
DOES MORALITY HARM CHILDREN?
ALICE MILLER ON MORALITY AND POISONOUS PEDAGOGY

William L. Fridley
Southeastern Oklahoma State University

Alice Miller, the former psychoanalyst, has gained world renown for her controversial and provocative writings on child rearing. Miller contends that traditional child rearing practices—in schools, ecclesiastical settings, and the family—consist of physical and emotional cruelty that she labels “poisonous pedagogy.” According to Miller, children who are subjected to such treatment have no recourse other than to repress their anger, rage and resentment for their abusive parents. The reason they have no recourse is in great part due to the effects of moral, religious, and ideological principles that convince the child such treatment is “for your own good.” This repressed anger is vented years later when the victims have a convenient target; namely, their own children (or for teachers, their students). Hence, the cycle of poisonous pedagogy is perpetuated from generation to generation. While much attention has been given to Miller’s psychological theories (particularly the psychological effects of “spanking”), there has been little in the way of philosophical analysis given to her account of the role *morality* plays in this process.

Miller’s book, *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of Violence*, is her most thorough explication of the nature and effects of poisonous pedagogy, and will also be the focus of my analysis.¹ The first task of my analysis will be to clarify and distill Miller’s views on morality. For example, I will clarify what she means by “morality,” set forth her account of the role *morality* plays in *poisonous pedagogy*, and explain her objections to morality, so conceived. Next, I will offer a critical examination of her criticisms of morality, and entertain possible objections to her account. Finally, I will suggest ways in which Miller’s views might be of use for educators.

CLARIFICATION OF MORALITY AND ITS ROLE IN POISONOUS
PEDAGOGY

When Miller objects to *morality*, she is referring to moral discourse, moral judgments, and the attendant beliefs in some type of moral order—be it objective or conventional—that inform such claims. This would include, for example, claims about moral duties and obligations (for example, “it is right or wrong to do this or that”), and claims of value that refer to the moral realm of human action (for instance, “that is a good or bad thing to do”) or to the moral status of individuals or states of affairs (“he is a bad or good boy,” or “that is a good or evil state of affairs”). Miller labels the use and invocation of such moral claims, as “moralizing.” She announces,

It is my intention to refrain from all moralizing. I definitely do not want to say someone ought or ought not to do this or that (for

example, ought not to hate), for I consider maxims of this sort to be useless. Rather, I see it as my task to expose the roots of hatred, which only a few people seem to recognize, and to search for the explanation of why there are so few of these people. (9)

Thus, Miller uses the term “morality” in an ordinary and typical fashion. Upon examining Miller’s views on the philosophical status of said moral claims and beliefs, however, her position is less typical and far from ordinary. In one of her most extensive treatments of this matter, Miller notes the almost universal belief in moral values: the belief that some actions are *really* right or wrong, *really* good or bad. “Every pedagogue,” Miller writes, “accepts as a foregone conclusion that it is wrong to tell a lie, to hurt or offend another human being, and to respond in kind to parental cruelty instead of showing understanding for the good intentions involved, etc.” (63). In their attempt to inculcate these moral values to children, Miller asserts that parents and pedagogues “sometimes resort to lying, deception, cruelty, mistreatment, and to subjecting the child to humiliation” (64). According to Miller, this apparently paradoxical state of affairs is easily reconciled in adults’ minds by recourse to the paternal mantra, “kid, this is for your own good.” As Miller puts it,

In the case of adults, however, it is not a matter of “negative values,” because they already have their upbringing behind them and use these means solely to achieve a sacred end: to save the child from telling lies in the future, from being deceitful, malicious, cruel, and egotistic. (64)

Moreover, it is Miller’s opinion that these contradictory dynamics are the inevitable result of systems of moral values that are a function of, and hence relative to, various relations of power. “It is clear from the foregoing that a relativity of traditional moral values is an intrinsic part of this system: in the last analysis, our status and degree of power determine whether our actions are judged to be good or bad” (64). Miller, here, points out the relativity of moral value systems, and she subsequently states that some “may find the way I relativize traditional pedagogical values and question the value of pedagogy *per se* to be shocking, nihilistic, threatening, or even naïve” (64). It would be inaccurate, however, to characterize her as a *moral relativist*. That is, the moral relativist holds that morality is relative to context, *and* that in a given context there exist certain moral principles that *are* prescriptively binding. Miller, on the other hand, would deny the binding prescriptivity of any putative moral principles. In fact, Miller expresses a decided aversion to the “abstract ethical systems of religion or philosophy” (64).

