

## Moral Education in the “Badlands”<sup>1</sup>

Francis Schrag

*University of Wisconsin-Madison*

Educating our children to be moral human beings — teaching them not to deceive or take what does not belong to them, encouraging them to be trusting and conciliatory rather than wary and aggressive — is one of our responsibilities as parents (and to some extent as teachers), but are there circumstances in which teaching children to deviate from moral norms generally considered sacrosanct is not simply permissible, but obligatory? So it seems, as Joseph Joffo’s searing memoir, *A Bag of Marbles*, illustrates:

It is 1941 in Nazi-occupied France, where Jews are beginning to be rounded up for deportation to concentration camps. Joseph is a ten-year old boy living in Paris whose survival depends on his Jewish identity remaining concealed from the authorities. If Joseph’s parents are to survive, they must learn to evade the enemy; if Joseph is to survive, his parents must teach him to do the same. Is there any doubt that his father does the right thing when, in instructing Joseph (and his thirteen-year old brother Maurice), he tells them: “Finally, you have to know one thing. You are Jews but never admit it. Never. You understand: NEVER!”<sup>2</sup> Wise advice! Joseph and his brother are able to invent a fictitious past as Algerian Catholics that enables them to successfully withstand a weeklong interrogation by the Gestapo. During his three years of flight, Joseph engages in a variety of normally forbidden activities in order to survive, such as altering ration cards in exchange for food. In his heart-rending recollection of those brutal years, Joseph recalls thinking: “I remember Father Boulier’s ethics class. ‘One must never lie.’ ‘A liar is never believed,’ etc. Holy Boulier, to say things like that; he never had the Gestapo at his back.”<sup>3</sup> I believe that any morality which permits you or me to deviate from otherwise inviolable moral norms to protect our own person permits us to deviate from those norms in order to protect our underage children and, further, permits us to teach those children to deviate from those norms when facing perils from attackers. Actually, that is an understatement: there is an asymmetry between protecting ourselves and protecting our underage children. It is not obligatory to defend myself against an attacker, but it is obligatory to defend my children. Let me, therefore, formulate a simple argument grounded in the duty of parents to care for their own children, an argument that establishes the legitimacy of cultivating children’s disposition to deviate from normal moral requirements when facing enemies bent on their destruction or subjugation. Subsequent discussion will reveal the need for modifying the argument, but here is where we should start.

### THE BASIC ARGUMENT

P1: Parents should see to it that their underage children are not subject to avoidable risks of harm.

P2: Inculcating moral norms and dispositions suitable for peacetime increases children’s defenselessness when ruthless enemies seek to harm them, thus imposing avoidable risks of harm.

C: Therefore parents should refrain from inculcating such norms and dispositions when ruthless enemies seek to harm their children.

Premise 1 derives from parents’ duty to care for and protect their children. I take this duty to be uncontroversial. Still, premise 1 is somewhat ambiguous. “Avoidable” might mean that a risk of harm was within *someone’s* control — for example, for the drinking water not to have been contaminated — or only that it was within *parents’* own control — for example, for the water to be treated before drinking. Since the argument focuses on parents’ obligations, the second interpretation is the preferred one. It makes no sense to hold parents responsible for failing to fulfill an obligation that is beyond their capability.

Premise 1 also claims that parents must protect their children from all risks of harm, but this surely is too strong. Parents, following this principle, might never permit children to cross the street, play by themselves, or ride a two-wheeler. Common sense suggests that parental overprotection does not serve children well, and for two different reasons: On the one hand, overprotected children fail to develop the wherewithal to cope in circumstances where parents are unavailable. On the other hand, just as we wish to live our own lives and make our own decisions, even at the risk of making mistakes that we will later regret, so should we want the same for our children. Philosophers as different as John Stuart Mill and Immanuel Kant would endorse this point. Our argument ought, therefore, to be amended to say that only protection from *high* risks of *serious* harm should be avoided, *if* they can be. To illustrate, parents should put safety plugs into electric outlets, they should not let two-year olds play on the sidewalk of a busy street without supervision, and so forth.

