

MORAL DEVELOPMENT AND MORAL EDUCATION

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Summary

The central question discussed in this article is: under what conditions is moral education possible? An analysis of this question requires a careful study of (1) the nature of moral value, and (2) the nature of moral development: how do young people grow in moral feeling and thinking? In the first part of the essay the nature of “moral value” and “moral character” are discussed. The first concept deals with the content of moral education, and the second deals with the aim of moral education. In the second part of the essay the most important theories of moral development are discussed: the cognitive developmental and the social learning theories. The first argues that in their moral development, children follow a structural pattern of development. Thus if this pattern is known, then a program of moral education can be designed that can assist children in their moral development. The social learning theory argues that learning is a process, and that this process is couched in the context of social living. Thus if the dynamics of social experience are known, then a moral education methodology can be designed that can stimulate moral development. The first theory stresses moral thinking as the goal of moral development; the second stresses the cultivation of moral character as the goal of this development.

1. Introduction

The central question of moral education was articulated about 2400 years ago when Meno asked Plato’s Socrates in the *Meno*: “Can you tell me, Socrates—is virtue something that can be taught? Or does it come by practice? Or is it neither teaching nor practice that gives it to a man but natural aptitude or something else?” (Plato 1961, p. 354). But Plato was quick to note at the outset that we cannot answer this question

unless we first know what virtue is: we cannot know whether a thing or an activity has a certain property unless we first know the nature of this thing or activity. Thus we cannot know whether virtue can be taught unless we know what it is. This knowledge is, moreover, indispensable for determining who is qualified to teach it. Thus the possibility of moral education in effect requires answers to three questions: (1) What is virtue? (2) How can it be taught? (3) Who is qualified to teach it?

In this article attention is focused on the first two questions: What is virtue? How can virtue be taught? The interest is in shedding as much light as possible on the possibility of moral education: under what conditions can we help young people to become moral human beings? During the past few decades psychological research has shown that the question of how virtue can be taught does not only require an understanding of the nature of virtue, but also of the dynamics of moral development: how do children grow in moral feeling and thinking? Is there a natural pattern of moral development? Is moral development at the mercy of social forces and norms? The article first advances a modest view of virtue, or moral value. Here it is assumed, with Plato and the major philosophers of education such as Dewey, Whitehead, Rousseau, Tolstoy, and Kohlberg, that we cannot undertake the task of moral education unless we proceed in this effort, implicitly or explicitly, from a conception of moral values, rules, principles, and ideals. Second, two of the most influential views of moral development, the cognitive developmental and the social learning views, are discussed, albeit briefly. Thirdly, the relationship between moral development and moral education is discussed. We shall see that although a certain view of moral development does not logically imply a concept of moral education, it can nevertheless be greatly useful in designing an effective methodology for moral teaching.

2. Nature of Moral Value

The question of the nature of moral value deals with the subject matter, or content, of moral education, and without this content, talk about moral education is both misguided and misleading. Accordingly, we should ask: what is moral value? What sort of reality do we impart to the young when we engage in moral teaching? Do we impart ideas, principles, rules, habits, or some kind of moral skill? We may, to begin, say that the imparting of moral values to the young in a proper way will result in what is usually known as “moral character”. Now, what do we mean when we speak of “moral value” and “moral character”?

Firstly, the term “moral value” refers to values such as justice, courage, honesty, truth telling, generosity, compassion, self-control, respect for the interests of others, responsibility. Each one of these, and similar values, is the basis of a moral rule. For example, Be just! Don’t kill! These rules have a normative, i.e., prescriptive, character, and they have this character mainly because the values they enunciate are viewed by society as supremely important. For example, “Don’t kill!” is a rule that forbids the destruction of human life, because human life is supremely important. But, why are such values important? Why should we not lie, cheat, or kill other people? Can we justify the validity of the values that underlie the moral rules that we are supposed to obey? Attempts to justify moral rules in general vary from one society to another and from one philosopher to another. We may invoke the authority of a supreme being,

reason, society, the state, a universal moral sentiment, or the need to maintain order, prosperity, and progress in society. Usually such attempts provide principles of justification. The purpose of these principles is to give meaning, validity, and practical relevance to the moral values and rules in daily life. For example, if I am asked “why should you refrain from stealing?” I can say, “because stealing is injurious to others, society, or humankind, or because it is contrary to the will of God, or because it is contrary to my conscience.” Here the rule may be justified by any one of these principles.

