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Beyond Intrinsic Motivation: Cultivating a "Sense of the Desirable"

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Imagine three students working hard on a history project. One finds the material intriguing and aspires to master it. Another has no particular interest in the material yet is motivated by the short- and long-term utility of receiving a high grade. The third student works on the project with the understanding that history is a valuable subject and that knowledge of history plays a significant role in one's personal development. This student is not intrigued by the subject matter, nor is he worried about grades; he feels that he should do a good job in order to better himself.

Of the three students, who is preferable: the first student, whose actions are intrinsically motivated; the second, who is extrinsically motivated; or the third, who is guided by motivation based on what is desirable, or what ought to be done? In other words, which type of motivation should be fostered in the school? Research in academic motivation over the past twenty years has focused on the first two types of students. Such research, much like prevailing educational thought, would suggest that the first student is preferable to the second. One reason for this, emphasized by several researchers (for example, Maehr, 1976), is the stability and consistency of the motivation—when learning is not evaluated and rewarded, the intrinsically motivated student will continue studying, while the one driven by extrinsic motivation will not. Intrinsic motivation is also likely to be considered preferable to motivation based on "what ought to be done." This is in accord with a central message underlying the psychology of academic motivation (and espoused by many educators years ago): study is best when based

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Beyond Intrinsic Motivation

on genuinely free choice, when motivated by immediate interest in what one is doing, whether this is stimulated by features, such as incongruities, that arouse intrigue or by the challenge invoked by the task and an orientation toward mastering it.

It is my contention that the attempt to base scholastic motivation on intrinsic motivation in this sense is doomed to failure from the outset, as the curriculum of the educational system is based on other motivational elements. Rather, it is motivation based on a “sense of the desirable” that is consistent with the considerations guiding the school curriculum.

Value-Oriented Curricula

The primary objective of schooling is instilling knowledge, skills, and values that can ensure the child’s development as a complete human being in his or her society and culture. Ostensibly, these goals are consistent with an instrumental theory of motivation, such as that proposed in the value-expectancy model (Weiner, 1980). They may be interpreted as directed toward enhancing students’ ability to maximize their satisfaction (or utility). However, closer examination reveals a qualification that renders this claim inadequate.

Schooling does not aim toward satisfaction of what is desired but rather toward what is desirable, as constructed by the culture. The school curriculum is not directed, as one might mistakenly believe, at preparing the individual to obtain maximal satisfaction of his or her wishes. Rather, it is directed at designing a system of values—that is, at cultivating certain values rather than others and preparing the individual to behave accordingly.

Frankfurt’s (1971) distinction between first- and second-order motivation suggests a conception of motivation that would seem to fit the above-mentioned goals of schooling. First-order motivation refers to the needs that the individual feels an urge or desire to satisfy. These can be primary, stemming from a physiological drive, or secondary, substantially conditioned by personal and cultural experience. Second-order motivation, on the other hand, is related to the individual’s cognition and evaluation of desirable behavior. According to this conception, individuals judge their personal needs and desires in terms of “objective” criteria and, where these needs appear undesirable, attempt to suppress or change them. Similarly, individuals perceive certain goals as desirable and proper and therefore worth pursuing regardless (or in spite) of existing needs and preferences. First-order motivations thus provide a basis for what are commonly called considerations of utility, while second-order motivations are related to consideration of what is worthy and proper. Frankfurt points out how essential the latter type of motivation is for human beings. It is second-order motivation that distinguishes a human being from what he calls a “wanton.” One cannot speak of autonomy without second-order motivation, without a “sense of the desirable,” which is the product of reflection.
Frankfurt's analysis sheds light on a concept whose definition in motivational psychology is vague—the concept of "value" in a restricted sense (as distinguished from its broader usages, as in the value-expectancy model). Among the diverse definitions of the concept in the psychological literature (see, for example, Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz and Bilsky, 1987), a common thread is evident: value denotes a belief that an end state or behavior is desirable, as distinct from being desired. It is based on the image of a state of human perfection that is worth aspiring toward. Whether emerging directly from experience with reality or from cultural perceptions, value (in its restricted sense), like the "sense of the desirable," is perceived as having intrinsic validity—that is, as not being contingent on personal inclination or social convention. In this sense, values stand in opposition to needs. Values rely on reflection and consideration, while needs rely on existing desires. While reflection and consideration can lead the individual to attribute a positive value to an existing need, they can also lead him or her to ascribe to it a negative value and to make an attempt to repress it.

