



THE
JUBILEE CENTRE
FOR CHARACTER & VALUES

UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

The cognitive aspect of moral education

Michael Hand

University of Birmingham

December 2012

'These are unpublished conference papers given at the inaugural conference of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Values, Character and Public Policy: Educating for an Ethical Life, at the University of Birmingham, Friday 14th December 2012. These papers are works in progress and should not be cited without author's prior permission.'

**School of Education
University of Birmingham
Edgbaston
Birmingham**

It is one thing to know what morality requires of us, another to be motivated to meet those requirements. Cases of individuals knowing quite well what they ought to do, but nevertheless failing to do it, are depressingly familiar. Indeed, these are precisely the cases in which we feel most justified in assigning moral blame: a person who knowingly offends against a moral standard is blameworthy in a way that she would not be if she were ignorant of the standard.

It is plain that moral educators must attend to moral motivation. They must cultivate in children and young people the sort of habits, desires, dispositions and inclinations that will move them to do what morality requires. This shaping of children's souls, of their emotional and volitional selves, is a central focus of the work of the Jubilee Centre. We might call it the *conative aspect* of moral education.

It would be unfortunate, however, if attention to the conative aspect of moral education resulted in neglect of its *cognitive aspect*. Knowing the difference between right and wrong is not all there is to moral agency; but it is a necessary part of it. Children need to know what morality requires, what weight these requirements carry, and what justifies them. Here I offer a preliminary sketch of a theory of cognitive moral education.

Requirements of the theory

I take it that an adequate theory of cognitive moral education must show how learners can be brought to hold true moral beliefs for good reasons. It must show that at least some moral beliefs are warranted and that those beliefs can be imparted in such a way as to be held on the basis of their warrant.

I reject approaches to cognitive moral education that are either *non-directive* or *non-rational*. Non-directive approaches eschew the aim of imparting moral beliefs, instead seeking to develop knowledge and understanding *about* moral beliefs. Learners may be encouraged to evaluate the moral beliefs they study, and even to choose moral beliefs of their own, but the teacher will studiously refrain from trying to influence the outcome of their evaluating and choosing. In rejecting approaches of this kind I do not mean to suggest that cognitive moral education should *never* be non-directive: there are many controversial moral questions on which it would be quite inappropriate for teachers to offer direction. I mean simply to rule out approaches that prohibit teachers from offering direction on *any* moral question.

Non-rational approaches endorse the aim of imparting moral beliefs but abandon the requirement that learners must be brought to hold those beliefs for good reasons. Teachers are charged with imparting an approved set of moral beliefs by means of various kinds of non-rational influence, persuasion, manipulation and pressure. Such evidential or argumentative support as the beliefs may enjoy may be presented to learners, but with no

serious intention or expectation that they will come to hold the beliefs on the basis of that support. This type of non-rational belief transmission is properly described as indoctrination.

Neither non-directive nor non-rational approaches to cognitive moral education take seriously enough the need for competent moral agents to hold true moral beliefs for good reasons – that is, to possess moral knowledge – and the consequent responsibility of moral educators to impart such knowledge.

Moral beliefs

Let me begin by explaining what I mean by moral beliefs. Note that the analysis of ‘moral’ I shall offer is unashamedly stipulative: I see little prospect of identifying a descriptive definition which covers all and only ordinary uses of the term. But note, too, that nothing much turns on whether my stipulative definition is accepted: if it is granted that the class of beliefs I designate as ‘moral’ includes some that are both warranted and important enough to impart in schools, I shall not much mind if others prefer a different designation.

Moral beliefs are a species of normative belief. To hold a normative belief is to hold *subscription to a standard to be justified*. Very often, when people subscribe to a standard of one kind or another, they also hold a belief to the effect that they ought to do what the standard requires. That is to say, they are not only volitionally committed to abiding by the standard, but also cognitively committed to the judgment that their volitional commitment is justified. In chess, for example, players both subscribe to the standard ‘move bishops diagonally across the board’ and hold the belief that bishops ought to be moved in this way. In the search for knowledge, responsible epistemic agents both subscribe to the standard ‘attend to relevant evidence and argument’ and hold the belief that they ought so to attend.

