

## Teaching the Value of Promising

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### Abstract

#### The Concept

*“I will gladly pay you on Tuesday for a hamburger today.” Saying this makes a promise under the right circumstances. If the vendor accepts, a contract arises from the exchange. Extending beyond this fragment of standard contract law, there are more basic elements of moral and communal survival at stake. Promising introduces the derived concept of obligation. Failure to live up to one’s obligation is a source of being ashamed of oneself and being the subject of shaming by others (Moffett, 2018; 228-30). Once a promise is accepted and service or good provided, a contract exists and is often enforceable by law. But, even without the law, failing to live up to one’s obligations subjects the promiser to sanctions such as shaming and even punishment. “Dad, you promised!” Is an oft heard challenge when a promise is broken to a child. Very young children intuit that in promising, a person becomes obligated to one or more others (Mercier, 2020; p.92). Failing to live up to a voluntarily created obligation on oneself is expected to result in guilt if that same person aborts the obligation others came to rely upon. Legitimate excuses are license to abort an otherwise obligatory commitment. But to be legitimate, the excuses must be recognized by most others as plausibly discounting the afore mentioned obligation.*

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Guilt is a foundational moral experience with an evolutionary record nearly coincidental with promising (Heinrich, 2015). Promising sustains cooperation (Smith & Wilson, 2019). Empathy and sympathy for others, may precede cooperation. Some care for another must precede interest in cooperating with one or more others at least among larger mammals and certainly primates (Bloom, 2013; Gintis, 2000). Promising extends and amplifies cooperating networks far beyond that of any other herd animal (Hare, 2017). Empathy, sympathy and the evolution of promising inevitably prompts further moral responsiveness (Frank, 2020). Guilt is a natural consequence of violating one’s obligation in promising. Shame is the experience of being humiliated by others often as a consequence of promising violations and other wrong-doing (Deomo, Rodogme & Teroni, 2015). But, as in William Golding’s classic novel, Lord of the Flies, the character illustrates, the character Piggy was *shamed* by others in the tribe simply on grounds of his unbecomingness (Golding, 1954). He was an innocent of wrong-doing but shamed nonetheless. Being *ashamed* is quite different from being shamed.

Being ashamed is consequent to recognizing one’s failure of obligation. Hence a parent’s charge to a child who takes a sibling’s desert: “You should be ashamed of yourself!” Presumably within a family there are courtesies and other implicit networks obligating all members to respect property and other rights of family members. Being ashamed is a moral experience. It follows from violating instincts to empathize, sympathize and cooperate (Hunter & Nedelsky, 2018). Introducing students to the role promising plays in human evolutionary history is no

mere act of moralizing. It is instead a straight-forward account of how humans originating as small, feeble, jungle, omnivore scavengers came to dominate all life above bacteria and viruses (Boehm, 2012).

Promising is part and parcel a product of an evolved language ability (Tomasello, 2010). Promising, is a socio-linguistic achievement. It derives from capacities exploited in creating human ability for crafting cultures. Promising is an evolved ability that moved humans from forest scavengers to architects of the earth's future. Learning promising requires understanding of a set of allied concepts such as obligation and social sanction (Terrace, 2019). The resulting social practices led humans to domesticate themselves (Hare, 2017). And in line with this as Hare and Woods write, friendliness (the consequence of self – domestication) is what gave humans a chance to succeed (Hare and Woods, 2020; Denworth, 2020). Friendliness is in essence Hare and Woods' term for all the moral accoutrements herein described as the promising-sculpted social world of humanity. Promising magnifies the potential of self-domesticated friendliness.

Suitably understood, the concept of promising becomes central to all aspects of education from biology to civics instruction (Wagner & Fair, 2020). Promising is role-modeled favorably or unfavorably every day and in every classroom. Teachers promise to grade fairly. Classroom management fails if the implicit promise to do right by all is neglected. Classroom management is served best by creating a moral architecture embodied best in the role-modeling of the teacher (Wagner and Simpson, 2008). Social studies education cannot explore much of human interaction and behavior without at least alluding to underlying promising commitments of humans to one another and within and between organizations. Currency which seems to make the world of economics go round is wholly dependent upon both implicit and explicit networks of promising among all who engage in commercial transactions of any kind (Hanley, 2019).

