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A Gap in the Value Layer?

Trajectories, Challenges and Prospects of Moral Education

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Recent years have witnessed a world-wide resurgence of interest in *moral education*, broadly understood, taking the form of explicit educational aims concerned with the socio-moral, psycho-moral (especially emotional) and political development of students – with student well-being typically being given as the inclusive meta-objective of all those aims (see e.g. Lovat, Toomey, Dally and Clement, 2009, pp. 17–18). In the European context, this resurgence took off in the 1990s, following on the heels of the introduction of ‘character education’ and ‘social and emotional learning’ in various U.S. school curricula. The interest in moral education escalated even further in the wake of the 2008 banking crisis which many analysts consider to have been as much – or more – the result of moral than financial failure. (Vaiman & Sigurjonsson, 2012). For instance, in my native country Iceland – the country originally hardest hit by the crisis – the Icelandic Parliament formed a Special truth-finding Investigative Commission. The Commission included a Working Group on Ethics, comprising two university moral philosophers and a historian, and one of the deliverables of the Commission was a thick volume on the deep-seated lack of ethical structures in Icelandic society which was to a significant extent responsible for the crisis. Among the takeaway lessons that the Icelandic Parliament drew from this report was that courses in ethics and critical thinking had to become an integrated part of the curriculum, both in business schools and compulsory education (Árnason, 2010; Vaiman & Sigurjonsson, 2012).

I think the best way to define what I want to convey to you today is to say that it is a concerto in three movements with variations on the theme *moral education in disruptive times*. The tempo in the first movement is *adagio*. It offers a condensed history of the *trajectories* (the ups and downs) of moral education, old and new. I then move up a gear to an *allegro* movement on the *challenges* that moral education in school faces (from various quarters). I conclude finally with a fast-paced *presto* movement on the *prospects* for moral education in years ahead.

I. Trajectories

Let us start with the trajectories: The foregrounding of moral education – or at least the awareness of the need for moral education – that we have seen post-2008, and is manifested for instance in the establishment of our new Jubilee Centre for Character and Values here at the University of Birmingham, was not entirely new, but it added fuel to an ongoing trend that had been gaining momentum since the 1990s. This revival of moral education and its reappearance in official school curricula and policy documents is even more noteworthy for the fact that interest in moral education had evidently sunk to an all-time low in the period from the 1940s–1980s or, at any rate, had become the subject of widespread and protracted indifference in the educational community. To understand this development, we need to engage in some highly abbreviated intellectual history, starting in antiquity.

Moral education, including character and emotion education, used to form a core element of ancient and medieval educational programmes, both in theory and in practice. These ‘glory centuries’ of moral education lasted all the way from the era of Plato and Aristotle through Medieval times and the Humanist period until the pre- and early Enlightenment theories of Comenius and Pestalozzi. A fair diversity of individual reasons, or a combination of such reasons, tends to be given to explain why the belief in direct moral and emotional formation, at least at school if not also in the home, gradually crumbled. In the 18th century Enlightenment, classic moral philosophy, with its roots in Greek and Hebrew culture, was dealt two severe blows, vividly depicted in Alasdair MacIntyre’s book *After virtue* (1981). Growing religious agnosticism, if not full-blown atheism, with its concomitant disenchantment and secularisation of society, undermined one of the two traditional bases of moral conviction: the belief in morality as a system of divine commands. Moreover, the other basis of moral conviction, the idea that morality is about the actualisation of our unique, immediately knowable human essence, also eroded as causal accounts of nature replaced teleological ones, and talk of any functional essences was, at best, nominalised and relativised – at worst ridiculed.

