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Motivational Dimensions of Moral Learning

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There is a puzzle about moral learning that has exercised philosophers for quite some time. It arises from the observation that moral learning evidently begins in forms of immersion, imitation, and training that are inseparable from participation in a social world and also foundational to learning any arts of analysis, evaluation, and intelligent self-direction that could plausibly facilitate an approximation of moral autonomy. We become acclimated to patterns of life, imitate what others do, and are trained from a very young age in preferred patterns of behavior. Without such forms of learning, we would not be able to acquire a language, engage in reasoned exchanges, or regulate our own behavior in light of salient aspects of the social worlds we inhabit. Participation in a society is thereby foundational to any prospect of autonomous moral judgment, and what many have found puzzling is how this could be the case and not also preclude autonomous moral judgment. Won't the learning inseparable from such participation shape moral sentiments, perceptions, and beliefs in ways that will inevitably limit moral motivation, perceptiveness, and knowledge?

Some forms of moral socialization would pointedly omit arts of analysis and evaluation, and confine arts of self- direction to those – not so intelligent – deemed conducive to rigid compliance with an established order. We could take a dim view of that, insist it is not genuinely educative, that it would not be conducive to the development of true virtue, and so on. Other – paradigmatically indoctrinating – forms of moral socialization employ methods of training that are anything but inseparable from participation in a social world as such: methods intended to "induce unquestioning commitment and suppress exercises of critical reason through manipulations that associate doubt, questioning, and contrary evidence with evil, weakness, and danger" (Curren, 2008). However worthy of investigation such forms of moral socialization might be, they do not give rise to the puzzle in question, which is thought to infect moral education even at its best. It is thought to pertain to aspects of moral learning that really are inseparable from learning in any social context and would inevitably limit the reach of critical reason however earnest and proficient instruction in the arts of analysis, evaluation, and intelligent self-direction may be.

Alternative versions of the puzzle arise from one or another version of the supposition that the effects of socially embedded moral learning inevitably persist in ways that inhibit moral autonomy and tend to preserve existing social codes, with all their limitations and flaws. These persisting effects are said to pertain to the limits of self- constitution, boundaries of perception and belief, and shaping of desire, emotion, or sentiment. Yet, it is not entirely obvious what is and is not inseparable

from learning in a social context as such. I offer as Exhibit A, Richard Peters' formulation of the puzzle, which established it as an enduring object of inquiry in philosophy of education. He called it the "paradox of moral education," identifying it as the problem of how a person first taught to act from good habits can become responsive to reason, and noting that it is ultimately an empirical, developmental puzzle, not a purely philosophical problem (Peters, 1981). Does early moral socialization or habituation necessarily yield patterns of conduct aptly described as acting "from habit"?

Peters' ideas about moral education were influenced by his readings of the classics, and similar readings of Aristotle's Ethics as committed to a rigidly sequential path of moral development beginning in "habit" and culminating, mysteriously, in "reason," have elicited responses from Myles Burnyeat (1980), Nancy Sherman (1989), Julia Annas (2011), and others. Acting "from habit" sounds like the antithesis of acting with thought or on the basis of reasoning out what to do, but why assume that processes of habituation yield action from habit? Why assume that habituation is mechanical and does not strengthen powers of discernment and deliberation? Why assume that it trains a person to act unreflectively as others desire, instead of shaping the person's own desires toward good ends or doing what a virtuous person would do because it is what a virtuous person would do?

At first blush, Peters' influential version of this puzzle seems to depend upon a gratuitously narrow conception of habituation and to be resolvable in principle through philosophical means. I'm going to argue that this is largely, but not entirely, true, that the role of motivation in moral learning is central to the puzzle, and that there are resources in motivation studies that are helpful to resolving the puzzle.

A larger lesson of the story I will tell is that moral psychologists in both philosophy and psychology may find it profitable to engage research on motivation beyond the moral domain. If the acquisition of virtues is much like the acquisition of complex skills – as Sherman, Annas and others argue – then the motivational insights of Social Cognitive Theory and Self-Determination Theory pertaining to the social contexts of learning bear powerfully on moral learning. Moral learning is less distinctive than one might have thought. A corollary of this is that far more education cultivates virtues than one might have thought – not moral virtues as such, but virtues that similarly involve the integration of commitments to goods into a learner's system of values or identity.

