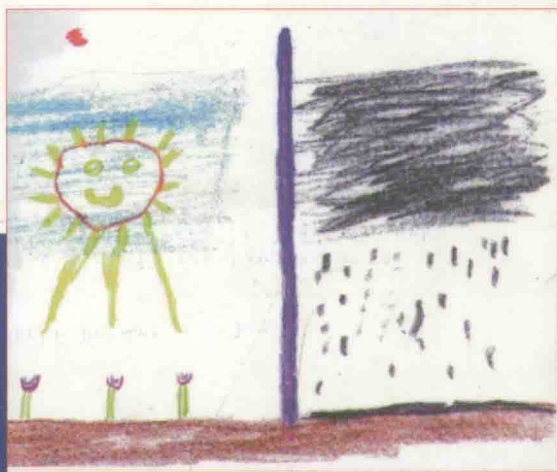


ROBERT COLES

"A FASCINATING BANQUET OF VIGNETTES, CHILDREN WHOSE DEEDS,
THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS RESONATE WITH MORAL STRENGTH."

—LOS ANGELES TIMES BOOK REVIEW



THE MORAL LIFE OF CHILDREN

The
Moral Life
of
Children

Robert Coles



Atlantic Monthly Press
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THE MORAL LIFE OF CHILDREN

INTRODUCTION

IF my wife had had her way, back in 1960, when our work in the South with black and white children was just starting, the subject matter of this book would have been our major preoccupation all along. She is a high school teacher (English and history), and she has always been interested in the moral side of her students' lives: their ideals and values; their sense of what is right and wrong, and how they state their reasons; and not least, the moral statements they make in response to what she teaches. In New Orleans, twenty-five years ago, when we were talking with young black children passing through segregationist mobs to enter school, and white children also harassed even for attending a school with a black child in it, my wife was quick to hear those children ask the old existentialist questions (Why? Why me? Why such behavior from fellow human beings?). She was also ready and eager to respond to that inquiring initiative on the part of particular boys and girls — to hear them out, to answer the questions put to us, to share her own ideas, thoughts, worries, and hopes.

I have to say that such was not my inclination. As I indicated in the five volumes of *Children of Crisis*, wherein I tried to describe the work I have done in various parts of this country, among various kinds of children, my training in child psychiatry has not always helped me comprehend the ways in which those children have managed. When they have been fearful, anxious, frightened, sad,

“sick,” in a tenacious despair, I have known rather promptly what to think, how to see what is happening and why. But when the children in question have simply been “well,” living their lives, I have often been at a loss to figure out how their mental life is to be understood. How are experts in child psychoanalysis to view the everyday behavior of children who have no clear symptoms, despite the severe stresses life has put upon them? Anna Freud has made an especially heroic effort to distinguish between “normality” and “pathology,” to understand what makes for both in boys, in girls — and has warned against categorical explanations.¹ The subject begs research, more and more of it.

When my wife and I worked with SNCC (the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), and lived in Louisiana and Georgia, during the civil rights days of the 1960s, I began to figure out one way of doing my work. Even though I was not “treating” children, as I had done in Boston’s Children’s Hospital, and even though these southern children weren’t complaining of nightmares or appetite loss or constraining phobias (three somewhat common psychiatric ills of children), the boys and girls were experiencing moments of “crisis,” were confronting threats, outright violence, were trying to survive psychologically as well as physically. And so I tried to work toward a version of documentary child psychiatry: to record how a historical crisis (school integration) or a social and economic crisis (the trials of Appalachia’s mountain families and of migrant farm families), or a long-standing racial impasse (the conditions of Indians in, say, the Southwest, or of Eskimos in coastal Alaska) bears upon the mental life of young people.