A landmark work which indirectly contributed to the downfall of moral education was David Hume’s *Treatise of human nature*. Hume, who of course was a contemporary of and a major influence on Rousseau (before the latter fell prey to his pathological Hume-paranoia in later years), established two key distinctions in his work that were to become an integral part of the new scientific outlook – later transposed

to the budding social sciences through the mediation of Max Weber. Hume's first distinction between facts and values states that propositions involving values, such as 'It was horrible of John to kill his mother-in-law', do not refer to any truth-evaluable matters of fact. Whereas the claim that John killed his mother-in-law has a clear factual basis in our sense-impressions, the claim that it was horrible of him to do so does not. It is worth quoting Hume at length here, as this is one of the most influential citations in the whole history of ideas to the present day:

Take any action allowed to be vicious: wilful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call vice. In whichever way you take it, you find only certain passions, motives, volitions, and thoughts. There is no other matter of fact in the case. The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object. You never can find it, till you turn your reflection into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action. Here is a matter of fact; but it is the object of feeling, not of reason. It lies in yourself, not in the object. So that when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it (Hume, 1978, p. 468).

In other words, when one makes the apparent moral judgement that something is morally good or bad, one is not actually making an ordinary judgement involving a propositional content that can be considered true or false, but rather expressing disapprobation or approbation: saddling the relevant facts with feeling or, more precisely, projecting subjective feelings onto the facts.

Hume's second distinction between 'is' and 'ought' states that it is impossible to derive an 'ought-claim' (such as 'He ought to help the old woman to stand up') from an 'is-statement' (such as 'The old woman fell down when trying to cross the street'). What Hume says here is simply that in 'every system of morality' he has 'hitherto met with', the author moves mysteriously at some point from ordinary claims about what is or is not in human affairs to some claims about what ought or ought not be, as if those latter claims simply revealed some further factual 'relation or affirmation' (1978, p. 469). Hume obviously finds this inference so logically preposterous that he spends little time dwelling on it.

Taken at face value, Hume's two distinctions mean, first, that values (including moral values) do not pertain to scientific reality; they are simply non-rational feelings in our heads; and second, that although

science can describe reality through ‘is’-judgements, no moral prescriptions can be drawn from such factual descriptions. If schools are to teach children facts about the world in which we live and remain neutral about values as non-rational and non-scientific, moral education simply has no place in school curricula in Western liberal democracies. Yet educators in Hume’s time did not draw those radical conclusions – and moral education did not give up the ghost all that easily for, as MacIntyre puts it, ‘the language and appearances of morality’ persisted among the general public for a long time, although its ‘integral substance’ had been ‘fragmented and then in part destroyed’ (1981, p. 5). It was not until a century and a half later, in the period 1940s–1980s, that we began to see the systematic exclusion of moral education from school curricula in the Western world. Various reasons militated against moral education in that period, including (in no particular order):

- Multicultural developments, which engendered radical moral relativism.
- Individualisation agendas, such as the self-fulfilment agenda of humanistic psychology, which elicited fear of indoctrination.
- Anti-traditionalism, for instance the Hippias movement.
- Fear of any homogenising and paternalistic tendencies.
- Bleak ‘situationist’ research findings about how context-dependent and chameleon-like children’s virtues and qualities of character are.
- Kohlbergian pessimism about children as capable moral reasoners.
- Technicism, exemplified for instance by the Sputnik-inspired emphasis on technology and science at the expense of ‘soft’ disciplines such as moral education.
- Increased antipathy from religious groups towards secularised moral education.
- General moral despondency in the wake of WWII; subsequent Cold-War pessimism about the possibility of a genuine moral dialogue and moral consensus.

During this period, most teacher-training programmes failed to prepare teachers for work on moral, emotional and interpersonal issues; as a consequence teachers frequently express insecurity about how to address such issues in the classroom (Aðalbjarnardóttir, 1999, p. 62). Philosopher of education David Carr even talks about a ‘conspiracy of silence’ among teacher educators on this topic (1991, p. 10).