#### MORAL LIMITS TO PARENTAL PROTECTION

Even the amended premise seems too strong, however, for it fails to indicate any moral limits to what parents may permissibly do. Suppose you believe that your child’s future economic prospects will be seriously harmed if he attends a second-rate college and much improved if he attends an elite college to which he is unlikely to gain admission. May you teach him how to write a college essay describing a childhood full of hardships that he never actually faced?<sup>4</sup> I think not, but why not?

An immediate thought here is that parents may not cultivate immorality, and lying is immoral, but this cannot be right because, as we have seen, lying is not always immoral; indeed it is sometimes the recommended course of action. As Sissela Bok notes, in cases such as the Gestapo’s questioning neighbors (or Joseph himself) about the boy’s whereabouts:

There would be no difficulty in defending openly the policy that persecutors searching for their innocent victims can be answered dishonestly. In fact, not only can it be defended; it could be advocated in advance as preferable to a policy of honesty at all times. Someone who advocated the opposite policy of total honesty to persecutors would be a dangerous

individual in times where life-and-death crises arise more frequently, one who could be trusted with no confidential information whatever.<sup>5</sup>

Bok argues that the negative value ordinarily placed on lying is clearly offset by the saving of an innocent life. This would satisfy many ethicists, but not some Kantians who disdain such balancing of consequences. Kantians believe that this balancing is too subjective, placing us on a slippery slope that may end up permitting us to lie to the admissions officer.

Christine Korsgaard attempts to vindicate Kant from the charge of endorsing truth telling even to a murderer seeking information about his intended victim, and hence appearing to value logical consistency over moral decency. Korsgaard claims that several of Kant's texts support the view that lying to a Gestapo agent searching for an innocent victim is permitted and, under certain circumstances, required.<sup>6</sup> Paraphrasing Kant, Korsgaard notes that, "The murderer wants to make you a tool of evil... You owe it to humanity in your own person not to allow your honesty to be used as a resource for evil."<sup>7</sup> This idea is reinforced in a more recent article by Tamar Schapiro who, discussing cases like that of the Gestapo agent, writes that such an agent's

adoption of an end that is blatantly at odds with the ideal of reciprocity in a Kingdom of Ends shows that he is not in a position to take up your honesty in the spirit in which it would be offered, namely a spirit of reciprocity. His choice of that end makes it appropriate for you to regard him as having refused to participate in the shared activity of which honesty is a part, the activity from which honesty derives its moral value.<sup>8</sup>

To sum up, the difference between teaching your son to deceive the admissions officer and teaching him to deceive the Gestapo agent is this: Deceiving the admissions officer *expresses* an immoral intention — the intention to secure for your son a benefit that he does not deserve — thereby depriving someone else's child of a benefit that he or she does deserve. On the other hand, deceiving the Gestapo officer is a *response* to an *immoral* intention — the intention to arrest and deport an innocent boy.

There is little doubt, then, that deception or force, proscribed in normal situations by both normative ethics and common sense morality, are not only appropriate but also moral responses to enemies seeking to deprive us or our loved ones of our basic rights to life and liberty. The implication of this fact for moral education in the "badlands" appears, however, to have gone unnoticed: If parents owe it to their humanity not to allow their own honesty to be used as a resource for evil, then by the same token they owe it to their children's humanity that *their* natural trust and candor, likewise, not be used in that way. For those children living in the "badlands," where enemies lurk who are bent on harming or killing them, their loved ones, or their allies, moral education must incorporate the development of the skills and dispositions needed to respond to attackers with force or guile. The "ought" here, let me add, is a moral "ought," not merely a prudential one. Perhaps a better way of putting this is that, here, morality and prudence are one. Kant himself seems to agree when he says, "Do not suffer your rights to be trampled underfoot by others with impunity."<sup>9</sup>