I tried to uncover a psychology of everyday life; a psychology of turmoil and response to turmoil; a psychology of hope against hope with plenty of interludes of doubt and fear. It turned out to be a psychology not characterized by an overwhelming weight of symptomatology. Yes, I have seen a number of children in the rural or urban South — or in our northern ghettos, our working-class suburbs or affluent ones — who might have been helped by visits to a

doctor who specializes in child psychiatry. Yet I did not seek out such children. In any community a child who is in substantial psychiatric trouble is usually known to the parents and teachers and ministers or priests of that community. Whether any medical help may be forthcoming is, of course, quite another matter. In a number of instances I certainly did help a child find his or her way to a clinic or hospital. "We need explanations for the vicissitudes of normality in childhood," Anna Freud has suggested — though we need, even before that, a way of seeing: a "methodology" that allows us to observe ordinary children going through their day-to-day lives.²

Even making such an effort, though, will not guarantee us the freedom to pursue whatever leads are provided by the children themselves. The observing doctor's ideological assumptions are hard to shake, and they can encourage one line of inquiry, discourage another. I am astonished at how stubbornly I turned my attention away from some extremely important messages I was being given by children, in order to pursue other matters. For instance, a *white* New Orleans child of eight, back at school after a 1962 boycott by white parents had finally collapsed, told me that she worried what God would decide, when He took up the matter of that boycott. I casually asked what *she* thought. She told me she was sure He'd have some trouble deciding. I asked why — certain, I'm afraid, that her sense of God's "trouble" came straight from her own mixed feelings. She became shy, suddenly; in time she told me she felt presumptuous speaking for God Almighty. I backed off, was only glad for such a spell of hesitation: *now* she and I might more directly address her own explicit reasons for not wanting to go to school with black children; and we might discuss her return to school, after months of idleness.

As the girl expressed her reasons for being glad to be back in school, I took note of the psychological difficulties she had to endure, both at home and at school: a child's psychology become, by virtue of one historical moment, an element in a city's political conflict. Here is some of what the child told me: "We were afraid to go to

that school. My mother was sure that if they took in one or two colored kids, a hundred or two hundred would be there a month later, unless the white people showed the world we can't be pushed around. That's what we did, too! We just said no, and we showed we meant it! Besides, the colored aren't good at school, and they can ruin it for everyone. I have some trouble reading, and my mother was sure it would get worse, if lots of the kids in my class were colored, and they don't care if they read or they don't read.

"My mother says I should really work hard and get better at school work. She tells us kids we'll become 'little niggers' if we don't watch out! The next minute she'll say she shouldn't talk like that! She's always getting angry at us, then she'll apologize. The other day she threw a box of corn flakes at my brother and me, and when she missed, she picked up the broom and started chasing us. She called us 'niggers.' Then she bumped into the refrigerator, and I think she hurt her arm. She dropped the broom, and she told us she was sorry. She said we should sit down, and she'd make us our favorite pancakes, and she did. She told us she was sure glad we're back in school, and it didn't make any difference if there are a few colored kids there, because they're going to need an education, just like us, and God put them here, just like He did us, and even if it's not the right thing, to mix people up, just because some federal judge says to do it, there's no reason we should all end up losing out on our schooling for the rest of our lives. My daddy doesn't agree with her, I know that. He's ready to go fight the federal judge; that's what he tells us every day. He and my mother fight, and he'll hit her sometimes, and she says he treats her like a 'nigger' when he's had some beer. So, she's ready to leave him one day, but then he 'comes around,' she says. She got him to agree with her on us going to school, even if he doesn't like the idea 'one goddamn bit.' "

Remarks such as these ought give all of us pause even today — reminders that social and economic jeopardy becomes, in a family's life, another kind of jeopardy: children caught between the complex and often contradictory inclinations of their parents, not to mention