How much relative weight to ascribe to each of the particular reasons above in the downfall of moral education remains controversial. Beyond controversy, however, is their cumulative effect in sidelining moral concerns from mainstream educational discourse in the West and marginalising references to the cultivation of the moral character of children in school curricula. Beyond controversy also is the fact that since the 1990s, and especially post-2008, the tide has turned dramatically, and with considerable swiftness, in favour of moral education. Various reasons can be given for this reversal of fortunes (again in no particular order):

- More female employment led to increased demands on the school to help ‘bring up’ children.
- A perceived increase in youth depression and social disaffection, culminating in events like the London 2011 riots – problems that many commentators interpreted as a sign of moral decline in need of rectification.
- Internationalisation created a need for cosmopolitan values.
- More secularisation and less religious education created the perception of a spiritual void that needed to be filled.
- Doubts about Kohlberg’s methodology reignited hopes about children as capable moral agents.
- The upsurge of so-called virtue ethics (with focus on people’s virtuous character traits and their cultivation) in moral philosophy spawned new movements in moral education, such as character education, social and emotional learning and (later) positive psychology’s virtue theory (‘positive education’).
- Finally, the 2008 financial crisis was a wake-up call for many, as already explained.

The story I have told you so far may seem to have a happy ending, almost like one from Grimm’s Fairy Tales: Moral education has risen, Phoenix-like, from the ashes and is alive and kicking again! Things are not so simple and straightforward however. Although various school subjects, initiatives and projects have been reintroduced into school curricula in recent years that fall broadly within the rubric of something we could call ‘moral education’, there is little agreement on what precisely should be taught in its name and how. So although moral education is *formally* speaking on

the up, it still faces serious *substantive challenges*. It is to those that I now turn in the second movement of my concerto.

II. Challenges

Without further ado, let me begin by articulating my concern that many of the so-called programmes of moral education that we have seen proliferate in recent years have little, if anything, to do with morality in the traditional sense, but everything to do with instrumentalist psychological effectiveness and smooth socio-emotional functioning. Take ‘social and emotional learning’, for example, based on the concept of ‘emotional intelligence’. The problem there is that this concept (although allegedly derived from Aristotle’s ethics!) does not in the end place any substantive moral constraint on the content of emotionally intelligent emotions: A clever but unscrupulous drug baron could satisfy the conditions of emotional intelligence admirably (see Kristjánsson, 2007, chap. 6). Many of the putative moral education initiatives of late are thus about the *clarification* or *efficient functioning* of one’s existing values, not the cultivation of objectively grounded moral value. This should come as no surprise; the biggest substantive challenge facing moral education in the 21st century is how to rebuild the value base that was lost in the wake of the Enlightenment through the erosion of a religious and teleological world view, as earlier described.

There is, as I hinted at in the title of my talk, a gap in our value layer, more serious perhaps than the gap in the ozone layer. 20th century attempts to mend this value gap took the form of elevating the so-called *self* to a value base: to make one’s own selfhood an object of value, valuable in so far as it was valued, instead of the traditional idea of selfhood as a subject of value, a value recorder if you like, only to be valued in so far as it was valuable (see Baumeister, 1991; Kristjánsson, 2010a). But far from being a panacea for all personal and social evils, this exaltation of the self to a demigod turned in on itself: High self-esteem did not, as expected, correlate with positive social variables; on the contrary, high self-esteem among the young increases the likelihood of bullying, drug-taking and dangerous sexual behaviour – as it gives the high self-esteemee a feeling of invulnerability to risk

(Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger & Vohs, 2003). In the financial crisis of 2008, we saw the dire consequences of a culture that had made the individual self a god in and to itself.

In the service of a cringing spirit of indiscriminate tolerance and value neutrality, the moral sensibilities which throb in the nerves of the young have largely been left unattended to. Plunged into a maelstrom of evanescence and ephemerality – with their values tattered and torn and deeply troubled by feelings of choking anxiety – the young have turned to all sorts of value parasites and value clones for comfort – in addition to being taught to sing in the kindergarten: ‘I am perfect, I am perfect, so are you’! To put it in a bit less dramatic terms, schools have failed to address the existential angst of today’s youth. By sidelining moral education as a school subject, however, and in some cases completely exorcising from school curricula, schools have proceeded to trivialise what is most conducive to and constitutive of human flourishing.