Hence, from a motivational perspective, the school curriculum is directed by values. The reasons for including subject matter in the curriculum are value-related. Indeed, the educator or curriculum designer is likely to explain the inclusion of a given subject in terms of its desirability. Accordingly, the school curriculum can be said to be directed toward the formation and development of values and teaching ways of realizing them. Moreover, above and beyond specific curricular goals, the educator aims to develop individuals who act on the basis of values—that is, of the desirable—rather than of desires.

The Limitations of Intrinsic Motivation in the School

The discussion above brings to light the problems inherent in motivational reliance on reward and punishment, as well as on intrinsic motivation. Both relate to first-order motivations, and neither is inherent in curricular objectives. Rather, they are used as means to increase the chances that students will engage in studies based on "values." One cannot expect these sources of motivation always to accord with the material taught in school.

Studies on the effect of external rewards have pointed to such an inconsistency on both cognitive and motivational levels. Extrinsic rewards have been found to confine learning and performance, emphasizing structured and measurable aspects of a task and hindering divergent thinking and creativity (Butler and Nisan, 1986; Kruglanski, Friedman, and Zeevi, 1971; Nisan, 1981). Moreover, they have been shown to suppress intrinsic motivation and a willingness to study spontaneously and to generate defensiveness and anxiety (Deci, 1975; Lepper and Greene, 1979).

Analogously, intrinsic motivation has limitations on the same two levels. A preliminary problem is that not all subject matters can arouse intrinsic motivation. Part—in fact, a large part—of the curriculum, though
Beyond Intrinsic Motivation

considered desirable by its designers, may not have the features appropriate for generating intrinsic motivation in most students. Whether educators continue to work on the present curriculum and try to “inject” it with intrinsic motivation, or whether subject matter that is problematic (from a motivational point of view) is simply omitted, the result is equally undesirable: a biased selection of curricular material, teaching methods, and possibly ways of learning and thinking. Moreover, the aim to achieve maximal coordination between the student’s inclinations and the curricular material will create a tendency to give students inordinate freedom of choice in what they learn. The criterion of including curricular material of intrinsic interest will thus conflict with the basic educational criterion of teaching that which is “desirable.” This is an important limitation that must be taken into account.

Another limitation of intrinsic motivation is that heavy reliance on it can develop and encourage an orientation toward first-order motivation—toward that which is of immediate interest, conforming with the individual’s wishes and desires at a given time. To put this in extreme terms, individuals whose studying is intentionally confined to material of intrinsic interest may be handicapped when it comes to mobilizing the motivational resources required to study material that does not interest them.

This prediction is based on research on the effect of rewards on intrinsic motivation (Deci, 1975; Lepper and Greene, 1979). These studies found that a person who attributes his or her behavior to a certain source of motivation tends to lose interest in that behavior when the motivational source is absent (for example, when an external reward is no longer expected), even if another motivational basis exists. This suggests a hierarchy of motivational types, such that extrinsic motivation tends to overshadow intrinsic motivation. Taking this argument one step further, I contend that intrinsic motivation tends to prevail over “value” (in the sense of what is desirable); that is, heavy reliance on intrinsic motivation with regard to a given task will overshadow and consequently weaken the perception of value and desirability with regard to that task.

The vulnerability of values and motivation based on the “sense of the desirable” was demonstrated in a recent study by Kunda and Schwartz (1983), which found that the rewarding of a prosocial act led to a decline in altruistic motivation, as expressed in behavior at a later date. Though there is no empirical evidence indicating that intrinsic motivation has a similar effect, it can be reasonably assumed that heavy emphasis on interest in what one is doing, on the immediate satisfaction that the student derives from the material, can overshadow the sense of the desirable regarding that material. This argument echoes claims regarding the development of a narcissistic personality.

