

Play Rights

Paper for the Conference: *Theater? Mit Mir?!*

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Introduction

This paper explores the importance of young people's theatrical play for their participation as active citizens in the shaping of the world in which they will have to survive as adults. The paper is organised around four areas or conceptual frames which provide its structure. These are: firstly, the struggle between a needs-based and a rights-based approach to the education of young people; secondly, the tension between life experienced as an individual and the collective requirements of participating in play; thirdly, the particular features that a theatre process brings to education; and finally, the relationship of applied theatre to social transformation. Through these stages, the argument will attempt to propose a central role in any future educational curriculum for theatre and drama.

Needs versus Rights

The differences between needs and rights can, in some areas of social life, be subtle and shifting and nowhere is this more true than with the concept of education. However, the systems and institutions through which education is provided for young people in Europe and North America and which, through colonialism, have been exported around the world, are firmly rooted in the principle of need. Accordingly, adults – teachers, parents, and increasingly today politicians – prescribe education for young people based upon these adults' perceptions of what young people need in order to be educated to survive in the modern world. It is not necessary to be a Marxist to understand that the needs of the most powerful in any given society are

represented through channels of communication such as education, media and parental influence, as the needs of the majority. For example, we often hear, see, and read in our media about the need for an educated workforce, capable of meeting the high-tech challenges of the new century. In practice this means that the transnational corporations need a certain type of worker in order to maintain their profit margins, and states which train these workers most effectively at their taxpayers' expense are likely to be the ones which will attract the jobs on offer at these corporations. In such an instance the need for education is a requirement of the way in which a globalised, neoliberal, capitalist economy operates today. Whether such an education relates to the range of needs experienced by the workers themselves is a different matter. Those who do not respond to this educational model are deemed to be stupid, difficult or unteachable. They are likely to become an underclass living on state benefits in so-called developed societies and sinking into poverty, disease and starvation in so-called developing ones. The corporations need to make a profit in order to offer their shareholders dividends without which their executives run the risk of losing their jobs, their enormous salaries, their pensions and their standard of living which accompanies this set-up. The needs of a very few people who control the operations of transnational corporations thus affect the education and life prospects of the majority. The neoliberal economic framework is therefore directly related to the type of education experienced by young people. Ever since the beginnings of European colonial expansion, the centre, in this case the European centres of economic and political power, has been dictating to the periphery in its own and its colonised nations the ways in which they should be educated and the ways in which they should process the reality of their lived experience. In the famous phrase of Paulo Freire the majority has not been allowed 'to name the world' but has had the world named for it,

using the language and concepts of the coloniser through the imposition of what Freire called the 'banking' system of education whereby the teacher pours a quantity of knowledge into the receptacle which is the passive learner and then tests whether this knowledge has been memorised. In this way the values, history, art, in sum the culture of the ruler, is passed on to the ruled who must either join this culture club or be left behind in the education system. As we've recently witnessed, this banking system of education has merely produced an education system of bankers.

The alternative to maintaining a system which is set up so that the many have to service the needs of the few is to change the principle by which the system operates from one of needs to one of rights. In theory, at least, such a system has been in place as a framework ever since the United Nations approved the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. More particularly, with regards to the education of young people, the most significant document within the rights framework is the Convention on the Rights of the Child, signed by all nations except Somalia and the United States, in 1989. Article 13 of the Convention states the following:

The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.

Underpinning this Article is a dialogical notion of education that refutes the colonial model. In this model the child is free to learn from whatever experiences she comes into contact with. Adults have a duty of care as teachers and parents to expose children to as wide a range of information, knowledge and understanding as they are able but not to colonise young people's faculties of analysis and interpretation by