Here it should be pointed out that a value is not an emotion, a feeling, a sentiment, or a mental state of some kind, nor is it an idea that exists in the mind—no, a value is a possible kind of action and may broadly refer to a possible mode of conduct. As such, it is a basis of action, in the sense that it is the actuating principle of the action. Accordingly we may view it as an entelechy, as a moving cause of a certain type of action, mainly because the realization of the action promises a certain kind of satisfaction, an important satisfaction. This is precisely why the moral virtues are viewed as values. We desire the different values, and we desire to act on them because they are conducive to human growth. Satisfaction without growth may be interesting, or may be accompanied by some pleasure; only the element of spiritual edification—intellectual, religious, aesthetic, and social edification—makes this sort of satisfaction possible. This is, it is suggested, why the sages of the past as well as the present placed supreme emphasis on the pursuit of human values such as goodness, beauty, and truth, and viewed them as the essential ingredients of human growth and development.

In addition to moral values, rules, and principles, we also find in the moral life of every society, moral ideals such as cooperation, compassion, alleviation of suffering, prevention of harm, or reduction of poverty. The point to be underscored here is that any meaningful talk about moral values should be done in context, in the context of a moral system—and a moral system is the unity of all the moral values, rules, principles, and ideals found in a given society. The cultivation of moral character usually takes place within such a system.

Secondly, a moral character is, broadly speaking, distinguished by three basic characteristics: (1) autonomy, (2) conscience, and (3) integrity. First, an autonomous person is a self-determined being. She is the source of her own ideas, feelings, and actions. She is not a conformist. She is in touch with her inner self, with her desires, feelings, beliefs, emotions, weaknesses, and strengths, and tries to act thoughtfully, critically, and purposefully. An autonomous person does not only choose her life, she authors it. This feature is stressed only to spotlight the aspect of responsibility, for a person cannot be moral unless she is responsible, and she cannot be responsible unless she chooses and performs her actions. Second, a moral character has conscience. By “conscience” is not meant some kind of moral sense implanted in the individual by nature or society or some mysterious force, but moral conscientiousness and the knowledge that moral values should be respected and that our lives can never be human unless we conduct ourselves in relation to each other according to these values. A person with a conscience is a moral agent; she can distinguish between right and wrong, good and bad, and she chooses to act morally from a moral motive, not expediently or arbitrarily. She is, moreover, the sort of person who respects other human beings as

moral agents. Third, a moral character is an integral, undivided whole. It is, as Aristotle said, firm and stable (Aristotle 1962, 1105 a 25-1105 b 5). A moral character is consistent in her behavior; she acts on principle, deriving her moral identity from these principles. She does not act on one principle one day and on another the second day. She acts on the same principle at home, in the work place, in social settings, or anywhere else. Acting on principle is crucial for being authentic, and a person cannot be authentic if she does not consistently originate her action, or life in general, from an established sense of value and a will to actualize the possibilities of this sense in her life.

Moral values are guides for action; they are organizative “principles” of conduct. They dictate what is moral and immoral, and they dictate what we should and should not do in concrete situations. We are always expected to pursue the moral, and avoid the immoral, course of action. We are usually skilled in meeting daily moral demands and conflicts that relate to duties at home, in the office, with friends, or in society at large. But what happens when moral values conflict in concrete moral situations? Consider the now popular case of Mr. Heinz. He is a poor man. His wife is dying. A new drug might help her. The druggist, who has sole ownership of the drug, refuses to sell it to Mr. Heinz on loan. What should the poor man do? Can he steal the drug? The man is caught between two moral prescriptions: (1) Do not steal! (2) Love your wife, and family, for in this case the death of his wife will be injurious to the whole family! This case is mentioned to stress that in the course of our life, we have to make serious moral decisions. The moral values which chart the domain of moral conduct are general. They do not relate directly to individual moral situations. They do not contain ready-made answers to the moral problems faced on the individual and social levels of life. They are only moral signposts. They point the way, but they do not accompany us on the way. They provide the conditions of moral action, but they do not constitute the structure of this sort of action. For example, “Do not kill!” is a universally recognized rule; it prohibits killing human lives, and yet we justify killing in some situations of self-defense, war, abortion, euthanasia, or capital crime. Under what conditions is killing in such situations justifiable? What is needed in moral life is the skill to translate the general content of the moral rule into specific moral judgments, the sort of judgments that can be the basis of action. This cannot be done without the aid of moral principles. Such principles are provided by the different moral systems we see in the different societies of the world. In many cases they are clarified and justified by various moral theories.