## THE AMENDED ARGUMENT AND ITS RELEVANCE

Premise 2 asserts that, in a case like Joseph’s, moral virtues adapted to peacetime conditions are luxuries that he can ill afford; this alleged fact may be disputed in two ways: (A) It would appear that anyone in a situation similar to Joseph’s must, to some extent, depend on others’ assistance; and in order to secure and sustain that assistance, it would appear that moral education suitable for peacetime *is* indispensable. (B) Unless war is interminable, sooner or later peace will again prevail and, that being the case, Joseph will, in the absence of moral education suitable for peacetime, be ill-equipped to take his place in the postwar community. The point made in (A) is true, as an incident in Joseph’s story bears out. When S.S. officers board a train carrying Joseph and his brother to presumed safety in Vichy France, Joseph, hoping he can trust a priest sitting nearby, tells him that he and his brother have no identity papers. After producing his own identity papers, the priest tells the officers, “The children are with me.” This proves sufficient for the officers, and the brothers elude capture.<sup>10</sup>

(B) is true as well. Joseph and his brother did survive the war and still live in France; indeed, the purpose of inculcating the norms and dispositions required for facing enemies is to facilitate survival in wartime, in anticipation of a peacetime when the enemy threat no longer exists. If both (A) and (B) are true, then the argument needs to be amended to incorporate a missing dimension — parents or other educators must, in such circumstances, inculcate two quite different sets of norms and dispositions: one for facing enemies and criminals, the other for facing everyone else. Normally, the idea of a double standard implies condemnation; here it signifies a necessary and appropriate accommodation to social reality.

If so, an important point follows: in Joseph’s circumstances, developing the capacity to identify enemies is perhaps his parents’ most pressing responsibility, because it is most likely to affect his ability to survive.<sup>11</sup> Let us then amend our original argument to include the considerations adduced above.

P1: Parents should see to it that their children are not subject to avoidable *high* risks of undeserved *serious* harm.

P2: In a war zone, parents should, so far as possible, teach their children to identify enemies and distinguish them from all others.

P3: In a war zone, inculcating *only* moral norms and dispositions suitable for interacting with those who are not enemies or *only* norms and dispositions suitable for facing enemies exposes children to high risks of serious harm.

C: In a war zone, parents should inculcate a double standard: one set of norms needed to face enemies and another needed to interact with others.

Even if the argument is persuasive, it might seem that it applies only in circumstances that, like Joseph’s, occur extremely rarely. Unfortunately, this is not true. First, cases like Joseph’s are far from unusual in many parts of the world. In the cases of civil wars, failed states, or occupation by foreign invaders, which are situations

found in many parts of the world, children as young as Joseph may become either the hunter or the hunted, and often they become both. Second, in many countries, including the United States, most metropolitan areas harbor street gangs, which present members and nonmembers with circumstances not unlike Joseph's. And third, yes, even in well-functioning, gang-free communities, bullies, young delinquents, and psychopaths threaten children. Let me now say a bit more about each of these contexts.

#### CIVIL WARS

In a civil war or when a country is under occupation by an enemy force, the warring parties disagree about who wields legitimate authority. Failing states have weak governments or governments that cannot be counted on to protect their citizens. In some failing states, local territories or neighborhoods are controlled by warlords who may not recognize any government as legitimate. In all these contexts, a person's failure or refusal to differentiate friends from enemies could be suicidal.

