What Is “Moral Education”?

Abstract Moral education is one of the most significant arenas of preoccupation of analytic educational philosophy as well as of daily educational practice. Several significant alternative theories of moral education emerged in twentieth century philosophy of education.

It would seem that twenty-first century theory and practice of moral education reflects new realities, challenges, and responses.

Keywords The moral situation • Moral socialization • Moral thinking
• Moral caring

Moral education is one of the central concerns of philosophy of education. Over the years, it has been described using a variety of terms—“moral education”, “values education”, “ethics and education” and “character education”. Ultimately, these diverse appellations all focus on the question of “What is the role of education in making us moral and good human beings?”

In former times, discussion of the moral and the good was typically related to religious belief and practice and was often regarded as one of the central missions of religious education. The discussion of moral education

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was to change dramatically in the modern era when morality was no longer necessarily dependent on or a derivative of religious education. Modern discussions do not necessarily—if at all—tie moral and ethical spheres to religion. Rather, they focus on the role of morality in education in general.

THE MORAL SITUATION

The discussion of what “moral education” means very much depends on the clarification of a prior question: What are the issues a person faces when he/she is confronted by a moral situation that calls for a decision?

The first component of a moral situation is that it constitutes a moment in which one has to decide between alternative actions regarding what to do or how to behave. However, the need for a decision in itself is not the single determining dimension of being moral since there are many moments in which we have to make choices in matters of taste, interest, or mood that are a part of daily life in modern societies and are issues unrelated to morality (e.g., “Which of Baskin-Robbins’ thirty-one flavors should I choose today?”). Moral decision-making is about having to make a choice between conflicting core values and principles that force us to decide which is the right and wrong thing for us to do. Moral conflicts are generally not between right and wrong but rather between two rights or two wrongs. Heinz has a very sick wife whose life was in danger. There is one drug that can save her; it is sold in only one pharmacy and it is extremely expensive because the pharmacist has devoted many years to developing it. Heinz does not have enough money to pay for the drug nor is he able to recruit funds. Ultimately, he has only two options: (1) to steal the drug and face the consequences or (2) not to steal the drug and potentially be responsible for his wife’s death. What should he do and why?¹ Moral decisions are about practical situations involving principled beliefs about what is right or wrong good or bad. In former times, priests and other religious authorities told us what to do. In modern life, we confront the situation with no clerical or supernatural dictates, rather, with only our own conscience and self.

Such decision-making is not an abstract discussion of wise philosophers sitting in easy chairs and deliberating for hours, days, months, or a lifetime. Moral decisions are issues that each of us faces every day in the here and now, situations that are central to human life, that are intensely personal, and that require making a choice of following a course of action.

APPROACHES TO MORAL EDUCATION

The emergence of contemporary public education created a dilemma about the place of moral education in schooling. As indicated, in former times this type of education was in the bailiwick of religion, which prescribed specific choices and actions. The question for a contemporary public education not rooted in specific religious beliefs is whether there is a place for moral education in schools. If the answer is in the affirmative, then we are faced with questions as to the bases on which moral decisions made, what are the goals of moral education in public schooling, and what the roles and responsibilities of teachers might be.

French academic Emile Durkheim is often regarded as the father of the fields of sociology and of modern thinking about moral education. Durkheim, in his numerous writings about morality and education, established a framework that influenced educational thinking and practice for many decades (Durkheim 1961).

Durkheim regarded human beings as social animals, meaning that human life originates and exists within social frameworks. There is no existence without society. Consequently, morality is a system of behaviors reflecting what societies regard as “right” or “wrong”. For Durkheim, modern moral education is the activity of transmitting good and right behaviors of a society to its future citizens. He regarded the teacher as a “secularized” priest or prophet charged with the mission—by means of words, demeanor, and actions—of transmitting society’s core values and behaviors. For Durkheim, the teacher is a powerful and essential force in moral education, and, in fact, is much more important than the family. A family is ultimately focused on caring, supporting, and protecting its children, and it will always compromise on moral issues when its own children are involved. Thus, it is the educator who is charged with transmitting moral codes and enforcing moral behaviors in the young.