In the 1980s, building on the work of Burnyeat and others, Nancy Sherman made a persuasive case for overturning the traditional understanding of Aristotelian habituation as essentially "a non-rational training of desires toward appropriate objects" (1989: 157). She acknowledged that if the practice in acting well that forms moral virtues where mechanically repetitive, the "transition between childhood and moral maturity" would be utterly "mysterious" (158). So, she argued, the practice that forms virtues must instead be guided or coached, in order for progress to occur (176 ff.), and coaching engages emotion, belief, and perception as a cluster of related dispositions: "emotions will be educated, in part through their constitutive beliefs and perceptions. Cultivating the dispositional capacities to feel fear, anger, goodwill, compassion, or pity appropriately will be bound up with learning how to discern the circumstances that warrant these responses," she wrote (166-67). The goal is "to prepare the learner for eventually arriving at competent judgments and reactions on his own," and what is required for this is "some dialogue and verbal exchange about

what one sees (and feels) and should see (and feel); in other words, actual descriptions which articulate a way of perceiving the situation and which put into play the relevant concepts, considerations, and emotions" (172). Verbal exchange of this kind is essential to cultivating discernment of ethically salient particulars, just as it is essential to a young string player becoming aware of diverse aspects of her playing, being able to judge and take control of what she is doing, and wanting to get better and exhibit qualities she could not even conceive of before. Habituation as "critical practice" informs and shapes perception, belief, desire, and capacities of reflection and self-direction, yielding rational wishes that would not have been possible otherwise (176 ff.). Sherman notes important qualifications to Aristotle's" division of the soul into rational and non-rational parts" (163), and his insistence that "one cannot be good without practical wisdom nor wise without virtue (158; citing NE VI). She cites his reference to a natural human desire to know and "the pleasure that we take in our senses," as evidence that "critical activity and its enjoyment characterize all stages of development" (167; citing Met. 989a20-27).

This is all very helpful in providing both a more plausible understanding of moral education and a better interpretation of Aristotle's ethical thought. By providing an attractive picture of what habituation can be, it goes a long way toward solving the mystery of how habituation could seamlessly initiate a person into a life guided by critical reason. Peters' conception of habituation was too narrow. So far, so good. But I'm inclined to think there is a motivational subtext to Peters' paradox that is not addressed by Sherman's undeniably important observations. One may still ask whether the coaching that shapes a learner's perceptions, beliefs, desires, and judgments toward the good or apparent good enables the learner to judge what she has learned and be moved by reasons that are fully her own. Does the social context of her moral habituation not constrain as much as it enables?

Sherman might have made more of Aristotle's reference to a natural desire to know. A natural desire to know might be no less basic and important to moral learning than a desire or need for social affiliation associated with the persisting effects of moral socialization on sentiments, perceptions, and beliefs. A basic desire to know might intrinsically motivate the activities through which a variety of intellectual virtues are acquired and expressed, including the practical wisdom essential to true moral virtue and the contemplative wisdom exhibited in Aristotle's most admirable and rewarding kind of life (Kraut, 1989; Lawrence, 2006; Reeve, 2006). If Aristotle is to be believed, the desire to know could evidently motivate the acquisition of intellectual virtues that could prevail over bonds of personal affiliation: he remarks in NE I.6, that "piety requires us to honor truth above our friends" – this in the context of explaining why the Form of the Good, "introduced by friends of our own," is not the object of his inquiry (1096a11-16). He wouldn't say this is required if he thought it motivationally impossible, presumably, and the mode of inquiry he adopts in the Nicomachean Ethics is evidently one through which his own students might, in principle, reject some of his views in favor of the truth. I have argued elsewhere that Sherman's one-sided particularism about practical wisdom ignores Aristotle's commitment to the idea of an ethical science and indications that he intends his course in ethics to provide students with "an opportunity to progress dialectically from the possession of ordinary, unsystematic, true or mostly true ethical beliefs to a systematic, reasoned body of ethical knowledge (epistêmê) resting in an account of human nature and well-being... the ethical knowledge required for phronêsis" (Curren, 2010: 545). Whether or not a desire to know, a love of truth, a seriousness about evidence and reason, is natural or is acquired at the

hands of a teacher like Socrates or Aristotle who displays such sentiments and commitments, we seem to uncover here the possibility of social motivations associated with moral learning dividing and turning against themselves in such a way that truth might prevail, exposing errors and facilitating moral progress: a teacher might be honored by cleaving not to his beliefs but to his fundamental commitments to goodness and truth. If the desire for knowledge should turn out to be a natural source of motivation in its own right, then so much the better.