It would be naïve to blame individual schools, or even educational authorities, for this state of affairs. Its roots lie much deeper; they lie in the fact that post-Humean secularists and atheists (represented for instance by the Dawkinses and Dennetts of today), who were so clever at overturning the religious world-view, lost the plot by failing to provide us with an alternative value base. They forgot people’s (not least young people’s) need for *transcendence*: the experience and pursuit of ideals higher than oneself (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; cf. De Botton, 2012, chap. 4). The irony is that an alternative base of transcendence was ready at hand in our rich heritage of art and literature. However, instead of harnessing those resources to fill the value gap left by the loss of God and of ‘man’ as a functional, teleological concept, the teaching of art and literature in school mostly degenerated into the formalism of twentieth century modernism with its accompanying dilettantist and obscurantist tendencies.

What I hope to have shown is that the recent reappearance of moral education, in various guises, in school curricula does not necessarily indicate that the value gap is being engaged head-on. We need to explore what precisely is being taught in those programmes; and let us not forget that there are still serious objections to teaching anything amounting to a full-fledged, objectively grounded morality or a science of objective human flourishing within the rubric of the school. Within the sphere of *politics*, we have thus seen an unlikely alliance of conservatives, radicals and liberals objecting to

the teaching of morality in school. Many *conservatives* consider moral education to be at best useless and at worst harmful, in that it takes valuable time away from core subjects and wastes school resources. There are, on this view, no pedagogically accepted, sustainable ways of teaching values, but even if there were, moral education is simply not the role of the school; rather, it is the responsibility of the family and other external (especially religious) institutions (e.g. Tooley, 2000). The most commonly-heard *radical* objection to moral education stems from critical postmodernists and others sharing a similar orientation: There are no homogeneous notions of morality which can and should be transmitted to all citizens in Western democratic societies, irrespective of gender, class, and race – unless, that is, it is our intention to perpetuate and reinforce the middle-class, white, male image. Rather, in order to take account of the full range of cultural diversity and fragmentation, we need to identify and transmit more local-scale values that will help strengthen the self-identity of various sub-cultures (Hall, 2000). Finally, liberals join this polyphonic chorus by claiming that schools should only maximise students’ capacity for choice without influencing in any ways the choices that they will want to make; otherwise we wind up in unsavoury paternalism (Gutmann, 1982).

My responses to those political challenges will be quick. I consider the conservative challenge *paradoxical* from the self-appointed preservers of the social order. I consider the radical challenge *parochial* and self-defeating in that it encloses the marginalised sub-groups that it is supposed to protect – say Muslim women in the West – inside a cocoon of opaque otherness (cf. Okin, 1999). I consider the liberal challenge itself *paternalistic* in that it fails to take account of the overwhelming wishes of parents that schools do not only produce efficient choosers but good people (cf. Haybron & Alexandrova, 2013).

Obviously, there are also *moral* and the *social scientific* challenges to moral education that are more profound philosophically than the political challenge, based as they are on Hume’s famous distinctions between fact and values on the one hand and is and ought statements (descriptions and prescriptions) on the other. I would need more time than the remaining minutes of my talk to counter those challenges. Fortunately, I have written quite a lot on both those issues in a series of papers published in the last few years, and I kindly ask you to consult those for what I consider to be pretty persuasive counter-arguments (Kristjánsson, 2010b; 2012; 2013).