In his book *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries Are Failing and What Can Be Done About It*, economist Paul Collier asserts that over 70% of the poorest nations "have recently been through a civil war or are still in one."<sup>12</sup> Among states that are failing by anyone's definition, Collier lists Angola, the Central African Republic, Haiti, Liberia, Sudan, the Solomon Islands, Somalia, and Zimbabwe. Regrettably, these "badlands" are anything but rare: As Alcinda Honwana writes, "In many African countries, as well as in parts of Southeast Asia and Latin America, the majority of adults, youth, and especially children have lived their entire lives under conditions of armed conflict."<sup>13</sup> In the most extreme of such "badlands" children are often forced to take up arms, sometimes against those they might normally look to for protection. Even in such dire circumstances, however, a young soldier cannot afford to treat everyone as an enemy. In his memoir of life as a teen conscript in the Sierra Leone civil war, Ishmael Beah writes, "My squad was my family, my gun was my provider and protector, and my rule was to kill or be killed."<sup>14</sup>

In such "badlands" children may become prey simply in virtue of being born into a particular family, tribe, or clan. Failing to distinguish between friend and foe can lead not simply to their own death, but also to the deaths of those they hold dear. And children face threats even in nations that are not torn by civil strife. Young girls in many parts of the world are subject to being seduced by traffickers, or kidnapped and sold into prostitution, where they are exploited and degraded for profit while corrupt law enforcement officials look the other way.<sup>15</sup>

For the millions of children growing up in these "badlands" — places ravaged by civil war, warlords, or unreliable and corrupt authorities — it is clear that the moral dispositions most of us hope to instill in our own children, such as the dispositions to be trusting and honest toward all people and to be respectful of public officials, would lead to their own destruction and that of their families. Since morality ought to protect the innocent, the *indiscriminate* expression of such dispositions in these "badlands" must be avoided. Inculcating a double standard is mandatory.

## URBAN GANGS

Regrettably, there are areas within our own country that resemble the "badlands" in two respects: first, children are subject to persecution and, second, the legally constituted authorities cannot offer them protection. I am referring to those areas controlled by youth gangs that are present in many poor, urban areas. According to Richard Wrangham and Michael L. Wilson, while not all gangs value combat, "most gangs identify with a territory, which they defend against other gangs.... The territory is often marked with prominent signs, including aggressive symbols and taunts directed to specific rivals."<sup>16</sup> A young gang member who failed to differentiate between fellow members and members of rival gangs would not be safe. But when gangs control neighborhoods, the need to differentiate allies from enemies is not limited only to gang members. This is because, in tough neighborhoods, gangs may offer the only protection from violence. Wrangham and Wilson cite a study in which a detective explains why a group of teens from affluent families in the Dallas suburbs joined gangs after being bused to schools with gang members. The young people's point of view is paraphrased by Wrangham and Wilson like this: "What am I going to do when I'm on the bus ten, fifteen, twenty minutes and I'm being pounded? No one is going to protect me."<sup>17</sup> My main point here is to stress the similarity in the environments of children who grow up in failed states and those who grow up in tough, poor, gang-infested neighborhoods. Indeed, Wrangham and Wilson note that the kinds of violence exhibited by gang members "are part of a common human pattern evident in societies lacking effective central authority, manifested in ethnic riots, blood feuds, lethal raiding, and warfare."<sup>18</sup> Whether they are part of a gang or not, young people in gang-ridden neighborhoods need to establish distinct attitudes, distinct expectations, and distinct moral dispositions toward likely allies and adversaries. Their world, no less than that of Joseph, is structured by the categories of ally and enemy. Strategies of deception, subterfuge, and counterattack that have no place in more favored circumstances must be developed to cope with enemies.

## GANG-FREE NEIGHBORHOODS

Even in gang-free neighborhoods, children come into contact with other children bent on harming them without cause; psychopaths, both child and adult, live everywhere; nor is it unusual for a few physically strong children to seek status by preying on their weaker classmates.

These neighborhoods are crucially different from the foreign and domestic "badlands" thus far described, however. (I should make it clear that, of course, my distinction between "badlands" and other environments is schematic; there are grey areas where gangs have partial control, where some but not all police are corrupt, and so forth.) It is not simply that there are fewer adults or children bent on harm but that protection from and defense against predators may be sought from parents and public officials, including teachers, school officials, and police officers. Where legitimate authorities can be counted on to protect the weak against the strong who wish them harm, the former need not develop the same strategies of evasion and defense required in the "badlands." This, however, requires that victims or putative

victims provide information to parents or teachers about attacks and attackers. Unfortunately, strong general norms against “tattle tales” and “snitches,” as well as fear of retaliation by perpetrators, often militate against informing authorities about predators. If that is true, then the situation facing children growing up in gang-free neighborhoods, while not to be compared to that of children growing up in the “badlands,” is nonetheless one in which the category of criminal, if not enemy, applies and must be learned.