Not having identified these motivational possibilities, I formulated in the 1990s a version of the puzzle I named the paradox of progressive morality. I assumed that the social contexts of moral learning would indeed limit moral motivation, perceptiveness, and knowledge, and I took the serious question to concern a tension between inducing commitment to an ethic and facilitating moral progress. My reasons for taking this version of the puzzle to be philosophically more interesting than Peters' has changed, and what I would now say is that it is a better framing of worrisome aspects of moral learning that are inseparable from its social context. It has the form of a dilemma and goes like this:

1. Either one's capacity to critically evaluate the morality one is habituated into is limited by the perceptions and sentiments one acquires in that habituation, or it is not.
2. If it is limited in this way, then no consistent system of morality is open to internal public scrutiny, and no one brought up in that system has any rational assurance that it is not deficient.
3. If one's critical capacity is not limited in this way, then the perceptions and sentiments [that] incline one to give the reasons of morality priority can be undermined by critical thinking, resulting in moral free-riding (Curren, 2000: 209; italics added).

I suggested as a tentative solution that:

if children are initiated into habitual practices of giving and taking reasons, including moral reasons, they will become both morally serious and committed critical thinkers, motivated by conceptions of themselves as both moral and devoted to the truth. Being motivated in this way will preclude free- riding, since selfishness and making an exception of oneself will be incompatible with a desire to be moral; but if thoughtfulness about what counts as a reason has been cultivated, it is hard to see how the perceptions and sentiments formed by such an upbringing would preclude an examination of fundamental morality and a potential for moral progress. On this [view of the matter], one pictures the intellectual virtues as themselves originating in training or habituation in accordance with norms of reason, as much as in teaching, and one pictures training in the habits of virtue as also including a training in the practice of giving adequate reasons for what one does and respecting the adequate reasons that others give (211-12; italics added).

Note the centrality of motivation in this proposed solution, and the suggestion that a conception of oneself – a self-concept – could be motivationally decisive (cf., Blasi, 1993; Lapsley, 2008; etc.). This still seems right to me, but it leaves some things unsaid. It is helpful to add what I had just said

before introducing this paradox, about the possibility of social motivations that support moral education dividing and turning against themselves in such a way as to facilitate moral progress. This would require teachers and models whose basic commitments are to the right things – to goodness and truth, as such, rather than specific doctrines – and who are able to nurture such commitments in others. A basis of natural desire to know may be a starting point for such nurture, just as a natural disposition to feel empathy may be. There is presumably more to be said about what makes for the difference between building on such motivational bases and undermining them.

I shall come back to this, by way of Julia Annas's contribution to this topic and its fruitful starting points for considering the motivational basis of moral learning. A way to frame our puzzle is to observe that if feelings of security, trust, loyalty, or any other such sentiments mediate the formation of character, it is not much of a stretch to suppose that the personal bonds that facilitate moral learning may also limit it. Commitment to an ethic may be cemented by loyalty, trust, a sense of security, or the absence of alternative satisfaction of affiliation or relatedness needs. While adopting a view of the acquisition of virtue similar to Sherman's, Julia Annas is more pointedly concerned with the motivational implications of the social context of moral learning, and it is the learner's trust in his teacher and solidarity with his social groups that she singles out (2011: 52).

A "virtuous disposition" is not "built up by force of habit," she notes; sometimes habituation yields "routine" – following the same route on a daily commute, for instance – but sometimes it yields complex practical skills or, what is not so different, virtues (12-13). "Practical skill and virtue require more than predictably similar reactions," she writes; "they require a response that is appropriate to the situation… Virtues…are states of character that enable us to respond in creative and imaginative ways to new challenges" (15). In order to become responsive to new and diverse situations, the learner cannot do exactly what the teacher does:

> The learner needs to trust the teacher to be doing the right thing to follow and copy, and to be conveying the right information and ways of doing things. And further, from the start the learner of a skill needs also what I have called the drive to aspire, manifesting itself first in the need the learner has to understand what she is doing if she is to learn properly.

> The learner needs to understand what in the role model to follow, what the point is of doing something this way rather than that, what is crucial to the teacher's way of doing things a particular way and what is not…

> What the learner needs to do is … to become able to acquire for herself the skill that the teacher has, rather than acquiring it as a matter of routine" (17).

This strikes me as both insightful and important, and it is already motivationally rich, beginning with the trust placed in the teacher. In cultivating virtues, "we try to educate and form motivations that are already present," Annas writes (10), but what are these antecedent motivations?