Subscription to standards and the associated normative beliefs are nevertheless separable. It is possible for a person to subscribe to a standard in the absence of the belief that she is justified in doing so, and to hold that subscription to a standard is justified without herself subscribing to it. I may consistently abide by the rule ‘pour the milk before the tea’ without assenting to the thought that this is something I *ought* to do. And I may sincerely believe that I ought not to swear in front of the children without having any serious intention of moderating my language accordingly.

I want to suggest that what distinguishes moral beliefs from other kinds of normative belief is the type of subscription to a standard held to be justified. Ordinarily, subscription to a standard involves intending to conform to the standard and being inclined to think well of oneself for conforming and badly of oneself for failing to conform. In the case of moral subscription, though, these attitudes are directed not only to one’s own actions and failures to act, but to everyone else’s too. Moral subscription to a standard involves intending to conform to the standard and to support the conformity of others, and being inclined to think well of anyone for conforming and badly of anyone for failing to conform. To hold a moral belief is to hold that moral subscription to a standard is justified.

Neither the content of the standard subscribed to, nor the way subscription is thought to be justified, makes a normative belief a moral one. That a standard is concerned with the welfare of others, for example, or that subscription to it is justified with reference to the conditions of human flourishing, does not yet show that we are dealing with a case of moral belief. It is only when one judges that the attitudes involved in subscription are appropriately directed to the actions of everyone, only when one considers oneself justified in holding others to a standard one subscribes to, that talk of moral belief is in place.

Warranted moral beliefs

A moral belief will be warranted when it can be shown that moral subscription to a standard is justified. There may be various ways of showing this. I want to leave open the possibility that different kinds of justification of moral subscription are available. It will be sufficient for a theory of cognitive moral education to show that there is *at least one* kind of valid justification of moral subscription, and thus at least one way of vindicating moral beliefs.

In his recent article 'Toward a pluralist and teleological theory of normativity', David Copp sketches a general strategy for justifying normative subscription (Copp, 2009). He proposes that there exist a number of basic, general problems in human life, which problems are best tackled by subscription to systems of standards. He writes:

There are two basic ideas. First, humans face a family of endemic problems, due to the interaction between their nature and the circumstances in which they live. Second, the capacity of humans to deal successfully with these problems depends on their subscribing to systems of norms or standards. Our subscription to these systems enables us to deal with the relevant problems. This is the basic fact that underlies all normativity. (Copp, 2009, p.26)

Subscription to a system of standards is justified, on this view, when it serves to ameliorate a basic problem of human existence. An example of such a problem is that 'our untutored processes of belief formation are not in general reliable in all the circumstances where we need them to be' (p.28). Subscription to epistemic standards is justified because it ameliorates this problem. Similarly, subscription to prudential standards ameliorates the endemic problem of our having 'a tendency to seek short-term or short-sighted advantages at variance with our values' (p.27).

In the case of these two problems, ordinary (as opposed to moral) subscription to standards is sufficient. To improve the reliability of my processes of belief formation, and to govern my life in accordance with my values, I need only hold *myself* to appropriate epistemic and prudential standards. If this general strategy is to be used to justify moral subscription to standards, we shall need to identify an endemic problem which is ameliorated only by our holding ourselves *and each other* to the standards in question. Copp argues that there is just such a problem: he calls it the 'problem of sociality' (p.27).

Drawing explicitly on J.L. Mackie's ethical theory (Mackie, 1977), and echoing similar accounts offered by G.J. Warnock (1971) and H.L.A. Hart (1961), Copp describes the

problem of sociality as arising from the combination of human vulnerability, limited resources and limited sympathies:

Human beings have biological and psychological needs and cannot generally meet these needs without interacting cooperatively with other people. We have things that we value, and we generally cannot achieve, protect, or realize these values without interacting cooperatively with other people. We are vulnerable to interference from other people. For all of these reasons, we need the cooperation of others to achieve what we value, no matter what we value, within at least a wide range of things we might value... Unfortunately, as Mackie points out, people have conflicting interests, limited resources, and limited sympathy as well as a tendency to pursue their own advantage, so there is always a risk that peaceful cooperation will break down. (Copp, 2009, p.27)

Amelioration of the problem of sociality requires moral subscription to standards of non-interference, fairness and mutual assistance. Ordinary subscription is insufficient here because merely holding myself to such standards, when others fail to do likewise, is self-defeating: I render myself more vulnerable to harm and exploitation than I would be if I did not subscribe. Amelioration of the problem depends on everyone, or almost everyone, conforming, so each of us has a legitimate interest in supporting the conformity of everyone else.