As noted above, a legitimate excuse releases parties from self-imposed feelings of guilt or communal assignment of guilt. For example, a parent may have promised to take the family to Disneyland, but the advent of a pandemic may justifiably, divert the fulfillment of the promise. Breaking the promise is defended by reference to the potential of dire consequence if the promise were fulfilled. There are no reasonable grounds for guilt when the obligation is properly overridden by inescapable interventions (Deomo, Rodogma & Teroni, 2015: pp. 21-35). Promising is the tipping point moving humans forward from mere accidentally contrived, conventions of cooperation.

### ***The Origins***

Homo erectus and then both homo sapiens and their cousins, the Neanderthals evolved to work together cooperatively, hunt and, protect their young (Barber, 2020: p.111). Group cooperation is seen among many species such as lions, zebras and meercats. Cooperation is the evolutionary ace for herd animals (Skyrms, 2014). Cooperation could not have evolved without the species evolving signals and a capacity for creating and the ability to share patterns of signals (Wiley, 2017; Skyrms, 2014). But only humans manage complex signaling patterns leading to shared systems of morality, moral evaluation and formal sanctions or punishments for defectors (Sober & Sloan-Wilson, 1998; Kurzbaum, Burton-Chellew & West, pp.575-99). Managing complex moral systems involves dispositions, skills and unrelenting commitment to the value of cooperation for noble purpose. What is a noble purpose?

Noble purpose is utilizing the instinct and tools evolution gave humans for the benefit of other cooperating humans (Frank, 2020; p.145-146). Where researchers once thought evolution was based on selfish gene psychology (Dawkins, 1982) it is now believed to be all about survival of the species and not the individual gene (DeSteno, 2014; 58-63; Gould, 2002; p. 652). And, there is tangible reason to believe that even the youngest of students can understand reasonable grounding of shared moral commitment (Hermann, Misch, Hernandez-Lloreda & Tomasello, 2001).

Psychologists Paul Bloom, and others show it is as instinctual for infants to cooperate (Bloom, 2013; Gopnik, 2009; 209-212). Self-interest cannot be denied. However, *species survival* depends far more on cooperation than on competition aimed at securing nothing more than survival of the fittest (Sanderson, 2020; p.184). Mathematical biologist Martin Nowak (Nowak & Highfield, 2011) has shown this to be true but even the father of capitalism Adam Smith argued similarly nearly a 150 years ago (Hanley, 2020; pp.15-18.).

The dispositions to cooperate are behavioral tendencies to act in accord with instinctual capacities realized as abilities for action at the moment (Skrms, 1996). These abilities further develop through acquired skills of reason. Together this concert of cooperative commitment, refined instinctual capacities and skills of reason act in concert to bootstrap young humans into mature adults ready to sustain the species existence' for another generation (Ong, Madlon-Kay, & Platt, 2018).

### ***No Escape from Morality***

Laws formalize and enforce much of human promise-keeping behavior. But such laws emerged long after homo sapiens and even homo erectus collaborated cooperatively to hunt and centuries later to farm. Promising was in place and somewhat definitive of human character before social conventions of promising were formalized and made explicitly enforceable (Seltzer, Zigler & Pollak, 2010; Gintis, 2010). Long after promising practices had been formalized, promising remains an unimpeachable practice in human families and in every organization (Rowland & Curry, 2019). Shame addressed towards those who abuse promising practices is a potent force beyond any applicable law (Manssar, 1991). So, what is it that is above and beyond applicable law?

Morality is not a specific set of algorithms that can be moralized about (Christian, 2020; p. 306-9). Rather, morality is the product of deep-thinking in *The Great Conversation of Humankind* (Wagner & Lopez, 2013; 167-72). Morality is also about extending or modifying the network of promises most likely to carry humans forward successfully into the future. The practice of moral reflection and its product of promising well is a human achievement beyond accident and mere convention (Bradford, 2017; 60-63).