She seems to suggest that the learner will have an antecedent or basic "need… to understand what she is doing," and that a "drive to aspire" to improvement grows out of this need, at least in part. "To aspire in the relevant way is to aspire to understand, to self-direction, and to improvement. The

need for reasons and articulacy [in moral education] emerges from the aspiration…" (20). A need and drive to understand and a need and drive to understand what one is doing might be independent sources of motivation; the former could well be an aspect of a natural inclination to explore and learn – Aristotle's natural desire to know – and the latter could well be an aspect of natural inclinations toward action and psychic integration, or need for self-determination. "The need for reasons and articulacy emerges from the aspiration," Annas says, but it might be more motivationally plausible to say that the need for reasons arises from a basic need for self-determination, while the direction of aspiration is motivationally grounded in a similarly basic need for social connection, the trust inspired by the teacher, adequate alignment between the values communicated in instruction and the learner's antecedent values, and other aspects of the context and manner of instruction.

"With skills of any complexity," Annas writes, "what is conveyed from the expert to the learner will require the giving of reasons…. Reasons enter here as a medium of explanation… The explanation enables the learner to go ahead in different situations and contexts" (19). A central claim of Annas's book is that virtues and ethical education are in all these respects like skills and education in skills, including the role of reason-giving, virtue being "a disposition not just to act reliably in certain ways but to act reliably for certain reasons" (20, 25; quoting 27).

Having explained this view of virtues and virtue education, and answered some preliminary objections, Annas devotes a chapter to a form of the puzzle that concerns us. "Virtue is understood in part by the way it is learnt," which is "always in an embedded context – a particular family, city, religion, and country," and "some may reasonably worry that the first point, about the trust required to learn in the first place, places constraints on the aspiration involved that are so strong that it is hard to see how the result could be virtue" (52). This leads to the objection that "thinking in terms of the virtues will be essentially conservative," because it will not lead us to "a point of view from which to criticize the contexts within which we learned what the virtues are " she writes (53). Having explained, at greater length than I have recounted, why reason-giving is essential to virtue, Annas can argue that, "Once we can reflect on the reasons we are given for acting in certain ways we can think for ourselves about them" (54). This being true, a virtue ethical perspective on moral or ethical education is no more inherently vulnerable to my paradox of progressive morality than any other perspective that could do justice to the social contexts of such education.

So, "What is involved in acquiring a virtue?' Annas asks (54). It begins, as we have insisted, in specific embedded human contexts, but Annas suggests we understand this:

> in terms of becoming a member of a community. People becoming brave will share certain reasons, feelings, and attitudes in a way that renders them distinctive, and can be thought of as forming a

> community of the brave. This is not the obvious kind of community that is formed by family, friends, and the like. It is from the first an 'invisible' rather than a 'visible' community… one made up of people with whom what you share is not physical space, but rather common concerns and ideals" (54- 55).

Annas argues, plausibly though without recourse to psychological research, that the ideals of virtue a person acquires can create a sense of affiliation with a virtual community, and a corresponding sense of distance from family members, peers, or culture, if the latter do not live up to the ideals. Distant paragons, even fictional or so idealized in biography as to be nearly fictional, may sustain an intrepid few in solitary solidarity with ideals. R. D. Liang argued in his studies of madness and social isolation within one's own family that a sense of membership in a virtual community of the like-minded could be enough to sustain a person (Liang, 1969).

If the challenge is simply to show how moral progress might be possible, this may qualify as a solution to the puzzle. Moral revolutions being few and far between, perhaps Annas is right on target in citing Aristotle's remark that "everyone seeks the good, not what their parents did" (22, 57; citing Pol. II.8)i, but asking, Why, if anyone can realize "that the virtuous life cannot just be the life your parents lead," "so few do so?" (57). Her unsurprising answer is that, "We are unwilling to criticize the contexts and institutions within which we learned the virtues, because we are unwilling to be pulled away from those contexts in the way that would be required" (57). Solidarity with tangible communities that provide "real comfort and support" are hard to let go of, so we tend to rationalize, deny, or simply ignore moral failings, and this, Annas perceptively notes, "is intuitively more convincing [as an explanation of why so few of us manage to reach a high ethical level] than the Kantian claim that we tend to follow gratification rather than reason, or the consequentialist claim that we are too selfish" (57, n. 6).

If the task of ethical inquiry is not simply to reveal such truths about the limits of moral progress, but to advance moral progress, then as excellent as Annas's answer may be, there is reason to ask whether some more helpful truths may yet be found. I have in mind truths about a wider array of motivational foundations of moral learning and action than the need for social connection or solidarity that Annas is occupied with in her answer to our puzzle – truths that might guide us in improving practices of moral or character education.