In short, intrinsic motivation cannot constitute a sufficient and stable motivational basis for schooling in general or a predesigned curriculum in particular. It will bias the content of the studies, lead students to think along confined lines, and encourage an orientation toward activity based on im-
mediate satisfaction rather than on values. Contrary to claims made by some psychologists, intrinsically motivated students will not be consistently motivated. Certain aspects of the curriculum will interest them, while others will not; at times they will study, and at times they will not. Thus, students who rely exclusively on intrinsic motivation are likely to neglect a large part of their schoolwork.

Most students, however, do not do this. The average student in a good school tends to do the work expected of him or her or at least takes care to devote a minimum level of attention to studies, even when a subject does not arouse high intrinsic motivation and even when rewards and punishments are not salient. What, then, is the source of such students' hard work? An answer to this question has been alluded to above; that the students share the belief of the curriculum designers that the program is desirable and valuable. This perception, which I call the "sense of the desirable," has motivational force; it affects behavior.

The Sense of the Desirable

Observations of two special educational frameworks—the Israeli yeshivas (secondary schools and colleges for Orthodox Jews) and one-year college preparatory programs—as well as studies in regular classrooms (Nisan, 1987; Bauminger, 1988), have revealed a sort of motivational, or action-directing, consideration that is distinct from and may even contradict common motivational considerations of utility. Apparently students perceive the school as an integral part of their world order, where non-instrumental considerations serve not only as behavioral constraints but also as major reasons for action. The child perceives school attendance and related demands made by the educational system as part of a complex set of cultural expectations that are legitimate and desirable. Fulfillment of such expectations is not always a function of fear of punishment, nor can it be reduced to terms of immediate or delayed utility (or satisfaction). It is perceived as desirable in itself, as inherently worthwhile. It is my thesis that perception of "the desirable" creates a motivational force that can be of considerable importance in school.

The sense of the desirable, or "value" in the restricted sense described above, is assumed to be a basic component of human experience. The question of what determines whether behaviors are perceived as desirable is analogous to a major question in the sphere of morality—what determines whether behaviors are perceived as moral or immoral? From a cognitive-developmental perspective (Kohlberg, 1976), one might seek the intrinsic logic underlying the perception of certain types of behavior (for example, close friendship) as desirable. At the other end of the theoretical spectrum, the relativistic approach attributes perceptions of desirability to arbitrary conditioning or cultural conventions. A third perspective—the cultural-constructivist approach, the approach taken here—claims that culture provides a network of beliefs and conceptions that lend validity and logic to the perception of
certain behaviors as desirable. Accordingly, perceptions of “the desirable” are largely based on the cultural image (whatever its sources—natural, traditional, the interests of power groups) of the ideal human being. Anything perceived as bringing the individual closer to this image (as well as everything perceived as contributing to his or her unique personal development, as will be suggested later) is judged as desirable and therefore as what “ought to be done.”

The motivational force of the sense of the desirable thus derives from cognition. However, this need not be a well-developed cognitive structure, and the individual need not be continuously aware of what ought to be done. Research on the distinction between moral and conventional norms (Shweder, Turriell, and Much, 1981) suggests that, although young children are unable to provide fully developed reasons for their judgments, they do possess “intuitions” that are sufficiently developed to create a sense of the desirable.

One should not expect, of course, full coordination between the sense of the desirable and behavior. The gap between the two is well known. However, it should be noted that studies on the relationship between judgment and behavior, conducted by philosophers and psychologists alike, have sought to explain this gap rather than considering it to be natural. The prevailing expectation is that judgment of “ought” will affect behavior. Indeed, common sense suggests that the mere belief that something ought to be done creates pressure to do it (although this may be overcome by other, opposing forces). The motivational force of the sense of the desirable is particularly salient in the domains of morality and altruistic behavior, and it may be assumed that it also operates—and can be further developed—in the school.

An instructive example of the motivational force of the sense of the desirable concerns Holocaust studies offered in Israeli schools. The material taught in the framework of these studies does not arouse intrinsic motivation in the sense that it is intriguing or that it evokes a challenge to master a difficult task; nor is it related to extrinsic or instrumental motivation—that is, to short-term reward and punishment or long-term utility. Nevertheless, especially in recent years, students have taken these studies very seriously out of a sense of commitment. The efforts that they devote to their studies are directly related to the value that they attribute to the subject matter as an important component of their identity.