taking upon themselves the task of assigning meaning and values to these inputs. Instead it is the right of children to set up dialogues between the worlds beyond themselves as presented through formal education, the family, the media and any other organs of culture, and their own lived experience. Learning is the product of these encounters between subjective and objective reality and is articulated and shared through the means selected by the young person: words, music, visual art, kinetic art or other forms of their own invention. Critical to this learning process is the right, capacity and opportunity to play. Through play the child embarks upon the process of assimilating external experience and of rehearsing responses to the situations thrown up by that experience. The child tries out identities in order to find out which ones fit most comfortably with the place she occupies; a process which is enhanced by opportunities to play safely with other children in order to discover through their reactions what are the various consequences of the behaviours they select. Playing is critical for the social aspects of identity formation. The development of a child towards well-being depends upon the provision of spaces in which to play with other children, to play with ideas and to play with responses to the experiences she encounters. The needs driven curriculum of formal schooling relegates play to the status of time off from the serious business of study instead of recognising it as the fundamental building block of any educational activity. Rather than nurturing the creative and imaginative capacities of young people, the curriculum all too often circumscribes the limits of knowledge in ways that are utterly alien to the learner. Government advisers and politicians, not even the increasingly distrusted and deskilled teachers, determine not only what is to be taught but also how it is to be taught, lest in the gap between form and content some random weed of the subversive imagination might spring up. Educating children for a life in a world which is not

theirs is, however, in the long run doomed and, more immediately, puts both children and the world at risk. The components of the system are human: recalcitrant, disaffected, and, until blunted by consumerist blandishments, yearning for a fairer world. As the present system fails more and more of its people and, increasingly, the planet itself, so a different way of managing our affairs will have to be found. In the search for these other ways, education, in the proper sense of the concept, will have a key role to play in unlocking the creativity and imagination of young people so that they can determine the agendas for change.

Individualism versus Collectivity

This paper is an assertion of the importance of play as a vital element in the life of the human species without which all social cohesion is threatened if not impossible. It is my contention that, as a direct consequence of the imposition of the neoliberal model of economic development upon all aspects of life in so-called developed societies, we are rapidly losing our capacity to play and, as *homo ludens* morphs into *homo microsoftus*, that loss calls into question our ability to meet the challenge of changing course and hence surviving as a species. For it is through play that we learn to live as social beings and through play that we first exercise our imaginations through interactions between what is and what might be. Through play we discover the creative excitement of becoming, of realising future possibilities. Children have a propensity to play because they are physically and emotionally in a state of constant becoming. As adults, we would be the same were it not for the external factors in our environments that strive to hold us in fixed positions of passivity. This is by no means a recent process, but rather a five hundred year lingering dissolution that Barbara Ehrenreich has linked to the rise in depression:

But if there was, in fact, a beginning to the epidemic of depression, sometime in the 16th or 17th century, it confronts us with this question: could this apparent decline in the ability to experience pleasure be in any way connected with the decline in opportunities for pleasure, such as carnival and other traditional festivities?¹

The present danger is that too long an alienation from that inner, playful child may result in a permanent loss of the epigenetic codes by which for millennia we learnt to play.

The urge to play is reflected in the earliest stories found in all cultures upon earth and the key figure at the heart of such stories is the trickster, at once nowhere and everywhere and somewhere in the psyche of us all. In the Prefatory Note to his study of American Indian mythology, *The Trickster*, Paul Radin writes:

...Trickster is at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself. He wills nothing consciously. At all times he is constrained to behave as does from impulses over which he has no control. He knows neither good nor evil yet he is responsible for both. He possesses no values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his passions and appetites, yet through his actions all values come into being.²

One of the perennial qualities of the trickster, manifested across all cultures, is the ability to serve as a link or communication between different worlds and different realities. For the ancient Greeks Hermes commuted between gods and men, negotiating on behalf of each to the other while frequently misrepresenting messages and misunderstanding instructions. The Christian tradition created the figure of Christ, at once both divine and human, representing God to mankind and mankind to God. In cultures where the links to nature were more vivid and concrete, trickster appears in the guise, for example, of the spider in West Africa and the raven among the nations

¹ Barbara Ehrenreich edited extract from *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy* (Granta, 2007) in the *Guardian G2*, April 2nd, 2007.