Recall my reference to a natural desire to know, natural inclinations toward action and psychic integration, and a need for self-determination, in connection with Annas's account of reasons and the self-directed aspiration essential to skill and virtue acquisition. Let me suggest also a further basic need closely associated with the acquisitions of skills, namely the need for competence.

It is arguably a great strength of Annas's account that it shrinks the perceived distance between moral or ethical learning and other kinds of learning in which competence is acquired. A basic lesson of Social Cognitive Theory is that the learner's perception of a growth of competence is essential to sustaining learning, though this isn't usually framed in terms of a basic psychological need for competence as such, rather in terms of self- efficacy or a sense that one is able to exert a measure of control over things one cares about (Schunk & Usher, 2012). This may seem remote from moral learning, but it shouldn't if one accepts the analogy with complex skills or Nancy Snow's relevantly similar view that virtue is a form of social intelligence, or "complex constellation of conceptual and procedural knowledge and cognitive-affective abilities that enable us to be full and effective participants in social life" (Snow, 2010: 84). Teaching designed to nurture a growth of competence discernible by the learner would presumably be advantageous to learning, and we can speculate – plausibly enough for present purposes – that the ongoing competence rewards of experiencing social success achieved through exercises of virtue would be an important source of moral

motivation. There are clearly scenarios in which such motivation could underwrite moral progress, such as ones in which it is possible to experience some reward in achieving incremental progress through one's efforts – the reward that might come from something as simple as acknowledging as a human equal a member of a hated minority.

Self-determination Theory (SDT) has identified the need for *competence* as one of three basic psychological needs that are universal across cultures and life stages, the other two being *relatedness*, or the need for mutually affirming relationships, and *autonomy* or self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000, 2012). Satisfaction of these needs is associated with fulfillment of potentials evident in natural inclinations toward action, exploration and learning, psychic integration, and social connectedness. Identifying socialization as a process that is successful when *internalization* of values and norms yields self-regulation, or autonomous motivation, SDT argues that human interactions and teaching that support "the satisfaction of the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness is necessary for effective internalization and for psychological growth, integrity, and well-being" (Niemiec, et al., 2006: 763). Effective internalization supports the psychic *integration* of values or *identified regulation* (self-regulation) in which "the individuals understand and accept the real importance [of something] for themselves" or have "identified with [its value] for themselves" (Deci & Ryan, 2012: 89). The "autonomy supportive" contextual factors identified as favorable to *identified regulation* include the offering of a *rationale* that is meaningful to the learner, respectful *acknowledgement* of the learner's "inclinations and right to choose," and a manner of offering the rationale and acknowledgement that *minimizes pressure and conveys choice*" (Deci, Eghrari, Patrick, and Leone, 1994: 124). Recall, in connection with the offering of a rationale, my suggestion that the need for reasons in cultivating virtue is rooted in the *need for self-determination*.

The lessons of this theory of motivation for moral learning may be hard to fully tease out, but it strikes me as useful for present purposes in its identification of several forms of *intrinsically motivated* action – to explore, learn, seek psychic integration and social connectedness – and two basic psychological needs in addition to a need for social connection, which might provide motivational counterweights to the social sentiments at the center of the puzzle we have been considering. I have spoken to the need for competence already, and you will surely have made a connection already between a natural inclination or intrinsic motivation to learn and my earlier discussion of Aristotle's assertion of a natural desire to know. So let me just note that the evidence regarding the importance of autonomy support to *identified [self-]regulation* very telling: for moral education to have much success of succeeding on its own terms, it must be predicated on satisfying not only social relatedness and competence needs, but also the need for autonomy. Accordingly, it will not threaten learners with rejection if their embrace of virtue should lead them to recognize limitations of ethical understanding or conduct in their former teachers or community. It will cultivate moral thoughtfulness and judgment, respecting the learner's autonomy, because a central goal of an education in virtue is autonomous good judgment grounded in wholehearted identification with the aspirations of virtue. This identification, which fulfills the natural inclination to psychic integration posited by SDT, should itself substantially anchor moral motivation; wholehearted identification is just fully accepting an integrated system of values as one's own – an idea Ryan and Deci got from Harry Frankfurt (1988: 58-68, 159-176). Moral education conducted on these terms will be unequivocal and public in its acceptance of the possibility that rising generations

will grasp things their elders did not, and the credible acceptance of that possibility – taking Aristotle at his word, when he says that "piety requires us to honor truth above our friends" – should not only provide assurance of social acceptance motivationally consistent with moral progress, it should spare us all a measure of moral hazard and difficulty in recognizing and coming to terms with our own limitations.

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