One important aim of moral education is training young people in the art of making sound moral judgments. Under what conditions can a person, young or adult, grow in the art of making sound moral judgments? This question acquires a greater measure of significance especially if we take into serious consideration the widespread recognition of cultural pluralism in general, and of moral pluralism in particular. “It is a fact that people seem to espouse different types of moral systems,” we are told, “what is moral and immoral seems to be different not only from one person to another but also from one society to another. This difference, which we can hardly ignore,” continues our critic, “undermines the very possibility of moral education, for if people in a given society do not uniformly uphold one system of morality, how can we establish, much less speak of, a program of moral education? The fact of moral pluralism implies that

one set of values is neither better nor worse than any other. Therefore, we have no right to impose the moral values of one person or group upon other persons or groups.” A critical evaluation of this relativist position is not made here, for many philosophers have successfully answered this objection (Gert 1998). It is, however, reasonable to state that this objection is painfully one-sided, exaggerates the differences between the various societies of the world, and ignores the similarities which are common to them. It is now time to recognize the unity and universality of human nature; it is time to recognize that all human beings belong to one species, the human species, and that they share in one nature, human nature. A quick yet reflective look at the diversity of the cultural experiences which make up the tapestry of humanity would show that all human beings have prized a fundamental core of moral values such as fairness, honesty, courage, respect for human life, truth-telling, decency, respect for the interests of others, to mention just a few values. Without an honest and realistic recognition of this fact the whole United Nations edifice of human rights relating to workers, women, children, prisoners, and human beings as such, would collapse, and the present structure of international laws, institutions, and organizations would certainly lose its effectiveness in gradually bringing about a system of world community erected on the principles of justice, freedom, and peace.

Let us now grant that we may at least in principle agree on a set of moral values or principles that may be viewed as the content of moral education, how, or by what method, can we stimulate the moral development of young people? This question assumes that human beings are not born as moral, but with the capacity, or potentiality, to become moral. It also assumes that becoming moral is a process of development. One does not become moral overnight or at a given point in one’s life. Becoming moral is in fact acquiring a “second nature” (moral nature), and certain developmental conditions have to be fulfilled in order for this nature to be acquired. How? In the following two sections, attention is given to the cognitive developmental and social learning approaches to moral development.

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[This work gives credibility to Bandura's version of social learning.]

Biographical Sketch

Michael H. Mitias was born in Swaydieh, Syria, in 1939. He received his high school education at the college de Terre Sainte, in Latakia, Syria. He did his undergraduate studies at the University of Connecticut and Union college, Ky, USA. He received his B.A. degree in philosophy in 1963 and his Ph.D. degree in philosophy from the University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, in 1971. He taught philosophy at Millsaps college from 1967 to 1999. He joined the philosophy department at Kuwait University in 1999. He was an active member of the International Society of Universalism from 1989 to 1996. He is married and has three sons, Johnny, Peter and Michel. He has devoted all his professional life to teaching philosophy. He acted on the principle that research and writing are necessary for effective teaching. His model in thinking and teaching is Socrates. His areas of research are theory of value: aesthetics, ethics, and political philosophy. He has contributed numerous articles to scholarly journals. He edited several books in aesthetics and ethics. Some of his books are *What Makes an Experience Aesthetic?*, *Moral Foundation of the State in Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, and *Moral Education and the Liberal Arts* (ed.).