Shaming someone for misconduct in promising is an unabashedly moral practice (Wrangham, 2016; 218-219). It is also a very effective practice in sustaining a cooperative sense of community (Grusec, Saas-Kortsak & Simultis, 1978). To instruct students on laws of supply and demand, behavioral reinforcements, democracy, socialism or capitalism without making transparent the role of promising, gives students little in the way of conceptual structure to tie all cooperative social learnings together.

Teachers have become timid about doing anything that could be construed as moralizing to students. Moralizing is didactic instruction in how one ought to behave. The danger of such instruction is patently obvious. History has made clear that young people can be shaped in ways that are dangerous to themselves and others. If teachers are going to moralize then they ought to know what right-minded behavior is. But can they know such a thing? Is such a thing knowable?

Hitler's youth, China's Red Guard, numerous cults around the world have instructed and shaped young people in ways most of the rest of the world find offensive. In view of such impending threat to human well-being should teachers shy away from moralizing altogether since no one can know what is truly right or wrong behavior?

There have been programs of values clarification encouraging students to grasp their own values. But what values matter? Preferring chocolate to strawberry ice cream is a personal value but such values are of little consequence. In contrast other values matter greatly. Valuing community well-being or practiced acts of charity are values but surely of far greater import than personal tastes in food. Are all values up for grabs since one can never know right from wrong social mandates? Is the abolition of slavery and later, prejudice (mean-spirited bias) a step forward or just different chapters in history?

The advice of the values clarification lists advice was at best distracting and at worse fragmenting (Wagner, 1981; 187-94). The values clarification movement is probably a bit anachronistic by this time but there is still confusion about which moral values are best. Unlike Rousseau's *Emile*, students are not isolated from surrounding influences until they have the most civilized virtues in place. Instead, in today's world, electronic and social media bring worlds flashing into student lives at an astounding rate. Which of these values or world views should be embraced is elusive to say the least. Choosing a mix from so many influences seems chancy, perhaps, reckless. Individuality is welcome and diversity praiseworthy. Still something in the curriculum must aim at keeping altogether for as Lincoln famously said: "United we stand, divided we fall." We now know that same wisdom was unimpeachable millennia ago. Cooperation and its amplifier, promising, are not mere values or conveniences. They are what sustains the species in the face of endless challenges at present and beyond. If there is a commitment to human survival then students must learn that there is no further choice to defect or cooperate. Cooperation makes the species resilient; defection makes it fragmented and vulnerable to extinction (Nowak & Highfield, 2011; Gould, 2002; p.1300; Schwartz, 1986, p.89).

Cooperation for species survival is for the well-being of all lest the genetic treasury of humanity be depleted in unnecessary and dangerous fashion. Species survival, not a sovereign, religion or political ideology dictates foundational morality. This biologically determined foundation of morality shows cooperative effort as essential to sustaining the well-being of all. This foundation of morality is threatened by so-called defectors. Defectors are those who stand apart from this morality and solely for self-interest at the expense of others (Zimbardo, 2007). How does this all play in public education?

### ***Pedagogical Intuition Is Very Much on The Mark.***

Intuitively, teachers like most people, recognize the importance of communities pulling together to secure the well-being of all. This intuition shows itself in renewed interest in character education. However, in the wake of public fear that students might be subjected to a dominant ideology such as those that caused so much destruction in the twentieth century, character education programs have been excessively timid about moralizing. Yet little could be achieved regards slavery, human - trafficking, prejudice and such if the meta-ideology of “Everyone has their own truth” dominated the curriculum and limited teachers pointing even to worthy moralistic causes. The present activity surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement shows vividly that when it comes to how people ought to behave towards one another not just anything is acceptable – not just anything is right-minded regardless of a person’s feelings! The American Psychological Association reports that some virtues at least, are right-minded for all (Peterson & Seligman, 2003).