² Paul Radin *The Trickster*, New York: Schocken Books (1972), p. xxiii.

of the Pacific North-West. The figure is always on the move between these worlds, shape-shifting, ambiguous, enjoying the joke of mortality and perpetual change. In *Trickster Makes This World*, Lewis Hyde sets out to discover some of the places where the figure may be sought in our world:

If trickster stirs to life on the open road, if he embodies ambiguity, if he “steals fire” to invent new technologies, if he plays with all boundaries both inner and outer, and so on – then he must still be among us, for none of these has disappeared from the world. His functions, like the bones of Osiris, may have been scattered, but they have not been destroyed. The problem is to find where his gathered body might come back to life, or where it might already have done so.³

There has been a marked decline in communal, public spaces for play in the Western world over the last fifty years. Increasingly the experience of childhood is isolated and fragmented, characterised for many by the passivity of gazing or interacting with electronic images from television, computer or video game. The visual replaces the aural and programmed responses occupy the space once held by the imagination. The television and computer in the bedroom are the contemporary tools with which the ‘developed’ world’s children respond in passivity and isolation to the external, social sphere; now virtual where once it was real. The claim that the increasing trend towards interactivity is an antidote to the notion of passive consumption of images needs to be treated cautiously for the terms on which interactive responses are permitted are predetermined by the creators of the images: programmed participation rather than a stimulus to free-flowing imagination. Though advancing computer technologies will offer ever increasing possibilities for virtual playfulness, some life-affirming elements of play are only made available through the intimate contact between living flesh.

³ Lewis Hyde *Trickster Makes This World*, New York: North Point Press (1999), p. 10.

In her study of play among pre-school children attending a day-care centre in Finland, Marjatta Kalliala notes that ‘children’s play culture does not just happen naturally. Play needs time and space. It needs mental and material stimulation to be offered in abundance’.⁴ She adds the further important distinction between space organised on behalf of children by institutions and those which children create for themselves as part of the process of their self-actualisation:

For these children, the playground at the day-care centre is the only place where they can learn and play competitive games of their own making. Despite offering enough space, time and friends to play with, the institutional playground does not compensate for the lack of playing in the backyard at home.⁵

Patterns of contemporary living have conspired to shrink these spaces almost to extinction. Homes lack backyards; working parents use organisations to arrange activities; outdoors is all too often synonymous with danger, violence and the environment of children who are not properly cared for. Even when the opportunity for safe play may be presented the modern child may eschew it as Kalliala notes: ‘... commercial and stereotypical television programmes with supplementary products have driven children out of the garden, so that children’s play culture pulsates with rhythms defined by television’.⁶ There is another vital element missing from child’s play that is organised on their behalf: the licence to lose control, to experience a moment of madness without social consequence. Kalliala has noted this propensity for wildness in the children she studied, relating it to a primal instinct for seeing the world from different angles:

Children all over the world seem to enjoy swivelling and the feeling of dizziness that

⁴ Marjatta Kalliala (2006), p. 139.

⁵ *ibid.* pp. 35-36.

⁶ *ibid.* p. 133.

comes with it. A momentary need to turn the world upside down and fool about together seems a universal phenomenon.⁷

This function of turning the world upside down used to be performed by carnival; those days set aside for time off from normal behaviour; the excesses of Mardi Gras and Midsummer madness. Now we have only the diluted vestiges in commercial fun fair rides and Bank Holidays – the appropriate way to experience freedom in a society dominated by neoliberal economics. Carnival, the playground of the trickster, offered collective, public spaces for the performance of disguise and madness. Whether subversive or domesticating in its effect, at least the carnival allowed for moments and places where other modes of experiencing, other ways of being were tried out.

Ever since the rise of capitalism, we have become used to the way that human relations in the economic sphere are defined in terms of markets; buyers and sellers. Business is predicated upon a transactional model; an extended marketplace that might be any place where a business transaction can be accomplished. However, what we are seeing today, fuelled by globalisation and accelerated by satellite and digital technologies, is the progressive penetration of the neoliberal economic model into every aspect of human relations and all the activities conducted by human beings. Those areas where elements of play formerly existed are now in thrall to this model: education, the arts, the emotions and the imagination. Where once there was learning and understanding, there is now something called a knowledge economy. Where once there was theatre, music, dance and art, there is now something called the creative industries. Once creativity is subjected to an industrial model, what hope is there for the arts to be experienced as joy and liberation? In writing of the influence of the Disney phenomenon upon the service industries throughout developed economies,

⁷ *ibid.* p. 94.