Durkheim did not prescribe a specific code of ethics—and he indicated that moral codes could change over time—yet he maintained that ethics relates ultimately to behaviors that are for the good of a society. He did acknowledge that it was sometimes necessary to revolt against the practices of a society if its current moral behaviors strayed from societal principles. In such cases, it was both legitimate and indeed a requirement to call a society to order and to chastise it for corrupting its own core principles. Thus, Durkheim did not regard Socrates, the biblical prophets or Jesus as malcontents, but rather as social critics protesting the turpitude

and degeneration of Athenian and Israelite societies and pleading with its citizens to return to their fundamental values.

Durkheim believed that teachers should be models of morally correct behavior. Their mission is to transmit the core values of modern secular societies by pedagogy, personality, and public behavior. The teacher's task is not simply to pass on knowledge verbally, but also to model "the good" and "the right". At the same time, the teacher must be concerned that the moral sphere does not become mere habit; instead it should be linked to reflection and understanding of core social values. Durkheim indicated that a teacher's authority must be tempered with benevolence and sensitivity to the frailty of the child and should not lapse into harshness.

The best pedagogic device for developing the social elements of moral education, according to Durkheim, is the utilization of the class as a social group for the nurturing of group pride, comradeship, and loyalty. The school class should be the model for behaving according to a society's highest and most worthy values. Durkheim's approach to moral education is the first iteration of a secular theory and practice of moral education for contemporary life.

An important—albeit little known—contribution to the discussion of moral education is to be found in the writings of British educationist John Wilson (Wilson et al. 1967). Durkheim grounded the origins of moral education in sociology, while Wilson believed that philosophy was the basis of a theory of moral education rooted in moral deliberation and reflection. Wilson regarded moral education as a way of thinking about ethical issues rather than as a procedure for transmitting specific values to students. His emphasis was on individual inquiry and deliberation rather than societal imposition.

Wilson's model of moral education was based on a thinking process, which encompassed identifying the moral dilemma; verifying the relevant facts and moral issues involved; and applying principles of reasoning and consideration of other people's interests to enable moral action. This approach regarded the role of schooling to be the nurturing of the philosophical process of moral reasoning.

Wilson did acknowledge that in order to teach the process of deliberation and resolution, a teacher often would need to express a particular moral viewpoint, because to be neutral or passive is to omit one important part of the process of moral reasoning. At the same time, the role of teachers/educators is to teach the multi-dimensional patterns of moral thinking, rather than to serve as exemplars of moral action. Teachers should not

model how students should behave but rather how they should model the dynamics of moral reasoning.

The rapid expansion of public schools in late twentieth-century American society led to the need for practical pedagogies and programs for implementing morals and values education in American schools. A group of educators committed to the practice of moral education in schools created an approach called “Values Clarification” (Raths et al. 1963). Values Clarification (VC) is rooted in the assumption that there is no clear or accepted set of moral values in contemporary life, and that the moral domain is a matter of personal choice and individual decision-making. Therefore, the VC approach states that teachers should not be allowed to impose their values or their behaviors and that their role in “values education” is to develop a series of skill sets that would enable the child to become a valuing person. VC believed that classroom teachers could and should help the young focus on moral issues and help them learn how to make their own value decisions. The VC model encompasses a process with seven components: (1) Choosing freely; (2) Choosing from alternatives; (3) Choosing from alternatives after thoughtful consideration of the consequences of each alternative; (4) Valuing the choice; (5) Valuing the choice so much as to be willing to affirm the choice to others; (6) Acting in a certain way to reflect commitment to the choice one made; and (7) Acting repeatedly according to the choice that they made so that it becomes an imbedded form of moral behavior. In VC, the role of schooling in moral education is to train young people to be able to apply the seven stages of the process, rather than to be a “morally-educated person”.