Certainly, no one should proselytize to students in favor of some religion or demean a student’s religious beliefs. But religion and moral commitment are not necessarily cut from the same fabric. Regardless of religion and any other ideology, people must figure out how each and every person ought to try to treat each and every other person (Noddings & Brooks, 2017; 32-34).

On a grand scale, teachers unabashedly endorse concerns about climate change, the need to re-cycle, social issues related to immigration and so on. These are conspicuously moral issues centered on cooperation. And teachers do tend to moralize about them – to the benefit of all. So, how to sort between what practices and ideas should be endorsed and what should be avoided or condemned?

Fortunately, there is no need to determine the truth of different religions or ideal platforms for political parties and or other ideologically – driven movements in order to address this question. Instead of moralizing mandates, teachers need only to share reflections with students reflecting the evolution of cooperation. With the evolutionary template at hand, teachers can scaffold both curriculum and instruction so students see cooperation as an evolutionarily imperative for human survival. Dismissing this imperative as just one of mere preference is tantamount to sanctioning defection and licenses *laissez faire* attitudes toward human survival. Students need to see that it is the evolved network of promising practices that sustains human well-being. Referring back to that biological foundation is no more mere moralizing than explaining the effect of mitochondria inserting itself into bacteria creating organic cells capable of generating energy, namely, eukaryotic cells.

Trying to demarcate the moral from the rest of the curriculum is exceedingly contrived. Since curriculums are largely about preparing students for future productive engagement with the world, tracing evolutionary survival tactics of humans seems critical and likely to legitimate moral reflection apart from teacher – directed moralizing. Morality in its entirety gives rise to moral dictates, principles and even excuses for altering current social structures. Morality is far more than conjuring rules. Morality is about how people ought to treat one another. As such morality is an inescapable aspect of education in the ideal of The Great Conversation of Humankind (Wagner et. al. 2018, p.36). With that ideal in mind people should think together about how best to treat one another and how best to create patterns reinforcing cooperatively-focused rules, dispositions and skills. The Great Conversation of Humankind not only depends on the acceptance of such shared moral commitments it properly focuses on them as objects of continues reflection and revision.

### ***Teaching respect for etiquette and other social conventions in no trivial matter.***

Participation in The Great Conversation is key to identifying the essentially moral. It goes beyond lesser concerns evaluating the merit of mere social constructions and etiquette. Admittedly, social conventions and much of etiquette sustain attention to shared moral commitment. But these lesser conventions are properly subject to challenge when seen as assaulting the foundation of moral concern namely each person’s cooperative commitment to work with others (Barber, 2029; p.111). This principle of seeking cooperative commitment while

not sacrificing the most basic well-being of others is central to the veil of ignorance principle of the twentieth century's greatest moral theorist John Rawls. For Rawls a safety net would surely be endorsed by all who had no knowledge in advance where they might one day end up in their respective communities (Rawls, 1972).

For human life to be sustainable, The Great Conversation of Humankind must address practices of behavior conducive to cooperation among all, near and far. From elementary classrooms to board rooms of adult organizations, gestures such as raising a hand to indicate one wishes to speak are mere practices of etiquette but they also highlight that all deserve respect. These practices reflect networks of implicit promising that preserve surrounding civil society. Taken together networks of promising reflect deeply the primary anthropic bond of promising as a cornerstone of human self-domestication (Wagner & Fair, 2021).

Rules of etiquette and social conventions such as saying "Please" and "Thank you" may vary without much consequence so long as they do not vary at the cost of cooperation. Hand shakes and hugs may give way to elbow bumps but, the goal of signaling cooperative intent towards one another is invaluable to human survival. Even these seemingly inconsequential practices further the evolutionary potency of cooperation for humanity.

### ***Teaching human Self-domestication***

Teachers should encourage students to think in evolutionary fashion about the potency of cooperation throughout human history. The point of such directed encouragement is not to moralize but rather to show that cooperation and especially all that surrounds the practice of promising both sustains and may advance the likely success of the human species. Success emerges to the extent that humans are subject to fewer effects likely to lead to their extinction (Dawkins, 1982).