The moral claims Miller cites, originate primarily from three sources: First, are the written accounts (many by seventeenth and eighteenth century German authors) prescribing various pedagogical and child rearing practices, replete with moral admonitions; Second, are the ideological systems that posit

ideal “ends” and prescribe certain morally mandated means to achieve these ends; Third, are the moral principles and injunctions that spring from religious traditions. Perhaps her most cited target in this regard is the Fourth Commandment (“thou shall honor thy mother and father”), which she charges as being a central tenet in poisonous pedagogy.

CRITICISMS OF MORALITY AND POISONOUS PEDAGOGY

I will now clarify and explain the ways in which Miller claims morality functions in contributing to what she calls poisonous pedagogy. In so doing, I will also explicate her criticisms of poisonous pedagogy, highlighting the functions of morality in these practices, and describing its harmful effects on children.

The goal of Miller’s work might be summarized as the quest to see clearly one’s childhood history. Concerning this purpose, Miller states:

Since I do not believe in the effectiveness of giving prescriptions and advice, at least when unconscious behavior is involved, I do not consider it my task to admonish parents to treat their child in ways that are impossible for them. Instead, I see it as my role to convey relevant information of a vivid and emotional nature to the child in the adult. As long as this child within is not allowed to become aware of what happened to him or her, a part of his or her emotional life will remain frozen, and sensitivity to the humiliations of childhood will therefore be dulled. (xvii)

In this text, as in several of her other works, Miller attempts to accomplish this task in two ways. First, she describes and explains the child rearing practices she refers to as “poisonous pedagogy.” And second, she recounts the childhoods of individuals that were subjected to poisonous pedagogy. The attempt, then, is to bear witness to and thus to prevent the devastating role of poisonous pedagogy, “its destruction of vitality, [and] its danger for society” (xvii).

The first, and perhaps most important criticism Miller makes of morality’s role in pedagogy are of its obscuring—even blinding—effects. This obscuring effect is at least twofold. Not only does it obfuscate from the child what is being *done* to him, but it also obfuscates from the pedagogue what he is *doing* to the child. The parent-child relationship is one of a power differential. The child is dependent and needy, longing for the parents’ love and care, and is terrified at the prospect of losing this love.

In the child’s eyes, the parents take on a divine role of omnipotence and omniscience.

From this position of power, the parents then inflict humiliation, manipulation, coercion, and an array of pedagogical subterfuge upon the

unwitting child. In addition to the moral rationales that cloak this pedagogical subterfuge, the child's confusion is compounded because these practices are executed in conjunction with various manifestations of the panoptic gaze. As Miller repeatedly points out, while children are commanded to honor their parents, there is no corresponding commandment for the parents to honor their children. While the parents interrogate, command, and "spank" their children, it is forbidden for the children to question, challenge, or "spank" their parents. This creates a double bind on the children. Not only are children forced to suffer the treatment to which they are subjected, but they must be grateful for such treatment. Children who fail to display the requisite gratitude risk losing their parents' love and approval. Miller explains this dynamic as it relates to corporal punishment:

Beatings, which are only one form of mistreatment, are *always* degrading, because the child not only is unable to defend him- or herself but is also supposed to show gratitude and respect to the parents in return. And along with corporal punishment there is a whole gamut of ingenious measures applied "for the child's own good" which are difficult for a child to comprehend and which for that very reason often have devastating effects in later life. (17)

Because the child's desire to know what is being done to him is typically thwarted at an early age, one of the effects is that even as he becomes an adult, the victim of poisonous pedagogy will continue to believe that the treatment he received was for his own good and for the purpose of impeding his evil inclinations. Miller refers to this as the "idealization" of one's parents. This is a phenomenon that, once again, prevents the individual from recognizing the truth of his upbringing and precludes the understanding of one's emotions.

In addition to the obfuscating effect on children, the moral discourse that pervades child-rearing practices also produces a similar effect on the parents that practice poisonous pedagogy. Since the parents were themselves victims of poisonous pedagogy and subsequently operate under the blinding spell of the idealization of their own upbringing, they are unable to truly understand what they are doing to their own children.

A case in point involves the labeling of children's behavior in moral terms. Children's expressions of exuberance and vitality, as well as anger and rage are often labeled as "immoral," and then punished by parents whose similar expressions and behaviors as children were labeled and punished as such. This then creates a self-fulfilling prophecy of sorts, in which the parents' punitive and disciplinary measures actually serve to provoke the very emotions and behaviors that the parents will then feel morally compelled to suppress. "Cause and effect are confused," Miller says of this scenario, "and what is attacked as a cause is something that the pedagogues have themselves brought

about. Once ‘wickedness’ has been produced in a child by suppressing vitality, any measure taken to stamp it out is justified” (31).