The Sense of the Desirable and Personal Identity

The example of Holocaust studies illustrates a special type of the sense of the desirable—one that is perceived not as having universal validity but rather as being valid for a specific group for whom the material has unique significance. The children who perceive Holocaust studies as desirable and behave accordingly do not necessarily believe that everyone ought to study the subject. In other words, we are dealing with a matter of particularistic desirability. Along these lines, there is also a perception of the desirable that
is personal, holding only for a particular individual. This type of the desirable, illustrated in the following empirical study, demonstrates the creative and dynamic aspect of this motivational set.

Almost all subjects in a study on “ought motivation” (Nisan, 1989b) stated that it is unnecessary to encourage children to participate in an extracurricular astronomy course. Interest in astronomy is perceived as a “personal preference” (Nucci, 1981), so that it is up to the individual to choose whether to pursue it. Yet when astronomy was presented as a high priority in a student’s life, responses were somewhat different. Two groups of Israeli subjects were presented with the same scenario: a seventeen-year-old boy who had to choose between attending a lecture on astronomy and going to a soccer match that he really wanted to see. To one group of respondents, the boy was described as “extremely interested in astronomy. The subject of astronomy plays an important role in his life—so important that Danny cannot envision himself without pursuing his interest in the subject.” To the other group, he was described as “somewhat interested in astronomy.” Both groups were then asked a number of questions. For example, they were asked to respond to the question “To what degree do you think Danny ought to go to the lecture?” by ranking their answers on a nine-point scale, from 1 = “not at all” to 9 = “very much.” A total of 120 respondents answered this question; results showed that subjects were more likely to feel that Danny ought to attend the lecture when he was described as “extremely interested in astronomy” (average rating of 6.5) than when he was described as “somewhat interested” (average rating of 5.7). Similar results were obtained for other scenarios with a similar structure. It seems, thus, that the personal project of an individual creates a sense of the desirable regarding that project. People are expected to dedicate themselves to such personal projects even if the activities related to them are not perceived as having universal value—that is, as being desirable for everyone.

Examination of this research may also provide a clue to the motivational basis for behaving according to what is desirable. Respondents had difficulty explaining why one “has” to act according to commitments and projects. However, the reasons they gave included variations of the following: “If it is so important for the person, then he ought to do it” and “If he does not do what is so crucial to him, he is spineless.” These reasons do not apply to the expectation that a person should always behave according to his preferences; if Danny likes to play bridge, we do not think that he ought to do that instead of attending a soccer match. Rather, he is expected to pursue projects that are very important to him and to fulfill deeply rooted commitments that constitute part of his self. Failure to behave in accordance with such projects and commitments—so long as they have not been abandoned—cannot be perceived as neutral behavior, as it would signify disregard for and even denial of that part of the self. Such denial is viewed as hindering and restraining the self. This same consideration holds for what is perceived as universally desirable. A child who believes that studying
Beyond Intrinsic Motivation

mathematics is desirable and important for the development of any person will also believe that he or she owes it to himself or herself to pursue those studies. To do otherwise would be to deny part of oneself, which is considered undesirable.

The study on the effect of commitment to astronomy and the previous example of learning about the Holocaust suggest that perceptions of the desirable are not limited to behaviors perceived as universally desirable ("Everyone should study poetry") but also include behaviors perceived as desirable for people belonging to a particular group or even for a specific individual ("I should persist in my efforts to excel in piano playing"). All of these perceptions can be encompassed by the following formulation: "It is desirable to develop oneself and actualize and act in accordance with one's personal identity." Such a perception regarding a personal project not only renders it desirable and motivating but also gives it a sense of value and legitimacy (for example, when it conflicts with other considerations).

The Sense of the Desirable in the School

In considering the possibility of fostering a sense of the desirable in the school, two questions come to the fore: Do schoolchildren possess a concept of desirability or value in the distinct sense described here? Is studying indeed perceived as desirable and intrinsically worthy behavior? These questions were examined in two recent studies (Nisan, 1988, 1989a) investigating the development of a distinct perception of values in children in the first, fourth, and seventh grades (ages six to seven, ten to eleven, and thirteen to fourteen, respectively). Subjects were presented with scenarios, each describing a child who behaves contrary to expectations of four different types (each study investigated three of the four types), labeled morality (for example, he steals), value (for example, she does not read books), convention (for example, he calls his teacher by her first name), and personal preference (for example, she does not go to the movies). Subjects were asked whether the behavior was bad, whether children should be brought up to behave in accordance with the expectation in question, and whether the described behavior should be punished.