Once the evolutionary foundation of morality is understood, students should discuss social practices, conventions and even rules of etiquette they believe contribute to human well-being. Some classroom practices are already showing the effect of this sort of reasoning with students (Ryzin & Rosth, 2019). The fear of teacher moralizing is likely minimized in classrooms where evolutionary understanding is secured.

### ***Justification of Foundational Morality***

Foundational morality as discussed herein is not about making judgments on rules of behavior. Rather the blossoming of morality as noted above, is a consequence of evolutionary forces arising from instincts of empathy, sympathy and the invention of promising. Rules and conventions emerge later from this foundation but are not themselves part of the foundation. The optimal practice of promising leads naturally to further socio-cultural evolution of supporting dispositions and skills. For example, dispositions to feel guilt and ashamedness for perceived wrong-doing are inevitable. So too are the community's disposition to condemn defectors as is the community's disposition to laud praise on altruistic action. Dispositions of reciprocity trust and trust-worthiness, along with various acts of kindness are outcomes of communal commitment to the *spirit* of promising and all that goes with its foundational role in morality. What rules, conventions and courtesies given cultures might add are always currency for discussion in The Great Conversation of Humankind. These moments of the Great Conversation demand skills of focus, respectful dialogue, clarity of expression and imagination. Instruction in the evolutionary foundation of morality should be similar to any other instruction involving a basic science such as evolution. But, once a threshold of understanding is reached, students must be released from didactic instruction to ferret out for themselves the utility of various practices, policies laws and so on. Not to do so would subject them to the dangers of teacher moralistic indoctrination.

For students to proceed beyond the threshold of didactic instruction to more potent reflection, they must acquire skills of critical thinking. Without such skills there is no way for them to evaluate prudently, the likelihood that any considered practice, rule, policy, convention or law will extend the potency of a community's network of promising. As students advance further in their education, they need to know more of what the social sciences have learned about behavioral tendencies and how statistics and most especially a Bayesian approach to figuring things out becomes invaluable for aligning such mind ware with foundational morality itself (Wagner, Johnson, Fair & Fasko, 2017; 89-98).

Moral matters above the foundational level range over rituals, rules of etiquette, laws, policies and transient social convention of many sorts. Ideally, a culture's rituals, rules of etiquette and other social conventions support foundational morality. Of course, it doesn't always work out that way. Above the foundational level culture plays

a dominant role in sculpting the specifics of defined rules of social practice. And, successful cultures depend on robust participation in The Great Conversation.

### ***Teaching the Value of Morally Enriched Cooperation in the Absence of Moralizing***

As in ages past, children begin their formal education instinctually ready to learn and instinctually ready to cooperate and empathize with classmates (Bloom, 2013; Gopnik, 2009; 209-212). Unfortunately, the forces of their immediate surrounds may lead them away from robust empathy and sympathy (Milgram, 1963). Cultures can be empowering as well as crippling of individual flourishing. For example, recall the cultural suppression of women in Western culture limiting their access to STEM studies (Stewart, 2017; 176-187, 210-20). An unavoidable outcome for women victimized by these cultural constraints can decrease interest in learning and lessen commitment to cooperate (Wagner & Benevente-McEnery, 2008).

In a market - driven world, pop culture produces a fixation on self-interest. Self-interest is as instinctual as cooperation. But survival of the *species* depends more on cooperation than on individual competition. The cultural sculpting of an over-powering society can dominate the otherwise natural instincts of an individual or a tribe within the society despite competing natural instincts to the contrary (Carter, 1998). The results may be foreboding as Rousseau worried with regards to *Émile* or they may be productive.

There are teaching strategies that develop cooperation among students such as the program Johnson & Johnson describe while tempering the instinct towards self-interest (2009). In light of the above, teachers and other educators should utilize teachable moments for promoting the merits of cooperation among students (Wagner, Johnson, Fair & Fasko, 2018). The spirit of community depends on whether instincts of self-interest or cooperation are most vigorously nurtured.

