their goal may be to improve students’ awareness of the plight of exploited peoples, but what they are actually doing is producing kids who are capable of doubting that the Holocaust took place and kids who are incapable of articulating moral objections to human sacrifice.

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In my opinion, we are today not unlike those confused, scrofulous hippies of the late 1960s who finally showed up at the doors of the free clinics in Haight-Ashbury to get their dose of traditional medicine. I hope we have the good sense to follow their example. We need to take an active stand against the divisive unlearning that is corrupting the integrity of our society.

William Butler Yeats talked of the “center” and warned us that it is not holding. Others talk of the threats to our social fabric and tradition. But we are still a sound society; in more than one sense, we have inherited a very healthy constitution from our founding fathers. We know how to dispel the moral confusion and get back our bearings and our confi-

dence. We have traditions and institutions of proven strength and efficacy, and we are still strong.

We need to bring back the great books and the great ideas. We need to transmit the best of our political and cultural heritage. We need to refrain from cynical attacks against our traditions and institutions. We need to expose the folly of all the schemes for starting from zero. We need to teach our young people to understand, respect, and protect the institutions that protect us and preserve our kindly, free, and democratic society.

This we can do. And when we engage in the Great Relearning that is so badly needed today, we will find that the lives of our morally enlightened children will be saner, safer, more dignified, and more humane. ▲