A major finding emerging from the studies was that many first-graders and almost all of the fourth- and seventh-graders distinguished among the four types of expectations. This distinction was sharpest in respect to the questions on upbringing and punishment. Subjects said that children everywhere should be brought up in accordance with both moral and value expectations (but not personal preference) yet should be punished only for behavioral infractions involving issues of morality; expectations of convention were perceived similarly to moral expectations (regarding upbringing and punishment) only if there was a social convention regarding that behavior. This distinction among types of expectations was also evident in the reasons that the children gave for their responses. Moral expectations were reasoned
mainly in terms of the welfare of others and of society, values mainly in terms of long-term utility and self-development, conventions in terms of social rules, and personal preferences in terms of the individual’s right to free choice. (The results also revealed a clear developmental trend, which is not directly relevant to the present subject.)

One of the studies included a scenario specifically intended to examine children’s expectations regarding school attendance. A large majority of subjects at all grade levels considered failure to attend school as bad behavior even when the protagonist lived in a country in which school attendance is not required and not common. Moreover, they even believed that there should be a law requiring school attendance (a response predicted for moral expectations but not for expectations of values). These responses were reasoned mainly in terms of the child’s development and his or her long-term well-being—reasons typical of values in the sense used here. What is relevant to the present argument is that young children perceive school attendance as desirable and as necessary for proper development.

The preceding discussion provides firm ground for the claim that the sense of the desirable can and should serve as a basic motivation in school. It can do so because it is the only motivation that conforms to the main objective underlying curriculum design—to develop the whole person; it should do so because cultivation of a sense of the desirable and encouragement to behave accordingly are presumably central educational goals. These cannot be achieved through extrinsic or intrinsic motivation, which are based—as suggested above—on expected gratification. It does not seem plausible that one can cultivate, develop, and encourage values that, by definition, go beyond the principle of pleasure and utility on the basis of that very principle. The sense of the desirable thus serves both as an educational aim and as a source of motivation for studying.

As a source of motivation, the sense of the desirable has several advantages. Two of them seem to overcome the limitations of intrinsic motivation. First, perception of the desirable is largely consistent with the entire curriculum, as all the curriculum is presumably based on what is desirable. Second, it is a relatively stable and consistent motivation, since it does not rely on interest in the material or on the chances for external reward.

One should not conclude, however, that the sense of the desirable offers a complete and exclusive solution to the problem of motivation in school. The sense of the desirable only guides one toward a certain action; it does not obligate one to take that action. It can thus be expected that numerous deviations from the desirable will occur. Elsewhere (Nisan, 1987), I have suggested an additional element—the perception of a contract—that provides the sense of the desirable with motivational force. However, like morality, the sense of the desirable seems more effective in keeping the individual from slipping below a certain level of functioning than in motivating him or her to excel. Thus, from both practical and theoretical points of view, the sense of the desirable does not and should not rule out other motivations.
Beyond Intrinsic Motivation

While it should be emphasized and developed as a basic reason for studying, it should be complemented by additional motivations that are subordinate to it. In such a context, there is room not only for intrinsic or achievement motivation, which some may consider worthwhile in themselves and desirable goals of education, but also for external rewards. Though empirical evidence is yet lacking, I would venture that external rewards that are clearly perceived as intended to further a "desirable" cause will not hinder motivations based on what "ought" to be done.

How can we develop the sense of the desirable as a basic motivation in schools? Two suggestions, based on observations and research conducted at a number of schools, will suffice here. The first suggestion refers to the school culture and the second to teacher behavior.