Moreover, Miller argues that many parents, in their preoccupation with abstract moral principles related to being a “good” parent (just as they were preoccupied with being “good” sons and daughters as children) are thus unable to understand their children’s true needs. Nor—in this mindset of moral performance—are they able to listen with empathy to what the child is telling them (258). Thus, in reference to the obscuring effect of morality, Miller concludes, “that moralizing concepts are less apt to uncover the truth than to conceal it” (260).

A second criticism that Miller makes of morality in child rearing involves its contribution to the creation of subsequent psychological disorders; namely, the phenomena of splitting off and projection, and the repetition compulsion disorder. As Miller argues on numerous occasions, it is not necessarily the traumatic treatment experienced by children that is problematic. But rather, it is the suppression of the emotional responses to the traumatic treatment that leads to various neuroses, psychoses, and destructive behaviors.

In no small part, moral injunctions and moral prohibitions are the psychic mechanisms employed by parents and pedagogues to suppress children’s expressions of anger and rage against their abusers. In their condition of helpless dependence and unawareness, children internalize the shame, guilt, and labels of moral censure foisted upon them by their parents. That is, the child comes not only to believe “what I do is bad,” but “what I am is bad.” Unable to endure one’s “badness,” the individual then projects the evil onto a target or scapegoat who is then subjected to the punitive treatment that such putative evil deserves. Miller refers to this “complicated psychodynamic mechanism” as “splitting off and projection of parts of the self” (80).

Another psychological dynamic that Miller attributes to poisonous pedagogy is the *repetition compulsion disorder*. Miller cites our early upbringing as the genesis of this disorder. She writes, “The way we were treated as small children is the way we treat ourselves the rest of our life.” One who is subjected to poisonous pedagogy and is not aware of what is being done to him “has no way of telling about it except to repeat it” (133). This compulsion to repeat how one was treated can take the form of “acting out” (as with the splitting off and projecting phenomenon), or take the form of self-destructive behaviors. For example, one may repeatedly become involved in dysfunctional relationships in which others may inflict cruel and punitive acts upon the individual. And in other cases, individuals will repeatedly engage in such self-destructive behaviors as drug abuse, addictions, and eating disorders. These individuals, Miller argues, are compelled to punish the “badness” or “evil” that is within them, just as their early pedagogues and parents punished them.

A third line of criticism that Miller lodges against morality concerns its prominent role in various systems of ideology; be they political, religious, therapeutic or pedagogical. One of the constitutive characteristics of these systems is the positing of certain moral goals, ends, or purposes. Adherence to these moral beliefs creates the possibility and often the actuality of what Nel Noddings has called “the elevation of principles over persons.”² That is, adherents to the ideology have not only the moral mandate, but also the moral justification to engage in action that will lead to the achievement of these “higher purposes.” As Miller argues, this includes actions that cause harm to others and even those actions that sacrifice the well being of children.

Children raised in these systems (at either the societal or familial level), are compelled to comply with and obey the tenets of the ideology without question and without criticism. In addition to the arrested development of critical thinking that results, Miller contends that children raised in such a system will consequently be susceptible to being controlled and manipulated. In fact, they will often gravitate to situations in which they are manipulated, because that is what they are familiar and comfortable with. Collectively, those societies that emphasize these pedagogical and child rearing practices will be especially vulnerable to political manipulation and tyrannical control.

A fourth criticism Miller makes of morality is that it is useless. As we can see from her previous criticisms, however, to say that morality is *useless* is not to say that is without *effect*. Perhaps one of Miller’s most eloquent passages on morality’s uselessness concerns the matter of resistance to totalitarian regimes. While it is often said that those who oppose totalitarianism have a “strong moral sense” or have remained “true to their principles,” Miller is of the opinion that such accounts miss the point. Miller explains, “The longer I wrestle with these questions, the more I am inclined to see courage, integrity, and a capacity for love not as ‘virtues,’ not as moral categories, but as the consequences of a benign fate.” By “benign fate,” she is referring to those who were permitted an awareness of what they experienced as children and were allowed to object to and defend themselves against mistreatment. Miller continues,

Morality and performance of duty are artificial measures that become necessary when something essential is lacking. The more successfully a person was denied access to his or her feelings in childhood, the larger the arsenal of intellectual weapons and the supply of moral prostheses has to be, because morality and a sense of duty are not sources of strength or fruitful soil for genuine affection. Blood does not flow in artificial limbs; they are for sale and can serve many masters. (85)

POSSIBLE OBJECTIONS TO MILLER

Many objections can, and have been made of Miller's work. These objections include charges that her positions are not subject to falsification; that her psychological views are flawed, both theoretically and empirically; that her claims are exaggerated; that she dwells on extreme cases without adequate concern for degree or distinctions; and the classic objection, "I was raised that way, and I turned out all right." Though these objections are certainly worthy of consideration, I will focus on several objections that specifically pertain to Miller's views on the use of morality in pedagogic efforts.