#### MORAL EDUCATION

Does acknowledgment of the “badlands” change our view of the task of moral education? Let us assume that moral education is concerned with fostering the virtues and the reasoning required to recognize and honor human dignity by acting justly and beneficently. Surely, acting justly does not require us to feel or act identically toward those who seek to deprive us of our most basic rights and those who do not. Nor should we want our children to develop the same dispositions toward those bearing them no ill will and those seeking to dominate or injure them. Therefore, it seems to me, the moral education of our children is more challenging than we have acknowledged, and involves at least three subtasks:

1. Nurturing the disposition to respond appropriately toward those who respect their rights and their autonomy.<sup>19</sup>
2. Nurturing the disposition to respond appropriately toward those who seek to violate their rights or subvert their autonomy.
3. Nurturing the ability to identify which of these categories a person belongs to.

Whether in the “badlands” or not, parents, and the educators who stand in for them, have the duty to help innocent children evade actual or prospective tormentors; this requires teaching them when and how deception and even force may be used in self-defense in circumstances where authorities cannot be counted on. With respect to the task of identifying enemies, two kinds of errors must be avoided: In many contexts, especially where interethnic suspicion and hostility prevail, it is all too easy to perceive young people from another ethnic group as enemies wishing them harm, and this can easily turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy. On the other hand, children brought up to expect their own good will always to be reciprocated can find themselves defenseless against abuse and intimidation when confronted by adults or children bent on hurting them.

If what I have been arguing is plausible, then why has the subject received little, if any, attention? One reason is that it might be assumed that only altruistic behavior must be learned; self-defense is instinctive, not something that must be inculcated. This belief may, in turn, derive from what Frans de Waal calls the “vener” theory of morality, which holds that humans are naturally self-seeking and the task of civilized morality is to cultivate concern for others.<sup>20</sup> But, as de Waal demonstrates, humans and other primates do not care only about themselves. Moreover, as Jean Hampton has argued, developing sufficient self-worth to be convinced of the right of self-defense can be a significant accomplishment under oppressive conditions.<sup>21</sup>

But even if we grant that the *disposition* to protect oneself is stronger than the disposition to care for others, it does *not* follow that we all naturally acquire the tools and strategies of self-defense in the face of criminals or enemies.

#### OBJECTIONS

Consider, finally, three objections: First, it might be claimed that morality exhorts us not to harm others, period. Socrates might be thought to have preached a similar lesson when he argued that it was better to suffer injustice than to act unjustly.<sup>22</sup> But Socrates’ exhortation is entirely consistent with my claim: To disarm an assailant with a blow or to deceive a pursuer is precisely *not* to act unjustly, assuming that one is innocent. This is not to deny that enemies, no matter how vile, remain human; even on a battlefield, morality does not grant soldiers *carte blanche*. But acknowledging this point is not at all the same thing as saying that morality should draw no distinction between those prepared to treat us as ends in ourselves and those willing to treat us as mere tools to their own ends.

Still, the objector may continue: Is there not something noble about a pacifist who refuses to lower himself to his enemy’s level and exhibits a willingness to risk even his own life rather than kill or injure another human being? And, further, did not Jesus exhort us to turn the other cheek and to love even our enemies?

