

A philosophical approach to moral education

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Abstract

Moral education needs to be distinguished from moral training and to find its way into the school curriculum. It should meet academic standards relating to knowledge and understanding of the moral domain in much the same way as do other areas of study. This paper briefly explores the aims, subject matter and methods of such an undertaking from a philosophical point of view. The approach helps to overcome the common dichotomy in which students are regarded as moral beings so far as their general conduct is concerned and as amoral beings when it comes to the subject matter that they study. When integrated into the curriculum, it brings out the moral aspects of various areas of study and assists students to understand them.

Key words

ethics, moral education, philosophy, training, understanding

Moral education, training and instruction

Moral education can all too easily fall prey to contentious or partial philosophical commitments.¹ Let me give an illustration to explain what I mean. There has been a long tradition, especially in the USA, of equating moral education with character development. Character education is sometimes understood to include all kinds of approaches to moral education, but to have a definite meaning it is more properly restricted to those approaches that seek to directly mould character and are concerned with conduct primarily as indicative of character. This requires educational activities designed to develop what are taken to be desirable character traits. Such a scheme of things faces the obvious difficulty of settling on an agreed list of traits, but much more problematically it privileges what is known as virtue ethics, which ties morality to character, over other ethical frameworks, such as those

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that focus on the consequences of conduct rather than character. Educational commitment to a consequentialist ethics is also controversial, of course, and the same is obviously true of religiously inspired moral education that focuses on a religion's moral rules or commandments. Each scheme has philosophical and educational implications that are at odds with the others.

One way of dealing with the problem of competing schemes is to question whether moral education should have such things as ethical behaviour or character development as its proximate aim. What if moral education were directed instead at ethical knowledge and understanding? Such is the aim of the philosophical approach to teaching ethics. Rather than settling on a scheme that is philosophically committed, it allows students to engage in an exploration of ethical subject matter, providing them with the opportunity to think about traditional virtues such as honesty and integrity, as well as the role of moral principles and the consequences of actions in regard to proper conduct.

This shift in aim corresponds to an old distinction between education and training. The traditional approaches set out to train young people to behave ethically according to one or another set of criteria, or to build desirable character traits. The philosophical approach aims to develop their knowledge and understanding of the moral domain in much the same way that we educate them in other domains, such as in science, mathematics, history or social studies. This is not to disparage training. Schools involve students in various kinds of training. Training in sport is an obvious example. Alongside sports training, however, we also have health education, which aims to develop students' knowledge and understanding of the determinants of good health. A similar distinction needs to be made in regard to moral education. Moral training goes along with behaviour management and the social training that students receive from a wide range of school activities. Moral education, properly speaking, is a field or aspect of study within the curriculum (an approach taken in Cam 2012).

Let me say something at this point about moral instruction. After all, moral education has often been delivered as 'teaching by telling'. This is not education in the sense of the exploration of concepts and principles, or the acquisition of critical judgement, but then neither is it training that aims to inculcate habits simply through practice. Moral instructions are either explicitly or, by implication, commands, rules, or codes of conduct with which we are expected to comply. Moral instruction informs receivers of their moral obligations. This means that moral

education delivered through instruction effectively centres on telling students what to think and how to behave.

Instruction need not be just a matter of telling, of course, but often involves showing as well. To return to the comparison with physical education, swimming instructors don't just tell learners what to do, they demonstrate how to do it and monitor the learners' efforts. To that extent, instructors are involved in training. The same thing applies to moral instruction. As well as teaching by telling, moral instructors may also lead by personal example and make use of examples from other sources, such as those in sacred texts, history or current affairs. But when these efforts extend to monitoring student conduct and correcting it, or praising and admonishing students for their personal qualities, then the instructor takes on the role of moral coach or trainer.

Yet telling someone to accept something doesn't mean that they will, any more than the outward conformity of their conduct means that they do so with knowledge and understanding. More is required in order to morally educate someone than simply to instruct them. Knowledge taught by instruction is not knowledge acquired by students unless they both understand and accept it. This requires them to grasp the embedded ideas and to submit related propositions to appraisal and judgement. Developing these powers is something in addition to telling students what to think. For that, we need to cultivate their ability to think about the subject matter in which we instruct them.

The contrast between the philosophical approach and moral instruction and training is all the more obvious once we acknowledge that there is a moral dimension to school subjects, to which moral education should attend. In 2011, I was a consultant for the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority to help develop a framework for the general capability of what was then called Ethical Behaviour in the Australian curriculum.² Ethical Behaviour was one of the capabilities to be embedded in subjects across the curriculum. My co-developer and I immediately recognised that something was amiss with the tag 'ethical behaviour' in a curriculum context. Perhaps the easiest way to see this is to consider assessment. Since the curriculum for each subject was to have the general capability of Ethical Behaviour embedded in it, assessment in a subject would have to reflect the extent to which

² For an overview of the general capabilities in the Australian curriculum, including what is now called 'Ethical Understanding,' see <http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/generalcapabilities/overview/general-capabilities-in-the-australian-curriculum>

achievement standards for Ethical Behaviour were met. This suggests setting up curriculum standards for ethical conduct and grading students accordingly. It presents the peculiar prospect of adjusting marks in academic subjects on the basis of non-academic performance. That is indicative of a category error—of confusing or conflating things that belong to one logical category with things that belong to another category (c.f. Ryle 1949). In this case, it is to conflate conduct that is properly evaluated by reference to academic criteria with conduct that is properly evaluated by reference to moral criteria. Happily, the general competence on which we were working was eventually changed from Ethical Behaviour to Ethical Understanding, a title that reflects normal academic criteria and assessment standards.