Some might object that Miller is being inconsistent in her anti-morality position because she is actually making moral objections to morality. This is a typical charge that is made against various forms of moral skepticism. According to this line of criticism, moral skeptics and amoralists will inevitably make decisions and judgments in the moral realm (for example in the context of human relations). When such decisions and judgments are made, they are of a "moral" nature, and hence constitute an inconsistency with or a self-refutation of the moral skeptic's position.

Defending Miller against this criticism involves the consideration of at least two questions. The first is a conceptual question; namely, how do we define "morality," and what counts as a *moral* claim, judgment, or action? The second is an empirical question of fact; namely, does Miller make such *moral* claims in her writings? In the initial section of the essay I attempted to clarify what Miller is referring to when she criticizes morality. She is referring to those claims and beliefs concerning obligation and value in the realm of human relations. She objects to such claims, and the beliefs that inform them, be it an objective morality or merely a conventional morality.

It is true that she uses terms such as "cruelty," "deception," and "love" that are often used in a moral sense. Such terms, however, are not necessarily moral terms and Miller does not employ them in a moral sense. For example, she does not claim that cruelty is wrong, or deception is bad, or that we have a duty to love others. That is, she uses such terms in a descriptive rather than a prescriptive sense. While individuals might quibble as to what counts as "cruel behavior," Miller is of the opinion that adding the moral judgment "and cruelty is bad," is unnecessary, superfluous, and confusing. In other words, some of the cruelest, and most destructive actions have been justified by moral arguments and have been motivated by moral beliefs. Acts of courage, care, and compassion, on the other hand, do not require a moral justification. And, according to Miller, moral injunctions are quite impotent in motivating such acts. Not only does she refrain from making objections to morality on moral grounds, but a thorough examination of Miller's writings demonstrates a remarkable consistency on her part, to fulfill her stated intent to "refrain from all moralizing."

This initial criticism stems from the question of whether it is possible to dispense with *morality*. Conceptually and philosophically, I believe that it is possible, as Miller's work illustrates and as it is also argued in Richard Garner's work on amoralism.³ In a famous essay, Elizabeth Anscombe argued that morality was a residual of divine command theory, and that it should be jettisoned. She also posed concerns over whether this was psychologically possible.⁴ I would liken this matter to those who contend that any system of morality or normative framework for human conduct is dependent upon religious authority. Yet, most philosophers recognize that it is surely possible to discuss and engage in our personal and social conduct without reference to such concepts as *sin*, *God's will*, and *divine sanctions*. Perhaps this is also the case with our concepts of moral value and obligation. Though this issue is beyond resolution, here, it does lead to the question that prompts the next objection to Miller's position. Namely, is abandoning morality desirable or preferable?

Some, then, might object that, contrary to Miller's claims, it is not morality per se that is the problem, but rather the issue involves *which* moral principles are endorsed, and *how* they are implemented. In other words, it is not morality that harms children, but the adults that misuse and abuse their imposition of morality on children. For example, one might concede that while traditional approaches to moral education are flawed due to their emphasis on duty and obedience, an approach to moral education that featured moral injunctions to love and care for others might be endorsed. Miller, of course, would resist this objection. In fact, she contends that moral claims such as "we should love," or "it is right to care," share the problems inherent in all moralistic efforts. Specifically, they function to hide the truth of what is being done to the child, and such injunctions are relatively useless in promoting the behavior they mandate. Clearly, the thoughtful and judicious utilization of moral claims by parents and educators is preferable to the unreflective and pernicious imposition of moral demands. While I will not argue that the use of moral claims is necessarily harmful, I would humbly suggest that Miller's criticisms of morality might give the readers pause to consider their routine recourse to moral claims—which are often taken for granted. The hope being that such consideration might contribute to practices that assist in the development of happy and healthy children.