There may be something noble about a person who, though fully capable of retaliating, *decides* not to raise his hand or attempt to evade an assailant. There is nothing noble about an innocent victim who, lacking the ability to imagine that another wishes to harm him, or lacking the ability to defend himself, has no choice but to throw up his hands to an assailant and say, in effect, “Do what you will with me!” Indeed, resistance to evil, even when doomed, helps sustain human dignity.<sup>23</sup>

Second, it might be claimed that my position contains an objectionable relativism, since I endorse both cultivating a trusting, conciliatory attitude in some neighborhoods, and a suspiciousness of others and readiness to deceive and counterattack assailants in the “badlands”; but this is not ethically problematic. The divergent policies that I endorse emanate from a common moral commitment — honoring human dignity and combating injustice.

Finally, it might be contended that while learning to defend oneself from attackers is important, it is not part of moral education, properly so called. In the end, I care little whether the term “moral education” be used for the task of preparing children for a world that includes criminals and enemies, but I submit: if moral educators are blind to the realities that confront millions of young people, some close to home, then their pronouncements can be of only limited relevance.

---

1. “Badlands”: a “term applied to an arid, badly eroded region... The rainfall is not adequate or badly distributed as to time, so plant growth is almost impossible, the barren dry rock and soil are unprotected.” *The Columbia Encyclopedia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944), 124.

2. Joseph Joffo, *Un Sac de Billes* [A Bag of Marbles] (Paris: Jean-Claude Lattes, 1973), 33 (translation by author).

3. *Ibid.*, 38.



4. A comprehensive discussion of such questions can be found in Adam Swift, *How Not to Be a Hypocrite: School Choice for the Morally Perplexed Parent* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).
5. Sissela Bok, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (1976; repr., New York: Vintage, 1989), 109–110.
6. Christine Korsgaard, *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 155 n. 3, 144–146.
7. *Ibid.*, 145–146.
8. Tamar Schapiro, “Kantian Rigorism and Mitigating Circumstances,” *Ethics* 117, no. 1 (2006), 52.
9. Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysical Principles of Virtue*, in *Immanuel Kant: Ethical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishing, 1983), 436, quoted in Korsgaard, *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*, 146.
10. Joffo, *Un Sac de Billes*, 42–45.
11. This is a point first made by Plato in his discussion of the need for guardians to embody the characteristics of watchdogs, in *Republic* 375–376.
12. Paul Collier, *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries Are Failing and What Can Be Done About It* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 17.
13. Alcinda Honwana, *Child Soldiers in Africa* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 152.
14. Ishmael Beah, *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (New York: Sarah Crichton, 2008), 126.
15. Caroline Moorehead, “Women and Children for Sale,” *New York Review of Books*, October 11, 2007, 15–18.
16. Richard W. Wrangham and Michael L. Wilson, “Collective Violence: Comparisons Between Youths and Chimpanzees,” *Annals of New York Academy of Sciences* 1036 (2004), 237.
17. *Ibid.*, 251.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Of course, within this vast category, one must learn innumerable nuances, for example, a child may legitimately refuse to disclose to a well-meaning teacher information that she is willing to share with a best friend, or vice versa.
20. Frans de Waal, “Morally Evolved: Primate Social Instincts, Human Morality, and the Rise and Fall of ‘Veneer Theory,’” in *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved*, eds. Stephen Macedo and Josiah Ober (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006).
21. Jean Hampton, “The Wisdom of the Egoist,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 14, no. 1 (1997): 21–51.
22. Plato *Gorgias* 469.
23. Consider the testimony of holocaust survivor Jean Améry: “For a short time in those days, I was able to foster the illusion that my dignity was totally restored through my own, no matter how modest, activity in the resistance movement.” From Jean Améry, *At the Mind’s Limits*, trans. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (New York: Schocken, 1986), 91, quoted in Tzvetan Todorov, *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps*, trans. Arthur Denner and Abigail Pollack (New York: Metropolitan, 1996), 26.

---

Among those who have responded to earlier versions of this essay, I would especially like to thank Eamonn Callan of Stanford University, Adam Swift of Oxford University, Russ Shafer-Landau and Daniel Pekarsky of my own university, and especially Ira Singer of Hofstra University.