

The Moral Intelligence of Children

Coles R (Bloomsbury, 1997, 218 pages)

Once in a while if we are lucky, one comes across a book that touches our hearts, opens our eyes, and puts down in words what we always knew at the back of our minds but never explored meaningfully. I was fortunate to be asked to review such a book and the work in question is written by a Pulitzer Prize-winning author, Dr Robert Coles. Dr Coles is a researcher and teacher of psychiatry at Harvard University, and one of the world's most respected experts on the inner lives of children.

The Moral Intelligence of Children is the latest of a list of books on child psychiatry for the layman. In his previous works, he explored narratively the minds of children in *The Inner Life of Children* and the sometimes awe-inspiring moral rectitude children display in *The Moral Life of Children*. In his latest book, he takes this further by exploring the important topic of how to raise morally upright children and that the moral character of a child is often developed from the early years, almost as young as one year of age.

The book is divided into three parts. In Part I, Dr Coles draws on his years of experience while working with children's moral, political and spiritual lives and discusses what makes a person "good" or "not-so-good". In the first chapter, he traced the origin of the term "moral intelligence" from Dr Rustin McIntosh, a distinguished paediatrician who taught Dr Coles during his younger days as a doctor. Dr McIntosh did not provide a precise definition but rather, told him about boys and girls "who were good, who were kind, who thought about others...who were smart in that way". He asserts that moral intelligence is not acquired only by memorisation of rules and regulations but is a consequence of learning how to be with others, how to behave in this world – a learning prompted by taking to heart what we have seen or heard. Dr Coles concludes that a child is a "witness of adult morality", ie the child looks for cues on how one ought to behave, and these cues are found in parents and teachers who go about their lives showing in action their assumptions, desires and values.

He then uses personal experiences with children he has worked with to illustrate the "good person", the "not-so-good" person and the "badly-behaving person". In each type of person, he links the moral character of the child with the kind of parenting and upbringing the child had, illustrating his earlier

assertion that children's moral character is greatly influenced by their social environment, upbringing and examples of their parents. For example, he talked about a girl called Elaine who is the bright, popular nine-year-old child of prosperous parents, who was accused of cheating on a class test by a fellow male classmate. Initially, the teacher did not believe the boy and Elaine's parents were offended that their daughter was "wrongly" accused. Moreover, Elaine, instead of being sorry, gloated over the fact that her classmate was distrusted. Eventually, the truth became known that Elaine had been cheating for a long time and instead of punishing their daughter, Elaine's parents remained reluctant in admitting their daughter's wrongdoing. The parents' evasive and protective attempts to attenuate their daughter's misdemeanor was, to Dr Coles, a protective mechanism to defend their family's defective moral system, illustrating that a child's values is deeply influenced by their social environment.

In Part II of his book, Dr Coles proceeds to demonstrate that a child's moral values system begins to develop as early as the postnatal years and traces the formation of a conscience during the elementary school years which is the equivalent to our primary school years. He also discusses the internal struggle of adolescents testing and challenging the value system that they were brought up with, and the formation of their own personal moral system.

The book concludes with Part III which is an open "Letter to Parents and Teachers". In it, he reminds all adults that they are models from whom children imbibe and develop their values and morals. He stresses that the teaching of a value system is not just by verbal instruction but more importantly, by adults being consistent and exemplary role models for our children to learn from. He concludes very wisely that practising one's moral system is a life-long journey which requires a commitment to self and to others; and though being constantly challenged, will be enriched and rarefied by it.

This book review would not be complete without comment on Dr Robert Coles' writing style. Dr Coles adopts a narrative style based on a description of his patients' histories and offers little or no organised commentary or interpretation. His book is written in a way that does not give a clear

characterisation of his position or for sweeping generalisations. Rather, he often circles around certain themes, sometimes appearing to make a point but later quickly moving away from it. He has, as in the past, always insisted that people's stories speak for themselves and for stories to have force and significance, they must be told in the words of the characters themselves. This explains why the book is written in such a narrative rather than an interpretive style. This makes reading Dr Coles' book easy yet thought-provoking. However, on the other hand, it is sometimes frustrating because he seldom gives his own conclusions, but would prefer us to arrive at them ourselves. Such a style is unconventional but not surprising when you realise that it comes from a man who is often described as an enigma of contradictions – he is a physician without a conventional practice, a psychiatrist who rejects much of the language of his specialty and a Harvard academic who spends much of his time volunteering in ghetto schools.

In retrospect, perhaps it is because of these reasons that Dr Coles' book is such a refreshing and provocative read.

In conclusion, this book is not just for psychiatrists, physicians or people who have an interest in child behaviour and psychology. It is also very suitable for teachers, parents and anyone who wishes to raise children with good moral values and to realise that they have a vitally important role and responsibility when doing so. I believe that this book is especially relevant for young Singaporean parents of today who are both working and have relegated child-raising to maids and foster caregivers. It reminds us that the ultimate responsibility of raising morally upright children falls on parents and unless we are around for them to model themselves after, we might be facing a greater problem in the near future.

DR GERALD KOH