

Recovering The Moral Dimension

November 02, 2011

Barry Schwartz's early research focused on trying to prove that B.F. Skinner's models of human nature were wrong. But conversations with political scientists and philosophers at Swarthmore College made Schwartz, who is a professor in the psychology department at Swarthmore, realize that the behaviorist models he was studying shared many features with economic models. This piqued his interest because, as he notes, "Policymakers don't take what psychologists have to say very seriously, [but] they certainly take what economists have to say very seriously."

When Schwartz explored the connections between behaviorist and economic models of human nature, he found that what was missing in nearly all of them was a moral dimension. In most models, he says, "the trick is to engineer rules and incentives so that you don't need moral people." He argues that this approach is a huge mistake because he believes neither rules nor incentives will actually get humans what we need and want.

In his [Bring the Family Address](#) at the 24th APS Annual Convention in Chicago, Schwartz will discuss how we can reintroduce the moral dimension by encouraging what Aristotle called *practical wisdom*. Schwartz contends that our current system of rules and incentives does not allow people to exercise their judgment and develop an ability to think between the lines. The most effective way to change this system, he says, is to rethink the way people are trained. Some medical schools and law schools, for example, are instituting new programs that require students to develop practical wisdom in the context of real-life situations. While it may take several generations, Schwartz argues that these programs have the potential to gradually reintroduce the moral dimension into our social institutions.

To learn more about Schwartz's work on practical wisdom and to see video clips from our interview with him below:

Barry Schwartz will give the Bring the Family Address at the [24th APS Annual Convention](#) in Chicago, Illinois, USA.

Question 1: Your work has spanned several areas. Are there any overarching interests that have guided your research over time?

Question 2: Why is practical wisdom so important?