Alan Bryman highlights the role of emotional labour in promoting the experience and thereby increasing the profits:

What could be described as new in relation to the Disney theme parks and to the other modern examples of the diffusion of emotional labour is the prominence it is given, particularly in relation to commercial service delivery. Therefore, it is the formally prescriptive nature of the experience of emotions as part of the work role that is novel, even though emotional labour itself is not new.⁸

The sphere of the emotions was formally experienced as part of the personal, intimate domain that marked out each person with an individual identity; but now it is only an aspect of the wider labour market: emotions at the service of business, and one particular model of business at that. The theatre has been turned into a transaction between employees and customers where once it was a communication between actors and audience. In the Disney theme parks the process is explicit in the terms of their training manuals where employees are referred to as the cast of this Disney production and the customers are guests. One such paying ‘guest’, Jerry Mander, describes his visit to the EPCOT Centre, having reminded readers that the initials stand for Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow:

And so it went throughout EPCOT. The corporations and the new technologies are there to make our lives better. The future will be a lot better than the present. We don’t need to maintain our charming but hindering bonds to such anomalies as land, family farms (or any farms), or community, or the natural world. All we need do now is relax, float in our little cars, and be awed with the skill, thoughtfulness, imagination, and devotion of these can-do visionary corporations and their astounding new tools. We can all look forward to a future of very little work, total comfort, and complete technological control of the environment, the weather, nature, and *us*. Our role? To trust their leadership and vision. To enjoy it, to live in it, and to watch it like a movie.⁹

Mander wrote these impressions over fifteen years ago, since when the spread of the theme park phenomenon has been exponential. The experience economy now sells complete worlds as visions of the future or as living museums where our history is

⁸ Alan Bryman *The Disneyization of Society*, London: Sage (2004), p. 110.

⁹ Jerry Mander *In The Absence of the Sacred*, San Francisco: Sierra Club Books (1992), pp. 154 – 155.

transformed through the alchemy of heritage into an experience devoid of pain, lack, contradiction.

The other side of the gleaming Disney coin's fantasy of social cohesion founded upon absolute faith in the corporation is the world of the underclass; of those who have no stake in that world because they have no role in it as customers. But they are two sides of the same coin; one made by the actions of the other:

Society is hollowing out, but not just in the rotting boroughs of south London. The middle classes are anxious too. Many are richer but few seem happier. Mental illness abounds. white-collar jobs are outsourced to India. Everyone looks for meaning in their lives – but all they find is shopping. The threat of global warming creates a psychosis of despair because, it seems, nothing can be done. The meltdown is social as well as glacial. We are a society losing control. Why?

The answer can be found just a short bus hop from south London, where City boys wallow in multimillion-pound bonuses. These are the Masters of the Universe. It is their interests and luxury desires that shape our world. [...]

The free-market spirit of competition that sifts winners from losers is the code of our mean streets. [...] There is no solidarity, empathy or humanity for the loser in New Labour's harsh meritocracy. For endemic social problems we offer just pitifully weak individualised solutions.¹⁰

'Solidarity, empathy' and 'humanity': all these are qualities that have their roots in child's play. Collective play happens when rules are agreed and all players abide by them: solidarity; and play is sustained when each player projects herself into the situation or role of another: empathy. We are all born with the imagination and creativity to operate as playful creatures, as humans, but if all opportunities are denied by a society whose creed is absolute selfishness, the instinct to play dies in a generation that is then unable to foster that capacity in its children.

¹⁰ Neal Lawson *The Guardian*, Thursday, February 22nd 2007.

In the grand narratives of social collapse it is no doubt unwise to pull at a single thread, yet it is hard not to seize upon broadcast television given that so many hours in the 'developed' world are devoted to this activity. There are many strands to the menace posed by television such as the concentration of ownership in so few hands; the conflict between profit and truth in the management of news; the promotion of a global monoculture; the assault upon history and identity through the 'breaking news' cult of the continuous present, to name a few. But for the purposes of this paper it is the damage inflicted by television upon the imagination that is the prime concern. Unlike story-telling or radio, the medium of television deprives the viewers of the possibility of making their own pictures. Without that autonomy they are placed in a position of passivity, absorbing what the screen gives out rather than employing their own visual experience to contest the global satellite discourse.