relatives, neighbors, friends, politicians, ministers. It was important to show that the so-called white resistance (in, say, the New Orleans of 1960–1963) was for some boys and girls a strenuous psychological challenge, the reasons for which they did not easily understand. And no wonder — their parents were themselves torn. Yet, I never did pursue themes the white child quoted above kept stating in her part of our conversations, and my wife always felt it was a pity I didn't. Here were people, she kept reminding me, who weren't only using psychological "defense mechanisms" of the ego to accommodate themselves to the thrust of "socioeconomic variables" upon their lives. These people, she observed, weren't only (as for smug Yankees) "rednecks," "segregationists"; weren't only (as for social scientists) the embittered members of a "marginal population," a "white lower-middle-class group." These were people, she repeatedly insisted, with a moral life that was chronically buffeted by conflicting commitments: loyalty to an (all-white) neighborhood; memories of what public figures and newspapers had been saying for years and years (the segregationist rhetoric of the time); devotion to a (Methodist) church; awareness of what education can mean in this century's America; and a notion of what constitutes their country's professed civic virtues. Each element in the foregoing list was part of what could be called an overall moral rhetoric to which the child somehow had to accommodate herself.

I think I understood how such a child ends up regarding the black children she sees at school or on the streets (being heckled) near school; also how she uses psychological maneuvers (rationalization, denial, projection, and so forth) to uphold parental mandates, to keep going in a confused and confusing educational situation. But I never did take a hard, close look at the actual moral content of such a girl's life — its private and public form, as expressed in reveries, words, and actions. When she supplied me with evidence of moral conflict, as she most assuredly did in the statement quoted above, I failed to pursue it as vigorously as I might have. On this subject, here are some remarks my wife wrote in the margin of a

yellow unlined sheet of paper on which had been typed a black child's comments, which in their essential moral nature resembled those of the above-mentioned white child: "I wish you wouldn't only concentrate on the rivalry and envy and 'defensive hate' of the white children as proof of their 'marginality.' I wish you wouldn't only see the black children as victims. They are fighting for certain ideals, but the white children are also waging a moral struggle. Children receive all kinds of moral signals, and they have to figure out which ones to consider important and which ones to ignore. Sometimes they can't ignore what they've decided they'd better try and ignore, and then they're in a jam. Shouldn't we look at this, too — their moral life as it's unfolding here in New Orleans?"

Yes, I agreed — but in my mind their "moral life" meant their psychological ways of dealing with perplexing and even dangerous circumstances. I was not ready to chronicle the moral ups and downs of these children's lives; I wanted to show (when I paid any attention at all to the moral side of things) what kind of psychological turmoil a child's conscience can incite, or indeed, constrain, dampen. The conscience — its social, cultural, and ideological sources — was for others to study. For me, back then, a child's conscience was a given: years and years of a certain kind of family life had meant, at last, this or that child's superego — internal "voices" judging him or her, prompting the boy or girl to prove the judgment correct through a prescribed pattern of behavior. Whence the "voices"? They came from mothers and fathers, of course — "introjects," they are called; and by school age, are quite solid presences in a child's life, a psychological "force" whose everyday influence on the young can be ascertained without too much difficulty, if enough time is spent watching and listening.³

Yet, what of the child as citizen? The child as churchgoer? The child as the law's instrument of legal redress, as history's fateful actor or actress? The child as a parent's *hope*, not only as object of obedience, manipulation, punishment? The child as a civilization's major preoccupation, a society's obsessional regard? The child as a

focus of imaginative play? (If film directors or storytellers or artists get involved in that last category, so also do social scientists, for whom “children” can be a means of constructing images, or even myths.) The child as moviegoer perhaps prompts us to think of mere consumerism, but even the silliest film, or one chock-full of violence, can be for some children a moral occasion. (I say this *not*, Lord knows, to justify such films.)