To put it as briefly as possible, regarding the first task of undermining the fact-value distinction, there are three main possible objections to this distinction, and I believe that their combined effort suffices to defang it. I call them the ‘anthropological’, ‘linguistic’ and ‘functional’ objections. Beginning with the anthropological objection, recall the common assumption that the fact of the relativity of moral beliefs – making a shared moral conception impossible to achieve – is a crucial reason for caving in to the distinction between facts and values. But is it an uncontroversial ‘fact’ that values are more relative than facts – even irretrievably so? Here, recent empirical psychology comes in handy, especially what for some psychologists has been the ‘shocking’ empirical discovery that the same moral virtues are, as a matter of fact, valued universally (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). This discovery involves no anomalous finding. More and more anthropologists and cultural psychologists are starting to concur with the old Aristotelian observation on how akin every human being is to other human beings. Far from being incommensurable or irretrievably relative, moral conceptions tend to be harmonious, or at least synthesisable from a higher-order perspective.

The linguistic objection penetrates more deeply into the core of the Humean idea that whereas descriptive concepts track factual reality, value concepts (such as moral concepts) project evaluative attitudes onto facts. The truth is that evaluation is not icing on the cake of hard facts. We cannot peel away the layers of evaluative projections until we touch bottom: the neutral descriptive content. We do not begin with hard facts that we then load with evaluation. When we describe reality, we always do so from a perspective that we could call ‘the descriptive point of view’. In the case of a moral concept, such as ‘murder’ or ‘kindness’, we describe from a moral point of view, but that point of view is no less descriptive than the perspective employed in classifying an object as, say, a table or a kettle. It is simply another perspective; we are drawing attention to features of another sort: ‘Moral notions do not evaluate the world of description but describe the world of evaluation’ (Kovesi, 1971, p. 119).

The third objection to Hume’s first law builds upon the linguistic objection but adds to it. I call it the functional objection because it delineates in detail the functions that different kinds of judgements about goodness or badness serve in our language (see von Wright, 1963). It is an empirical fact – buttressed, for instance, by recent positive psychological findings – that a well functioning human life is a life of virtue, as virtues are conducive to the human good. And what is a virtue is not

something that can be decided on a whim, simply by projecting a Humean pro-attitude onto it, for the same reason that it is impossible to call anything you like good or harm.

The functional objection thus not only puts (in my view at least!) the final nail in the coffin of Hume's first distinction, it also prepares the ground for a realist-naturalist alternative about the function of the virtues in a flourishing life and the function of flourishing lives for a flourishing society. More generally, I propose to carve out a meta-function for morality as a system that integrates these specific functions for the good of individuals and for the good of society – a system which can be objectively evaluated as good or bad on grounds of how well it executes this integrative function. On such a virtue-based alternative, moral education will be accorded a new and expanded function in teaching the things that matter to people as evaluative beings: beings whose relation to the world is one of concern. Moral evaluations are, then, no longer to be edited out as irrelevant and unscientific; rather they will be judged on their own merits as objectively appropriate or inappropriate.

So there goes the fact–value distinction down the drain! But what about the is–ought distinction? Well, if that distinction simply means that social scientists are not preachers, then this distinction should by all means be preserved! But just as it is surely possible to pass a judgement about a knife being good without any prescription to cut, it must be possible to issue moral judgements about states of affairs without thereby issuing moral prescriptions on how others should act on them. Why has this simple truth eluded so many social scientists? I suspect the reason lies in the ambiguity of the term 'normative'. If we abandon Hume's first distinction, we do admit a certain kind of normativity into social scientific discourse, namely normativity as evaluativeness. But that does not mean that we allow another kind of normativity to enter such discourse, namely normativity understood as prescriptivity. Let me explain this with examples: Judgments such as 'A life of virtue is happier than a life of vice' are normative in the sense of being evaluative (they evaluate certain states of affairs from a moral point of view, amenable to empirical evidence, and thus concern what I call evaluative facts or factual values), but they are not prescriptive; they do not tell people to lead virtuous lives unless those people are concerned with – and hence motivated to pursue – morality and the happy life. And that is something one cannot and should not take for granted. The inclusion of empirically grounded moral evaluations in social scientific theories does not undermine their objectivity, therefore. On the contrary,

correctly describing the world of factual values strengthens their objectivity. In other words, educationists and other social scientists need to be more evaluative in order to be more objective!