I think this is a promising strategy for vindicating moral beliefs. To hold the moral belief that, say, stealing is wrong, is to hold that moral subscription to the standard 'do not steal' is justified. Moral subscription to this standard *is* justified because general conformity to it serves to ameliorate the endemic human problem of sociality. Therefore the moral belief that stealing is wrong is warranted.

Imparting warranted moral beliefs

One goal of moral education is to bring it about that learners hold true moral beliefs for good reasons. The foregoing account of warranted moral beliefs suggests a way of achieving this goal. Learners must be helped to grasp the seriousness of the problem of sociality and the possibility of ameliorating it by general conformity to standards of non-interference, fairness and mutual assistance. They must be brought to understand that these features of the human condition justify a type of subscription to such standards which involves their intending both to conform and to support the conformity of others. And they must come to see that the adequacy of this justification for moral subscription supplies the warrant for the corresponding moral beliefs.

I noted above that this way of justifying moral subscription is not exclusive: it leaves open the possibility of there being other respectable justifications. I take this to be a practical advantage of the account for the purposes of moral education in schools. Given that children come to school not only with a variety of more or less entrenched moral beliefs, but also with a variety of more or less entrenched reasons for their moral beliefs, it is helpful if persuading them to accept one form of justification does not require persuading

them to reject all others. A pupil with, for example, a strong conviction that there are adequate religious grounds for morality need not give up this conviction in order to accept that morality is also required by our collective need to solve the problem of sociality.

Grasping the seriousness of the problem of sociality and the possibility of ameliorating it by conformity to standards does not present any special cognitive challenges, and it is the sort of understanding that can be deepened and ramified as the cognitive capacities of learners develop. Nevertheless, it might plausibly be objected that there would be something odd about delaying the transmission of moral beliefs to children until such time as they are capable of understanding their warrant. But if we do not delay until this point, are we not obliged to use the non-rational methods of beliefs transmission I described above as indoctrinatory? Fortunately not. As I have argued elsewhere, rational belief transmission need not be a matter of presenting the relevant evidence and argument at the outset (Hand, 2002, 2003). Very often in education we proceed, initially at least, by testifying to the evidence rather than presenting it. We ask children to believe things on the basis that we, or appropriately qualified others, have seen the evidence or traced the arguments that warrant the beliefs; and wherever possible we attach promissory notes to the effect that the evidence or arguments in question will be made available to them in due course. Children are not bullied or cajoled or manipulated into believing without regard to evidence; rather they are asked to believe on the basis of evidence to be presented later. This method of rational belief transmission is as legitimate in moral education as it is elsewhere on the curriculum, as long as moral educators are in a position to make good on their promises when the cognitive capacities of children allow.

Finally, let me emphasise again that I do not take the task of imparting warranted moral beliefs to be the whole of moral education. Perhaps it is a relatively minor part of it. No doubt it is a good deal easier to convince learners that moral subscription to certain standards is justified than it is to bring about their subscription to those standards. Nevertheless, the cognitive aspect of moral education is not trivial, and any theory of moral education that neglected it would be deficient.

References

- Copp, D. (2009) 'Toward a pluralist and teleological theory of normativity', in *Philosophical Issues* 19 (1), pp.21-37.
- Hand, M. (2003) 'A philosophical objection to faith schools', in *Theory and Research in Education* 1 (1), pp.89-99.
- Hand, M. (2002) 'Religious upbringing reconsidered', in *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 36 (4), pp.545-557.
- Hart, H.L.A. (1961) *The Concept of Law*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Mackie, J.L. (1977) *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, Harmondsworth: Penguin
- Warnock, G.J. (1971) *The Object of Morality*, London: Methuen.