The role of the VC teacher is to create classroom activities and pedagogies focused on developing the seven valuing processes. The VC teacher is a technician who facilitates the development of a series of thinking, feeling, and behavioral skills. Moreover, the VC teacher should not reveal his/her own moral preferences; indeed their personal moral lifestyle is totally irrelevant to their work. They are neither representatives of society nor models of advanced stages of thinking; rather, they are trainers of a set of necessary skill sets.

The VC proponents developed a series of pedagogic exercises, dialogue strategies, role-playing case studies, value sheets, and hundreds of activities falling into three main categories. One set of pedagogic tools focused on the strategy of valuing questions that caused the student to think about moral issues. Another strategy aimed to encourage students to express

their own personal values and examine them. A third group of activities created guidelines for group discussion and processing to enable students to hear and react to different perspectives.

The academic world did not treat VC with the respect shown to other university-based moral education programs, probably because it was more shaped by teachers' practical needs for engaging and compelling classroom materials rather than being rooted in philosophical or psychological models. The pragmatic aspect of VC should not be minimized because any theory of moral education can only truly be useful if it is accompanied by or leads to clear, accessible, and useful practical materials.

Lawrence Kohlberg was the most prominent name in twentieth-century moral education (Kohlberg 1968, 1981, 1983). A psychologist educated at the University of Chicago, Kohlberg spent his academic career as a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, where he devoted his research, educational, and pedagogic interests to the subject of moral education. Kohlberg's work was rooted in psychology and philosophy, and his focus was on the practice of education. His appeal and commitment to the field of moral education was profound, and he was singular in his quest for the synthesis of theory and practice.

Kohlberg's approach to moral education rejected the position that morality was essentially a set of moral norms, while also rejecting the notion that morality was exclusively a matter of individual choice. Kohlberg believed that while individuals are raised and rooted in specific societies, at the same time they must deal with issues that are universal in nature and that extend beyond specific societal borders. Indeed, he regarded the moral sphere as a central domain of being human.

Based on his psychological research, Kohlberg developed a three-levelled classification of "types" or "orientations" of moral judgment. Level One of moral judgment (called the "pre-conventional") refers to moral thinking and decision-making that is oriented toward (or shaped by) fear of punishment or pain. A person on this level makes moral decisions to avoid physical or other sorts of punishment and/or to satisfy egoistical needs. What is "good" or "right" is whatever prevents a person from getting yelled at or punished, or, conversely, gets them some candy. Level Two, moral reasoning (the "conventional level") is oriented toward social expectations and behaviors—being a "good boy" or a "good girl" or doing what a good citizen in a particular city, society, or state is expected to do or not do. On this level, decisions are made in terms of adherence to accepted moral conventions. Level Three, moral thinking (the

post-conventional), refers to individual decisions oriented to conscience, principles, and to the ultimate value of justice. In Level Three decision-making, we can sometimes be acting in accord with society but, ultimately, we are oriented to transcending societal norms.

These levels are generally assumed to be connected to three commonly accepted sociological stages in our biological development, that is, infancy; school-age; adolescence and emerging young adulthood; and adulthood. However, Kohlberg's levels of moral development did not necessarily automatically synchronize with the standard model just described. Indeed, there are many adults who are preconventional or infantile in their moral decision-making processes, and there are also adolescents and young adults who are post-conventional or principled in their moral decision-making and development. Another important aspect of Kohlberg's developmental notion is his belief that once people have reached a higher level of development, it is unlikely that they will regress to a lower level. One who has learned to live a life of principle (with all the complexities involved) will likely find it difficult not to live the principled life consistently.

