Getting engaged with what really matters:
effective routes to education?

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Abstract

There is little point haranguing the young for their moral (or civic) failings nor parading values or goals that we nostalgically believe informed previous generations. *Steles* in Ur and writings of classical Greece show us that such futile acts have a long history. We must start from where young people are, morally, with what concerns them, and with the tools that they use for caring about their world as well as the pressures, temptations and inspirations that inform the use of these tools. We also start from theories of morality, which are diverse. The Kantian model of morality as 'cool reason' dominated late 20Th century moral psychology, emphasizing development as increasingly complex understanding of moral principles and the consequences of action. Here, education focuses on promoting more complex reasoning. Recent developments echo Hume's dispute with Kant about the immediacy of moral affect (such as compassion or disgust) in contrast to the slower reflection of reasoning. Current moral theory rhetoric tends to pit affect *against* reason but the next steps may be synthesis rather than polarity. As yet, little has been done to consider the logistics of educating moral affect, though civic education does take on board that civic responsibility requires affective engagement in an issue. Character education derives from Aristotelian   virtues, enduring trait-like attributes of the person which combine 'good' emotion, 'wise' reason and the ego qualities for pursuing both. I will argue that character education can only be formulated adequately when the implicit assumptions about both reason and affect are unpacked, and particularly, when the cultural context in which virtues are fostered and enacted, and the tools for so doing, are fully articulated.

Introduction

I am skeptical about character education. However I am not skeptical about the potential for effective moral and civic education. My skepticism is alerted by the extent to which any model critically examines its goals and the extent to which it rigorously explores a perspective on human development that translates into feasible educational practices. I am skeptical about discourses around education (in any sphere) which apparently start from a rhetoric of what is wrong with society and especially, what we have 'lost'. Nostalgia is a poisoned chalice offered too often by those of us whose memory spans decades not years; not only is our memory selective (and derived from very privileged educational and youth experience) it is unlikely to be relevant to many of today's conditions. (I remind myself sometimes that the people of my current age who might have 'advised' the teachers of my own adolescence would have been teenagers in the First World War….).

We must address the conditions and preoccupations of contemporary youth and in particular, what fires them. In this paper I will unpack the goals, and interrogate the underlying developmental theory, of three current models of morality. Each has gaps:
   a) only one of them currently translates into obviously viable educational practice
   b) each has substantial gaps in their implicit moral theory, which are made explicit by what is fore-fronted in the other two
   c) motivation is crucial to moral and civic engagement; it is vital to explore both the role of affect in engagement, and the issues that provoke affect.
   d) character education specialists say that young people 'lack a language of virtues'; while we might critique the concept of virtue itself, the cultural context and available discourses that are within any culture need to be explored in order to understand what young people in that culture draw upon to make sense of moral and civic issues.

I separate the goal or *telos* of moral education from the processes of development because they have different roots. First, our ideals of moral functioning reflect theories (folk or expert) about what society needs from the 'good person' in order to function. We then give an individual incentive by claiming that the performance of such goodness brings rewards in the afterlife, or at least prestige in the present one. Second, to have a plan for effective education, we need a theory of how development takes place; how 'goodness' is acquired (or fostered) and how education can intervene to facilitate this.

'Character' and its problems

Character education rests on a theory of 'virtue', which in fact means a list of moral attributes which may seem quite disparate. The underpinning psychological theory is that virtues are enduring trait-like qualities of the person that reliably come into play in moral situations. Unless we subscribe to a completely innate theory, such traits are seen as *acquired habits of mind*. Historically, in the era of social learning theory, virtue slotted into a

conditioning model of habit formation. In the current theoretical climate this model is not popular: character education theorists are in the process of generating a contemporary model of development as this Conference demonstrates. The goals of virtue education need to translate into viable practice rooted in psychological theory and research. What seems to be emerging is a model in which a social climate (both in the school and the wider culture) provides explicit discourses of the desired goals, and there are activities which provide students with opportunities for, and rewards for, performing versions of those desired behaviors.

The problem for me is that the goals seem quite diffuse. The overall message seems to be that young people should understand and be able to discriminate what is 'good', and should develop a sense of purpose (or 'compass') in their lives enabling them to pursue this. Scott Seider, in an excellent account of his study of three schools in Boston, points out how each has a very different 'theory of virtue' – even though each school is doing well in its task of improving the quality of student performance and selfhood (Seider, 2012). In one school, the explicit list of virtues sounds similar to the 'cardinal virtues': courage, compassion, respect, integrity, perseverance. In the second school, 'life skills' are prioritized, academic preparation, self-presentation, debating, but also self-discipline and determination. In the third school, which draws on Eastern as well as Western cultural discourses, the qualities are improving their community, persistence, daring, respect, excellence and integrity. In each school community meetings publicly reward students who demonstrate the desired qualities. Seider describes how each school is different, but successful. He concludes also that each school's dominant discourses are invoked for community-wide discussions of sensitive issues, such as bullying.

I reason, therefore I am moral…?

The cognitive developmental/neo-Kantian model of moral development, exemplified by Kohlberg's theory *inter alia* clearly delineates moral reasoning as the primary moral function and moral development as increasingly sophisticated cognition. This has the benefit of translating easily into educational practice – whether Socratic discussion or the reflective enactment of a Just Community. However critics identify two limitations. The first concerns the implicit theory of what comprises morality, the second concerns what moral *processes* are excluded.