As mentioned, the primary basis for the sense of the desirable is recognition of the contribution of schooling to the development of the individual. While the individual may construct certain perceptions of the desirable by himself or herself, on the basis of what he or she considers "objective" features of the behavior or outcome at hand, in most cases perceptions of the desirable stem from cultural assumptions and beliefs—not only because the individual alone cannot know or predict all possible outcomes, but primarily because the value is often culturally dependent. A certain skill or behavior may be desirable in one culture and of no value in another culture, where it has a different set of meanings. Consequently, the clarity, force, and degree of cultural consensus regarding the desirability of a given behavior or outcome are likely to be major factors affecting the perception of that behavior or outcome. Although these cultural assumptions are transmitted to the child through a variety of channels (for example, parents, the media), the culture of the school—what has been recently referred to as the school's "ethos"—is undoubtedly a central factor shaping the student's evaluations and beliefs, particularly with regard to the value of studying in school.

Thus, a major factor affecting the development of the sense of the desirable in schoolchildren is the degree to which the school is value-oriented. The value orientation, in contrast to instrumental, achievement, and hedonistic orientations, is directed at developing the individual's personality and potential, at cultivating "good" people, whose lives are guided by values. The yeshiva is an extreme example of this conception, but secular institutions can be value-oriented as well. Indeed, we have observed that students in value-oriented institutions tend to have a stronger sense of the desirable than their counterparts studying in schools in which the prevailing orientation is instrumental or based on achievement.

As mentioned above, teacher behavior also plays an important role. The value orientation of a school is expressed in all aspects of schooling, including the criteria employed in teacher evaluations of students and the nature of the student-teacher interaction. Of particular significance in this regard is the respect exhibited by the teacher toward the students (Schwartz, Cohen, Kinreich, and Grad, 1987). Respect for the student seems to be an
essential component of an orientation toward values, as it reflects consideration of the whole human being, rather than just a part of the person’s self (for example, his or her achievements). Our preliminary study of eighth-graders has shown that teachers perceived as respecting their students were also perceived as guided more by the value orientation, emphasizing their students’ personal development rather than high scholastic achievement. Furthermore, they were perceived as tending to prefer value considerations over personal ones when faced with a dilemma.

A Concluding Note

The argument favoring the sense of the desirable as a source of motivation in the school is likely to arouse certain reservations. I believe that our discussion disaffirms two central ones.

One such reservation stems from associating the sense of the desirable with the superego. This conjures up an image of the child as restrained and suffering, in contrast to the child who is positively motivated, free, and happy. Freud’s discussion of the superego has led to a perception of the moral and value system as being directed at the restraint of the individual's natural inclinations. This is the source of the sharp distinction between motivation and morality: motivation is related to behaviors that derive from desire and free choice, while morality and value are perceived as being forced on the individual.

Obviously, the division between the two systems is not justified from a practical point of view. The direction and intensity of learning cannot be fully examined without taking into account the influence of values and morality. Even from a theoretical perspective, however, the distinction between moral and motivational factors is not sharp. In fact, scholars in the field of psychoanalysis (for example, Pattison, 1968) have widely recognized that the restraining aspect of the superego must be considered together with the constructive aspect of the ego ideal. Indeed, a sense of the desirable related to studying is closer to tendencies toward self-realization than to restraint of desires. True, the sense of the desirable will sometimes lead the individual to engage in behavior that contradicts his or her “natural” needs, but the same may be said of achievement-oriented motivation, for example. The conflict with other value systems is not limited to the sense of the desirable.

A second reservation stems from associating the sense of the desirable with obedience and conformity and with the imposition of values on the innocent child. These features are contradictory to the approach that seeks to view the school as a framework that fosters personal freedom and independent thinking. While values undeniably dictate behavior and therefore limit it, they always involve a degree of self-construction. Without denying the dominant effect of culture in forming beliefs and values, I submit that culture-transmitted values come to be justified within a coordinated system of beliefs and values. The value of schooling is based on an understanding
Beyond Intrinsic Motivation

of what is desirable, not on blind obedience. Indeed, that is how the child distinguishes between morality and values, on the one hand, and conventions, on the other.

The type of motivation emphasized in school may have broad implications for the student and his or her culture. The motivation that operates in schools not only reflects a cultural orientation but also contributes to the shaping of that orientation. For this very reason, we ought to consider what each motivational practice represents. While the sense of the desirable represents an orientation toward values or ideals, extrinsic motivation—and to some extent intrinsic motivation—represent an orientation toward self-interest. Cultivation of the sense of the desirable is therefore important not only for strengthening one’s motivational set but also for enabling one to strike a balance between an orientation toward self-interest and one toward values.

References