Why not, too, think of the child as moral protagonist or antagonist — as in the South’s racial conflict? Ruby, at ten, looked back at four years of somewhat unusual school attendance. A black child, she walked past hostile mobs at age six to enter a once all-white school in New Orleans, and she will appear from time to time in this book, as she did in Volume I of *Children of Crisis*. Her view of her experience? “I knew I was just Ruby,” she told me once, in retrospect — “just Ruby trying to go to school, and worrying that I couldn’t be helping my momma with the kids younger than me, like I did on the weekends and in the summer. But I guess I also knew I was the Ruby who had to do it — go into that school and stay there, no matter what those people said, standing outside. And besides, the minister reminded me that God chooses us to do His will, and so I had to be His Ruby, if that’s what He wanted. And then that white lady wrote and told me she was going to stop shouting at me, because she’d decided *I* wasn’t bad, even if *integration* was bad, then my momma said I’d become ‘her Ruby,’ that lady’s, just as she said in her letter, and I was glad; and I was glad I got all the nice letters from people who said I was standing up for them, and I was walking for them, and they were thinking of me, and they were with me, and I was their Ruby, too, they said.”

Through those memorable sentences, a child reveals herself to be a self-observer, as well as an observer of others. But let us be more ambitious for her. Was she not, utterly, and daily, a moral figure? A person able to find a measure of moral transcendence: comprehending, through language, the essence of what a human being can manage to be? Ruby, Tessie, Lawrence, and Martha, the

children we were meeting during those beleaguered and affecting days, were, in my wife's phrase, "moralists, but with no pretense." They led an active moral life that was not only part of a family's "psychodynamics," but the life of a neighborhood, a city, a country, a world; the life, also, of a religion, a culture. Might we not take stock of such a life by the use of the eyes and ears, questions put and answered, deeds observed and recorded? And especially through the children's own words, uttered in their own homes, transcribed, edited, and inevitably extracted from many human exchanges in a manner that might do justice to them.⁴

I suppose this is the occasion to take up directly, and yet again, the question of authenticity. "Children don't speak the way they do in your books," I was told at a psychiatric meeting once, and I could not disagree. I have assembled remarks made by children in the course of years of acquaintance, and tried to fit them into the confines of a book. The risks are substantial: distortion of what the children have said or intended to say; the intrusion of the observer's, the writer's subjectivity, if not outright bias. Under such circumstances there is a requirement of tentativeness with respect to assertions — lest a necessarily limited number of children, whose statements have been made in relatively informal moments, be turned into the vigorous spokespersons of the observer's beliefs, if not dogmas. There is a decided value to so-called objective research, to well-constructed surveys and to tests uniformly administered. There is good reason, too, that a few of us stay around specific neighborhoods, try to figure out, no matter the hazards, just what we've heard that seems to matter for the speakers and for us who have tried to understand not only today's utterances, but many months of them, enough to enable a sense of things, a drift of things — mostly vague, but at moments as clear and resounding as a giant bell, tolling to an entire countryside, or so it seems when a boy's, a girl's *cri de coeur* is uttered. And there *is* eloquence, Lord knows — powerful declarations, urgently persuasive analytic statements, stirring or touching asides.

By the time we were living in New Mexico (1972–1974), I had

begun to take more care for the moral activity of children. In *The Old Ones of New Mexico*, I tried to set forth a particular, rural, Hispano-American morality as I had come to see it through the eyes of some grandparents, who in towns such as Truchas or Madrid say so much about how the young think about this life. Similarly, in Alaska I tried to indicate (in *The Last and First Eskimos*) what happens to a cultural morality as it is transmitted over the generations, and as it runs into forces from the outside, bringing new social norms to the edge of the Bering Sea, or up rivers such as the Kobuk or Kugaruk. Finally, in the fifth volume of *Children of Crisis (Privileged Ones)*, I tried to show some of the moral dilemmas that children of affluent backgrounds sometimes try to reconcile with a lived life. "I'm not your friend Ruby," one such girl warned me. After I had nervously assured her that I didn't hold that fact against her or anyone else, she explained the reason for her comment — not intended as "defensive" or accusatory: "I'm just like Ruby, though — in ways: I can see someone sneer, even if it's in fun. I can see myself starting to sneer, and then I say stop, and I do stop. I'll be held to account by God, like my mother says, for the bad thoughts, but at least I can shut my mouth and straighten out my face." She was waging her own moral war — not Ruby's, unquestionably, but a moral war just the same.