The 'goal' is postconventional reasoning. Because Kohlberg grounded this in a particular version of Kantian ethics, it was originally embedded in reasoning based on an ethic of justice (Kohlberg, 1971/1981). This was criticized both by philosophers and as a result of empirical findings that different cultures and subcultures had different dominant ethical discourses, such as care, filial piety, honor, community etc. This array has some parallel with the diversity of virtues – after all, a virtue expresses a goal for development that is embedded in an implicit moral theory about why that virtue is important. (The crucial difference, of course, is that for a virtue, the question is, "Is X capable of performing compassionately?" while for reasoning, the question is, 'Does X invoke compassion as a desirable reason for acting in a particular way?') Nevertheless, the principle of a *variety* of moral goals is now common to both.

Evidence of the cultural diversity of ethics is also a challenge to moral *process*; if culture is ignored, than the role of culture in moral development is also ignored.

I feel, therefore I am moral?

A major gap in neo-Kantian ethics is that identified by Hume, that affective moral response is excluded from the analysis. Moral affect is a problem both for character and virtue and for moral reasoning. For a model of 'cool reason' as the criterion process of morality, affect may precede reasoning but be seen as unreliable, ethically, or even in conflict with reason. Alternatively, affect may become morally respectable when it is seen to arise from a reasoned position: I *become* angry, or compassionate, now that I recognize the injustice of the situation. Affect becomes the engine for enacting moral reasoning.

In the context of virtue, affect may be encapsulated by a virtue such as compassion, or respectfulness. Or particular affects may be embedded in virtues; one *feels* brave (or cowardly), one *feels* driven to persevere. For this reason, character theory (such as Marvin Berkowitz's model) stresses the necessary coexistence of affect, cognition and performance (the longstanding psychological trilogy of action, cognition and motivation). This contrasts with the separation of affect and cognition in models of reasoning.

The third moral theory is *moral intuitionism*. This raises interesting questions for moral processes, and it has also, by a slightly circuitous route, generated a new set of teleological ethics. To date however, it has not produced a developmental theory that could translate into education. Moral intuitionism reflects Hume's

disagreement with Kant; that we have an immediate and powerfully affective response to many morally–charged situations. While we can manufacture rational arguments for why a particular response should meet the requirements of universalizability and being founded in principle, we should not deny the 'morality' of that initial response. For psychologists, and for educators, two questions arise: what is the origin of those primary reactions, and how might we ensure that they are appropriately channeled – that moral disgust for example is not directed to people with disabilities, or different colored skin or sexual orientation.

I first encountered the importance of the primary affective moral response in my work on civic engagement and peace movements (Haste,1990). I found that people who became activists tended to have experienced a powerful reaction that first, led to their engagement with the issue, and further, to their taking some personal responsibility (sometimes a lot) for action. The data seemed not so much to show that the initial affect was rationalized by later cool reason (though this did occur), more that the affect caused a shift of perspective, a new way of seeing, and therefore the need for reordering, their world. This is consistent with appraisal models of affect. My data were consistent with other research that suggested that certain affects were more conducive than others to promoting engagement and responsibility; anger in particular, whereas fear often led to powerlessness and inaction. Compassion has long been recognized as a vital catalyst of civic (ad moral) responsibility).

Moral intuitionism, studied intensively now in association with neuroscience indicators, affirms the immediacy of affect that feels morally charged. Particularly strong affects are disgust, shame, compassion (harm-avoidance) and fear. However, this work also challenges the traditional binary between cognition and affect, that different parts of the brain perform different functions. As first Antonio Damasio, and now many others, show, cognition does not take place in isolation from affect ('pure reason' hardly exists) nor does affect take place without input from cognitive processes (Damasio, 1995).

The immediacy of the affective experience, and the swiftness of processing, have been explained in several ways. One version is that it must be i*nnate.* That is, there is a strong pre-wired predisposition, involving both affect and information processing, to respond to certain cues; the nontechnical term 'instinct' comes to mind. For some researchers, this has led to evolutionary speculations; the processing and the affect served a survival function in our past (eg. Haidt. 2012). However I would argue that it is much more useful to explore the rapid combined affect and information processing as a unitary process demonstrating fast reactions – reactions that do not need to be grounded in a hardwired innate, let alone an evolutionary, basis. Because of the dominant focus on 'cool' cognition in much of psychology, less attention has been paid to research on the rather common rapid processing – in all areas of human experience. Subsequent to Damasio's insights and related work, there is now more work being done on fast processing that integrates affect and cognition: it has yet to be applied extensively to moral intuition but this is an extremely rich area to do so.

Moral intuitionism, or at least its explanatory spinoffs, has also generated a set of 'goals' for moral performance. These derive, in the hands of Jonathan Haidt, from a combination of contemporary cultural variations on dominant moral ethics and speculations about survival values. The 'moral foundations' that Haidt proposes build in part on the cultural diversity that emerged from more cognitive work, but he adds both affect and an evolutionary slant. The current list has six 'foundations' (he is open to more) which according to his research vary in salience between cultures, subcultures and political parties. These are caring/harm-avoidance, loyalty, authority, purity, liberty and fairness/justice.

What to educate, and how?

A cognitive world of cool reason seems almost a shoe-in for educational practice; it fits the structure of school curricula well. A world of enduring character traits can be accommodated by education as long as we believe that practice and emulating good examples promotes the right habits of mind and behavior. With or without an evolutionary gloss, morality as fast processing, affect integrated with information-processing provokes a challenge. Just what do we target, in what do we intervene – beyond ensuring that the objects of moral affect are appropriate?

Yet commonsense, the history of the humanities, and our observations of human functioning tell us loudly that affect is crucial. I personally do not subscribe to current more speculative evolutionary explanations, though I do not rule out a degree of innate organization. But I think we must move forward with a model that fully recognises both the powerful and focusing force of subjective moral affect, and the rapid processing of information, experience and cultural narrative that is integral to it. To do less is less than science, and less than human.

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