With regards to classroom content, self-interest should be acknowledged as instinctual but in endless tension with the instinct of cooperation. (Le Texier, 2019; Gopnik, 2016, p. 199; Mlowdinow, 2015). Emphasis on the existence of self-interest alone as a driving instinct should never be allowed to discredit the competing instinct of altruism for communal well-being (Ritchie, 2020; 215).

In science classes, evolution should never be taught as if the core of the matter is simply survival of the fittest. It is not the core nor was it so in Darwin's mind (Gould, 2002). Preaching to students that evolution is all some version of metaphors such as Thomas Huxley's, "nature is red in tooth and claw," mitigates against what is known about natural and social needs to cooperate. Thomas Hobbes was right to worry about a humanity without recognized obligations. In such a world, each is a potential foe rather than a resource for others. In such a world, fear dominates and all of humanity is always on the verge of war with one another. In such a world, all are defectors and cooperators are quickly dispatched forever (Wagner, 1981; pp. 81-90).

Since students typically begin their schooling with a cooperative minded notion of kindness, friendliness and so on. Teachable moments building on these should be manifest in every teacher's classroom management strategies (Seals, 2019; 21). In the elementary grades students begin witnessing the forming of in-groups that often fragment as competitors try to eliminate one another from the inside making the group ever more elitist. Inevitably such machinations destroy the group and new alliances must be made. Such cyclic fragmenting driven by self-interest leads not to contentment but instead endless anxiety and confrontation.

Human cooperation should be explored in classrooms as more than happenstance of cultural history alone. Human cooperation precedes nations and written history. It is an inherited instinct just as is self-interest. Friendliness, a path forward in cooperative relations should be described as more than chance favoring of people's liking or disliking each other (Starmans, Sheskin & Bloom, 2017). Teachers should always be ready to exploit the teachable moment featuring promising as the heart of inclusiveness and cooperative life (Wagner & Benevente-McEnery, 2008).

Things to be included in a curriculum centered on promising and cooperation can range from the jigsaw method (Aronson & Patnoe, 2011; Roseth, Lee & Saltarelli, 2019) to Miller's cooperation protocols (2008, 210-15), Hare and Woods' friendliness modeling (Hare & Woods, 2020, pp. 65-66) as self - domestication, Haidt's talking about loyalty and fairness with students (Sacks, 2020; p. 267) and finally, explicitly reminding students that a world of self-interest ultimately drives each stakeholder towards a self-defeating end (Wagner & Lopez, 2013).

The first job of every mammalian youngster is to become an adult. They role model adults minute by minute. Teachers are most effective in social studies not when lecturing or testing for facts but when role-modelling the virtues Martin Luther King Jr. applauds in his famed “I Have a Dream Speech.” King’s invitation to judge others on character rings provocatively. Since times of antiquity theorists have urged teachers to role model character strengths such as integrity, compassion, cooperativeness reliability, respect for others, loyalty to community writ large and unrelenting attention to justice and fairness. These character strengths are encompassed in the American Psychological Association’s historic endorsement of a book titled *Character Strength and Human Virtue* (Peterson & Seligman, 2003). Modelling sound character likely readies student’s for civic and social life more than didactic instruction in institutional regulations and historic social movements (Wagner, 2008). This is not to say that instruction in such matters are irrelevant, they are not. Nonetheless, as Linda Zagzebski insists lessons on paradigmatic moral leaders serves as a beacon drawing student attention to moral ideals of cooperative behavior (Zagzebski, 2017; 158-159). Still, it is what students see in their own teacher and other teacher and staff members’ behavior at school that is likely to be most influential to them in the long run. A teacher teaches genuine friendliness by being observed as genuinely friendly to everyone and stalwart in minding the obligations she commits herself to when promising, leading and engaging all others in the school community. Teachers can achieve much through role-modeling and teaching not to make a living but rather, living to teach, an embodiment of social integrity. Moralizing could never accomplish so much.

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