Unlike play, television exacerbates the gap between knowledge and information by swamping the receiver with the latter in quantities and at speeds which do not allow the brain to process the new input in ways that can extend the mind's capacity. The result is a kind of cultural indigestion, where alien goblets offer random stereotypes and caricatures of understanding, misleading us into thinking we have a part in someone else's world. Jerry Mander has explored the consequences of the invasion of television into a previously virgin, oral culture: that of the Dene Indians of the Canadian northwest:

The stories also embodied a teaching system. The old transmit to the young their knowledge of how things are, in such a loving way that the children absorb it whole and request more. The death of the storytelling process will leave an absence of knowledge of Indian ways and thought, and a sense of worth in Indian culture.

Another important factor is that the images woven by the storyteller are

actually realized in the listeners' minds. The children create pictures in their heads, pictures that go far beyond the words of the storyteller, into the more elaborate, more fabulous world of the imagination. So the child is in some ways as creative as the teller of the tale, or put another way, the storyteller is only a stimulus for the imagination of the child.¹¹

What the residential schools managed only partially, in their attempts to eradicate native cultures, satellite television is highly likely to complete and with it, radically reduce the once myriad ways of being human. The subsequent cultural impoverishment of the species has as many implications for survival as the loss of biodiversity. There is a danger already manifest in the behaviour of many young people who feel no sense of connection with the world they inhabit, that the long journey of individualism embarked on in the early modern, capitalist period and given philosophical and cultural credence by the Enlightenment with its accompanying myth of Progress will result in changes to our epigenetic codes that leave us programmed to destroy each other through our inability to play with each other.

Why Theatre in Education?

In view of the social conditions depicted above I believe that there has never been a time when Theatre in Education was needed more. However, it should not be treated like sticking plasters to be 'applied' to the gaping wounds of the unjust, alienating, neoliberal society. Rather it is needed because it is a methodology which can only operate effectively through participation based on the principle of the democratic engagement of all those involved in a particular project. Real participation means that the participants set the agenda according to the articles of the CRC, not that young people are permitted to participate in the agendas set by curriculum advisers, teachers or parents. Whether facilitated by teachers or by theatre professionals it is essential

¹¹ Mander, *op.cit.*, pp. 112-113.

that the process is grounded in research that comes out of the lived experience of young people. In a reversal of the power relations that operate in the rest of their lives, it is the young people themselves who become the subjects rather than the objects of the TiE process, teaching the teachers about what it means to be a young person growing up in the world created and endorsed by the adults who surround them. This does not mean that those with a duty of care simply offer a platform for the self-indulgence of adolescent emotion but rather that they facilitate a dialogic space where the teenage world can safely collide with experiences from the wider world in ways that show that young people can act upon and engage meaningfully with the reality of their own and of others' lived experience. Dave Pammenter articulates the responsibilities of those who supervise the devising unequivocally:

Ultimately [TiE's] responsibility is only to the child. If the material presented is slight, lacking emotional or intellectual depth, then the intellectual and aesthetic capabilities of the children are being underestimated and the resulting work will be patronizing and hold little meaning for them. If learning is to take place through the forum of the programme, if the programme is child-centred, if learning is to do with experience, then the responsibility of the deviser is to create a rich and meaningful experience: an experience that has been well planned, has depth, truth, usually has its own internal logic and has an artistic integrity that reaches and involves the child, and is challenging to both child and performer.¹²

The challenge must operate whether there is a professional performer or whether the young person is the performer. There are as many ways to initiate a TiE process as there are projects and the specific context is always the determining factor in what constitutes an appropriate approach. Personal objects, pictorial representations, images and stories all have a role to play in unlocking the latent creativity of young people. For the facilitator who may also in other guises be a teacher, it is important not to project an expectation of issues 'worthy' of inclusion in the content of the performance. Worth and importance are ascribed to experience by the participants,

¹² Pammenter, David 'Devising for TIE' in Jackson, Tony *Learning through Theatre* (1993), London: Routledge, p. 69.