So these are my quick responses to the challenges – political, moral and social scientific – that moral education faces in our times. But what about its realistic prospects in years to come? Let me conclude this talk by considering some prospects that could materialise if we, the educators took matters into our own hands.

III. Prospects

Even if it were true, as suggested earlier, that recent initiatives in moral education across the Western world have developed in response to an internationally recognised need for the character-coaching of the young, this does not mean that the programmes themselves necessarily have any theoretical common ground. Here are some of the *formal* reasons for caution:

- Some of the recent programmes are geared towards preschool and/or primary education while others are exclusively aimed at students in secondary education.
- Some of the programmes have been dressed up as new separate school subjects while others function as add-ons to already existing subjects.
- Some of the programmes are part of the compulsory curriculum while others are optional elements.

Those reasons are compounded by apparent *substantive* differences among the recent programmes, based on the fact that they are rooted in different *disciplinary paradigms*:

- Some are *moral*, giving rise to programmes such as character education (CE).
- Some are *psychological*, giving rise to programmes such as social and emotional learning (SEL) and social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL).
- Some are *political*, giving rise to programmes such as civic or citizenship education (CCE).
- Some are *health-related*, giving rise to programmes such as physical, social and health education (PSHE).
- Some are *religious*, giving rise to programmes of religion-based moral education (RE).

- Some are of an *eclectic* disciplinary provenance, such as well-being education (WE) and life-skills/life-competence education (LE).

An obvious question to ask, then, is whether moral education is swimming in a sea of hopeless heterogeneity: Is there anything singular to be found in this prodigious plurality of approaches – any putative common point of departure? Eminent American character educationist Marvin Berkowitz has recently stated this problem in stark terms: ‘I have found the language of moral education to be a semantic minefield’, he says. ‘There is no moral GPS to help with such semantic navigation. I have lectured, written, etc. under quite a set of terms. The terminology varies geographically and historically. And there are many overlapping terms used’ (2012).

Berkowitz’s description can give rise to two contrasting interpretations: One is that the mixed bag of theoretical assumptions underlying different programmes in moral education constitutes a hopeless hotchpotch of ill-assorted elements, and that its penchant for eclecticism will in the end prove to be this field’s undoing. The alternative interpretation is that moral education offers us a healthy melting-pot of elements that can be made to work – perhaps not simultaneously, but at least in conjunction with one another, and that this field demarcates, at a more general level, a conceptual and practical common ground.

Let me end with a practical proposal. Why not start with a particular region, such as the United Kingdom, and through our new-established Jubilee Centre for Character and Values, explore precisely which of the two alternative interpretations is correct? Among the *aims* of our Centre should be to:

- a) establish a data bank on all school subjects and programmes related to moral and well-being education as part of compulsory primary or secondary education, to collect the available evidence on their effectiveness and to conduct meta-analyses of such findings;
- b) explore and subsequently critique the theoretical/philosophical assumptions underpinning the different efforts;
- c) compare and coordinate the practical content and implications of the different efforts by holding national and international conferences and disseminating information of relevance both to researchers and practitioners.

Dear colleagues: I do not have a PhD in fortune-telling, and I honestly do not know if the current groundswell in favour of the systematic cultivation of moral traits among the young does have any

common rationale – or whether people are simply talking at cross-purposes. I do not know either where this recent trend will lead us in the future. What I know, however, is that educational efforts usually fare best when they are backed up by empirical data and involve national and international comparisons. This is why the final note struck in this somewhat rambling concerto is a proposal for an action-oriented research project where, I hope, our new Centre can take the lead in getting to grips with what moral education in the 21st century should be about.

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