A third objection is that the examples of child rearing cited by Miller are extreme cases, drawn primarily from a particular cultural-historical milieu that is not representative of contemporary child rearing practices. To a degree, Miller acknowledges that in some ways modern parenting has improved, and that in some cases the treatment of children is less cruel and severe. Miller also claims, however, that "overt abuse is not the only way to stifle a child's vitality" (92). In other words, many of the more "enlightened" approaches to raising children involve subtle mechanisms that serve to manipulate children,

obscure what is being done to them, and perpetuate the cycle of poisonous pedagogy. In addition, Miller is of the opinion that poisonous pedagogy in its more severe forms continues to be practiced to an extent that we are not willing, nor able to acknowledge. In the United States, for example, we see the growing popularity of “character education” programs in our schools. Many of these programs have a strong moralistic emphasis that I find problematic, for many of the same reasons that Miller objects to.⁵

A fourth objection to Miller concerns the application of her views to either familial or school settings. Specifically, it might be argued that she provides little in the way of pedagogical suggestions and direction and that her approach is too permissive and does not provide the grounding for limits in the adult child relationship. Miller would readily admit that she does not offer pedagogical prescriptions. She cautions readers that her writings should not be considered “how to” manuals on raising children. Miller also makes it clear that while she especially objects to the “poisonous” manifestations of pedagogy, she also has an aversion to all forms of pedagogy. Among the reasons for her aversion are the coercive, manipulative, and controlling features that she believes are inherent in all pedagogical efforts. In short, it is not her purpose, or desire to make pedagogical suggestions or offer a set of directions for raising children.

She does, however, anticipate, and attempts to counter the objection that her approach is too permissive and without limits. She rejects the notion that her position resembles “a Rousseauistic optimism about human ‘nature’” (96). Furthermore, she argues that her position does not preclude the importance of certain forms of restraint or limits. According to Miller,

All this does not mean that children should be raised without any restraints. Crucial for healthy development is the respect of their care givers, tolerance for their feelings, awareness of their needs and grievances, and authenticity on the part of their parents, whose own freedom—and not pedagogical considerations—sets natural limits for children. (98)

Of course, Miller’s accounts on these matters are unlikely to satisfy those who feel the need for operating in a more explicitly structured fashion.

This brings me to a final objection to Miller’s views. There are surely those who will continue to hold fast to their moral beliefs and principles. And for many, these beliefs include the moral imperative to teach their children these moral principles and to act in accordance to them. I have little confidence in the power of philosophical argumentation to persuade one to question or change one’s moral or religious beliefs. Miller realizes this, and I believe her attempt to help the reader understand his childhood, through a descriptive rather than a prescriptive approach, is perhaps the most likely approach to affect change and provide insight.

USEFULNESS FOR EDUCATORS

I am of the opinion that Miller's work has much to offer. Not so much for its application to teaching, but for its value in helping the teacher gain a greater self-understanding. My reading of Miller has helped to open my eyes to my childhood: how I was raised, and how I was taught. It has heightened my awareness that the way I treat my students is often an unconscious (and sometimes unfortunate) repetition of the way I was treated, as a child and as a student. This awareness and understanding has also enhanced my ability and desire to empathize with and understand my students.

Miller alerts us to the deceptions, dangers, and perils associated with the use of morality. Her work has much in common with Noddings' efforts to debunk the use of traditional approaches to morality in education. I applaud these efforts, and feel they are pursuing a promising path for educators. I have been toying with what I call "the paradox of morality and moral education." This paradox, simply stated, is that abandoning morality in education will lead to a more humane (and some might say "moral") world.⁶ This notion will have to be developed in another essay, and Miller's work will be an important influence in its preparation.

NOTES

1. Alice Miller, *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of Violence*, 3rd ed., trans. Hildegarde Hannum and Hunter Hannum (New York: Noonday Press, 1990). This work will be cited in the text for all subsequent references.
2. Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 40.
3. Richard Garner, *Beyond Morality* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1994).
4. G.E.M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," in *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G.E.M. Anscombe: Ethics, Religion and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 26–42.
5. For criticisms of contemporary character education programs and their moralistic emphasis, see Alfie Kohn, "How Not to Teach Values: A Critical Look at Character Education," *Phi Delta Kappan* (1997). For criticisms of conservative approaches to the raising, instructing and disciplining of children using "strict father morality," see George Lakoff, *Moral Politics: What Conservatives Know that Liberals Don't* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 339–383.
6. The idea of the "paradox" was sparked by Garner's work on amorality. Garner is of the opinion that "a blend of curiosity, compassion, and non-duplicity will almost always result in behavior more 'virtuous' than morality alone could ever hope to produce." Garner, *Beyond Morality*, 383.