not prescribed or proscribed by a gate-keeping adult. Stories of events that have actually happened to the young person are particularly valuable starting-points because that person, as story-teller, is the artist in charge of her own experience, selecting what to include, what to leave out and what to emphasise. Whatever development, change, transformation is to come from this process for the young person, it can only be real if it is grounded in the truth of her experience. As Brecht commented: 'Taught only by reality can/ Reality be changed'.¹³ The particular strength of theatre in relation to social change, however, is its unique capacity for mixing fact and fiction. The initial groundwork of reality, of starting from a place inhabited and recognised by the participants is enhanced by the operation of the imagination, by the asking of 'what if?' and by playing with all the possible answers to that question. This is the essential quality of play at any age and for any situation. For young people in general and for marginalised, vulnerable and oppressed young people in particular it is vital that they gain access to a place where they can be made powerful by the articulation of aspiration and by the taking of actions designed to realise those aspirations. The rehearsing of taking action in the controlled space of the theatre workshop may for some young people prove to be the spring-board that gives them the confidence and energy to take action in the world outside theatre and, in so doing, to bring about a change in the previous, hostile reality which prevailed before they participated in the theatre process.

After running a series of child-rights theatre workshops in various African countries, Michael Etherton was struck by the imaginative power and creative capacity of some of the poorest and least privileged children on the face of the earth:

What constantly amazes us adults is the quality of the drama the young people create in the process of defining the infringement of their rights. In country after country, in culture after culture, children and young people have a beautiful sense of

¹³ Brecht, Bertolt *The Measures Taken and Other Lehrstücke*, London: Eyre Methuen 1977, p.34

dramatic improvisation. Young people's art in all kinds of creative media, coupled with their struggle for their rights in an unfair world, stands a good chance of changing the future in ways we adults cannot now imagine.¹⁴

One of the commonest cries of young children is 'it's not fair' because their sense of justice has not been blunted by the persistent experience of unfairness which blights the lives of so many adolescents. The cynicism which grows from the disappointments and deceptions of life may, at least for the duration of the workshop, be suspended and, in that liminal moment of suspension, be replaced by a belief in the possibility of change. Whether that belief is well-founded and sustainable takes us beyond the sphere of theatre and its rehearsals for change and out into the world itself.

Young People as Agents of Social Change

Theatre is not a magic space which suddenly releases young people from all the oppressions with which they are afflicted in the rest of their lives. Neither will it produce social transformation if it merely offers a temporary escape into a never-never land of happy fantasy. Facilitators have a key role in helping to structure a bridge between their everyday worlds and the worlds of their aspirations and desires by challenging young people to apply their imaginative capacities to their lived experiences. A core aspect of this challenge is to encourage young people to view these experiences as capable of being changed rather than being accepted fatalistically as inevitable. In this aspect facilitators can be greatly helped by revisiting Brecht's concept of *Verfremdung*: that process whereby the worlds in which young people grow up today are represented in ways that enable participants to view the world as curious, extraordinary, contradictory and, above all, as capable of being changed by the actions of people. *Verfremdung* is, in effect, a counter-hegemonic device which

¹⁴ Michael Etherton 'West African Child Rights Theatre for Development' in Etherton *op. cit.* p.118.

can offer children some means of combating the constant bombardment of their senses by those who would have them buy their products, look like them, accept their ideas without question, and secure their passive acceptance to name their worlds on their behalf. This stage of counter-hegemonic consciousness-raising is an essential phase in the process of contemporary Theatre in Education directed towards social change by young people since, without it, the participants will remain constrained by the false utopias of happiness through consumption. However, once participants can be repositioned as active citizens they can embark upon a journey of social investigation exploiting the power of theatre to evoke those conditions of empathy by which the self is identified in the other and the other in the self. Under these circumstances it is possible to witness young people experiencing transformative potential applied both to themselves and to the societies they inhabit.

This conference uses the phrase 'Children and Adolescents at Risk'; at risk of what? And for whom is this risk? It is normal for young people to be demonised as a threat to society or to be characterised as being at risk of dropping out of those institutions to which they may have no desire to belong. If families are places of physical and sexual abuse and schools are sites of bullying and humiliation where irrelevant curricula are forced upon them, it is little wonder that the failure of these institutions invites young people to seek alternative institutions and patterns of relationship. But it is the young people who are to blame, who are seen as at risk, rather than our economic and social systems which are far more dangerous than the vulnerable and isolated children who resist them. Drama in Education to be effective in terms of social transformation must challenge prevailing hegemonies and create disturbance among the values, ethics and morality that is commonplace today.