I noticed similar parallels as I worked abroad — starting in 1974 when I first went to South Africa and Brazil.⁵ I explain that work, dealing with the way in which children acquire their personal sense of nationality, in another book, *The Political Life of Children*, which with the present book represents a decade of research. Once I had been struck by the moral energy in a few South African and Brazilian children, I was able, ironically, to see in other countries what for too long I'd failed to notice in my native land. In Soweto, in Cape Town's university neighborhoods, in Rio de Janeiro's favelas, I met boys and girls, poor and well-to-do, black and white, who were all trying to find moral answers for themselves through the daily steps they took — a word here, a gesture there, a sympathy announced,

another sympathy denounced. I pursued the study I was making of nationalism as an aspect of childhood, but I also tried to regard how closely these same children, and others I would meet elsewhere, forged a moral life — an outlook that often followed, rather than preceded, a series of events.

Back in this country I decided to review all my records, all the transcripts of conversations, all the drawings and paintings, all the notes — before depositing them once and for all in the University of North Carolina library — with the hope of learning yet again from the Rubys of my working life. But I also decided, once more prompted by my wife, that I had better go back to the various parts of America we had once called home, and talk with some new children, or even with the children of the children we had once known. In Belle Glade, Florida, I met yet again with migrant children (during 1979); in New Mexico I visited Albuquerque and went north to the communities I had known — Truchas and Madrid (during 1980); I also returned (repeatedly, during the early 1980s) to Atlanta and New Orleans, and to the neighborhoods in and around Boston where I had worked in the 1960s and early 1970s; and not least, I was asked by the editor of *Daedalus*, the Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, to visit three schools in different parts of this country. Such visits were made (1980) by three of us (Sara Lawrence Lightfoot and Philip Jackson each went alone, as did I) in the hope that we would be able to report back to our colleagues on a committee organized by *Daedalus* whatever observations we found to be significant. In the chapter “On Character” I describe the “method” of that inquiry. In the five volumes of *Children of Crisis* I have described in detail how I did my work, and do so here, again, at the back of this book.⁶

The chapter “On Character,” followed by the one on “Young Idealism,” tells what I tried to do — get to know students, teachers, administrators from the top down, and in each case with an interest in the question of “character”: what makes someone, in his or her eyes and those of others, a person of “character”? I pursued this

last matter at greater length than originally planned — trying again and again to learn how it comes about that some youths achieve a moral stature, whether publicly recognized or simply among friends. The teachers I met, the school principals, pressed me as hard as I tried to press them, and I often thought of comments they made while I was trudging up the slopes of several Brazilian favelas, where schools play no part at all in the lives of even twelve-year-old children, and where *childhood*, one begins to realize, has to be considered in a different light from ours. The lucky ones I met in those favelas who had survived to the second decade of life (and to early parenthood) did not strike me as “adolescents.” I fear, at times, my naive, ignorant, and self-preoccupied ways may have struck them as — well, not “adolescent,” for none of them knew that word, but as, alas, rather characteristic of the Yankees they had met in Copacabana or Ipanema!

The Brazilian aspect of this work entailed much frustration, I have to say. I had long been interested in comparing the “poverty” I had seen in America with that to be found in the so-called third world, but my wife persuaded me that if it was lives I wished to compare, not merely statistics and indices, then I had best find some focus for the attempt, especially in view of the language barrier. My Portuguese is rudimentary and entails stilted exchanges mediated by an interpreter. Thus, I abandoned the original purpose of “comparison,” in favor of an attempt over many years to puzzle out how some spirited children in Brazil’s favelas manage to make do ethically. What sources give them the moral purpose they develop in the life they live?⁷

As I moved back and forth, one hour in the Copacabana, the next in a favela, I began to notice a continual reference to “them” by people I knew in both locations. I myself began to think of “them” all too commonly — “them” down there along the ocean, whence I had come to this or that favela, strung along a hill, and “them” up there on that hill, which I could see as I stood on the sand and felt the ocean lapping or lashing my legs. One day in a favela I was