Kohlberg was committed to the development of a theory as well as to its implementation in schools (and at a certain point he also tested its use in prisons). Kohlberg shared Durkheim's emphasis on the importance of moral education in schools, although Kohlberg prescribed a much different pedagogy and practice. He shared some of Wilson's philosophic thinking but was much more psychologically and practically oriented than Wilson. He agreed with VC's emphasis on practice but rejected most of the other thinking of VC.

Kohlberg worked with a group of educators to create a five-step method for moral dilemma discussion: Step 1: A moral dilemma is read out loud to the class (Kohlberg created a group of approximately 16 dilemmas, indicating that dilemmas could also be selected from ancient texts, literary texts, and contemporary sources). After the reading, the teacher makes sure that the group has understood and agreed upon the main points presented in the dilemma.

Step 2: The teacher raises two questions about the dilemma: (1) What should the person facing the dilemma do? (2) Why? The "why" question is ultimately the central discussion topic for Kohlberg because it reflects the nature of a person's orientation in terms of moral thinking. Step 3: The class breaks up into small groups to discuss the participants' reactions. The reason for initially splitting into small groups is to make people feel comfortable to share their thoughts before reassembling. Step 4: A group

discussion regarding what the protagonist should do and why. The teacher's role is to listen, explicate, and, as much as possible, enable the participants to hear patterns that reflect all three levels of moral thinking. This stage is critical in enabling students to at least hear levels of thinking that are higher than theirs. Step 5: The teacher summarizes the entire exercise and, to the extent that there were presentations reflecting the three levels, briefly summarizes the three different ways of thinking. The teacher's role is to explicate, not propagate views. This discussion section was very important to Kohlberg as he believed that enabling students to hear levels of thinking higher than their own and hopefully to be influenced accordingly. Moreover, it was important to demonstrate that moral deliberation and discussions are not simply empty talking but that issues of morality do, can, and should have solutions. The teacher's role in the entire process is based on a familiarity with the three levels of thinking, an ability to utilize and model the Socratic method of questioning, a sensitivity to group dynamics, and the ability to summarize without preaching. Kohlberg's influence was great for several decades in the second half of the twentieth century because it was both rooted in a philosophical and psychological theory of moral thinking and translated into actual educational processes.

Reactions to—and, in some cases, critique of—Kohlberg's work led to a new late twentieth-century and twenty-first-century school of moral education denoted as “the caring approach” (also referred to as “the feminist approach”) (Larrabee 1993). One of the most prominent voices of the caring approach is philosopher of education Nel Noddings, who developed what she called, “a relational approach to ethics and moral education” (Noddings 2007). For Noddings, the core of ethics and moral education is not “moral thinking” but rather the human virtue known as “caring” which refers to a trait at the core of human life characterized by concern for the other. This virtue is rooted in the emergence of what it means to be human, which encompasses being able to be a caring person toward others and a person able to be cared for by others. While not a theological model, Noddings' position reflects the humanistic assumptions of Martin Buber and others who regarded human life as a dialogue in which one learns to appreciate the other, be appreciated by the other, and ultimately develop an authentic interactive human relationship denoted as the “I-thou” (Buber 1958). According to this perspective, ethics is about the human virtues of intuitiveness and receptivity, rather than moral principles or reasoning. Noddings' caring is not a universal moral *principle* but a core human *virtue*.

Noddings regards schools as central platforms and frameworks for the development of caring, and her writings pay much attention to the creation of schools and school communities as caring environments. The teacher is one who has chosen a profession rooted in caring and, ultimately, one of whose roles, if not *the* central role, is to turn the school into a laboratory for developing a caring community.

While the twentieth century was deeply preoccupied with the issue of moral education, there were (and always have been and will be) voices which reject the role of schooling in issues of morality. Here are some famous examples: "My grandmother wanted me to have an education, so she kept me out of school" (Margaret Mead); "Education is what remains after one has forgotten everything he learned in school. It is a miracle that curiosity survives formal education" (Albert Einstein); "What does education often do? It makes a straight-cut ditch of a free and meandering brook (Henry David Thoreau); "It is our American habit, if we find the foundations of our educational structure unsatisfactory, to add another story or wing" (John Dewey); "Knowledge that is acquired under compulsion obtains no hold on the mind" (Plato).

The "anti-moral education" tradition is rooted in the notion that by its very nature almost any kind of schooling is a form of indoctrination. This tradition says that schools should only teach topics, subjects, and issues that are based on agreed-upon and established methodologies and facts. As the nature of morality is one of personal preference, moral content cannot be regarded as shared or public knowledge, thus it should not be taught in school.

The *epistemological* version of this argument says that schools should only teach verifiable and objective bodies of knowledge. So-called "moral knowledge" is neither verifiable nor objective in the same way as the sciences. Education should deal with only publicly verifiable and agreed-upon contents often characterized as scientific or rational.

The *individualist* argument claims that the individual is the primary unit in life and schools should be concerned with the liberation and autonomy of the individual rather than the promulgation of a particular ethic. It opposes moral education on the grounds that it becomes a means by which the state or some power group—men, colonialists, Caucasians, and other such power groups—imposes their specific value beliefs. Education should be about ownership of self, and children should have the potential to be free choosing agents rather than be manipulated by a church or synagogue, big business, white capitalists, or gender-specific worldviews.

The *empirical evaluative* critique of moral education is fact-based rather than ideological, stating that there is no valid or reliable empirical data to validate the value of moral education in schools. Its argument is that research shows that schooling is not a very important factor in affecting people's morality and hence the entire enterprise of implementation in schools is a waste of time and money. Schools should do what they do best, and they should not attempt to undertake an impossible task.

It is indeed legitimate to raise questions about moral education within public education. Are schools the tools of "power brokers" or interest groups or are schools simply incapable of having an impact on the moral sphere? The anti-moral educationists are good souls and not simply ornery troublemakers, and they do bring to our attention the potentially manipulative nature of schools, which may indeed serve the "power brokers" rather than "the powerless".

INTO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Thinking about moral education has taken some new directions in the twenty-first century. The language of "moral education" has seemed to shift to the term "character education" and philosophic thinking has focused on virtues, with less of an emphasis on moral principles and judgments (Zagzebski 1966). The entire field of morality has been influenced by new trends in research within developmental psychology, neurology, and sociology that have been generally shaped by the neurosciences. Psychologist Vivian Gopnik indicates "that babies and young children are not the immoral creatures we thought them to be. Even the youngest babies have a striking capacity for empathy and altruism" (Gopnik 2009). The emerging field of neuro-education has been described as "the hot new area in education" (Klemm 1996).

Thinking about morality and education in the twenty-first century has also been shaped by a painful dynamic unrelated to the pastoral groves of the Academy. The hallways and sanctuaries of our schools, houses of worship, and other areas of public assembly have been desecrated by violence, shooting, destruction, and death. There is no need for Kohlberg's fictional dilemmas; daily life on the West Coast and the East Coast, north and south, and even in the holy chambers of the Congress of the United States, have become a living pandemic of moral crisis, dilemma, and failure. Indeed, snapchat, smartphones, and on-site television cameras are writing the next sagas and stories of moral education in the twenty-first century.

CODA

It should come as no surprise that the subject of teaching morals and values has been a central arena of contemplation, thought, and practice in the world of education. From ancient times until today, there has been a sense of connection between education and being a good or moral person. As we have seen, there are many approaches to this subject, and it continues to preoccupy those who believe that education is related to how we live as human beings. The twentieth century was an extremely dramatic arena for reflection and the implementation of the diverse approaches to moral education. The twenty-first century is proving to be a painfully vivid setting highlighting the need for moral education and a moral way. Indeed, I think it is fair to say that moral education continues to be one of the central pressing and eternally important elements of the life and work of the world of education.

NOTE

1. This is one of a series of dilemmas created by Lawrence Kohlberg for his dilemma discussion practice.

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