It is not quite so obvious that the same would have been true had we been asked to embed moral instruction throughout the curriculum. Still, that would have raised the prospect of students being marked for their knowledge in a subject *and* for subscribing to the moral values in which they were instructed. It would have been to insist on prescribed answers to moral questions and to regard all other responses as wide of the mark or incorrect. In short, the mistake involved in embedding moral instruction throughout the curriculum would be to build moral judgements into the curriculum on the same basis as such things as statements of scientific and historical fact and to teach and assess them accordingly.

To sum up my remarks so far: moral instruction and training takes many forms in schools, including rules of conduct, everyday behaviour management, religious instruction, and character-building activities. It aims to guide behaviour in morally approved ways and to encourage the development of valued qualities and habits. All such efforts can be contrasted with developing an understanding of the moral domain through the systematic exploration of moral concepts and the principles of moral decision-making and judgement within the academic curriculum. It is the contrast between moral education as part of the academic curriculum and morally committed instruction and training.

Aims, subject matter and methods

We can ask questions about education on different levels. We can ask fundamental questions about its purpose or aims, for instance, or in regard to how our thinking about education fits with our conception of society. We can ask middle-level questions about such things as what to include in the curriculum—subject matter—and what skills and abilities teachers need. Such questions are key ones for

curriculum authorities and those involved in teacher education. Then there are nitty-gritty questions about method that schools and teachers constantly face—questions that a teacher may confront in how best to bring a class of middle secondary students to appreciate the haiku in poetry, for instance, or in organising next term's nature science project in upper primary.

The answers to questions at the various levels ought to cohere. College courses for prospective language and literature teachers should help to prepare them for the kinds of problems that they will encounter in class. What the primary teacher plans to do next term in nature science should conform to the science curriculum. A curriculum and ways of teaching that indoctrinate students would be out of keeping with a democratic society, and so on. No educational system is going to be entirely coherent, of course, but we should do our best to make our overall efforts as coherent as possible.

These general remarks apply to moral education in particular. Any scheme of moral education needs to address questions at all three levels; and the purpose of moral education, what is taught, and how we teach it, should form a coherent whole. So let us examine the proposal on offer from the three standpoints of its overall aim, subject matter and teaching methods.

I have said that the aim of embedding moral education in the academic curriculum is to develop knowledge and understanding of the moral domain. I should therefore begin by explaining what I mean by knowledge and understanding. The classical way in which knowledge has been defined connects it with understanding. When Akira is unable to tell the class whether whales are mammals because he has no idea, he clearly does not *know* the answer. The same can be said if he gives what he takes to be the answer, but he is wrong. Even if Akira gives the right answer by a lucky guess, he still can't be said to know the answer. In order to be said to know the answer, Akira must (1) have an idea of what to say, (2) have the *right* idea, and (3) have that idea for the right kind of reason. The traditional way of putting this is to say that knowledge is justified true belief. This way of defining knowledge can be questioned, of course, but it is a useful starting-point for thinking about the relationship between knowledge and understanding. Knowledge excludes a lucky guess or a correct answer given for the wrong reason. For Akira to know that whales are mammals, he must not only believe that whales are mammals but must be able to justify the claim. If he cannot do that, then he lacks the *understanding* required for knowledge.

On this account of knowledge, students who are unable to explain or justify what they say do not really *know* what they are talking about. This applies not only to a case such as Akira's, but also to students who have no difficulty recalling the right answer while having no idea of the evidence or reasoning on which it is based. It pertains to students who have somehow or other stumbled upon the answer, but cannot explain how they got there. It applies to a great deal of what is learned by rote rather than by thinking things through, as well as to most of what students try to cram into their heads for short-term recall.

While students cannot be said to have acquired even basic bits of factual knowledge without any idea of how to justify them, it would be a mistake to think of school subject matter in terms of such scraps. For one thing, facts are connected in various ways, such as being related as cause and effect, belonging to a sequence of actions and events, or forming evidence for a conclusion. An effect is better understood when we know its cause. An array of facts regarding actions and events becomes more intelligible when captured by a social or historical narrative. The import of a set of facts becomes clearer when we see what they imply. In each case, the facts figure in some kind of explanation or justification. Reference to its cause explains the effect. The historical narrative elucidates the sequence of actions and events. Our reasoning, if sound, justifies our conclusion. To make such connections is to *understand* the workings of nature, the significance of historical events, or what the facts entail. It is through the development of their understanding, not merely by memorising isolated facts, that students attain more than a fragmentary and superficial knowledge of subject matter.

The knowledge and understanding that students are expected to gain through a philosophical approach to the moral domain is that pursued in ethics. Ethics is the study of morality that, among other things, explores the language of morals, the sources of moral knowledge, the conditions of moral responsibility, and the justification of moral principles and appraisals. When we consider what kinds of knowledge and understanding are to be gained through such a study, three things stand out. They are knowledge and understanding of (1) moral concepts, (2) ways of forming and evaluating moral judgements and, insofar as they inform practice, (3) know-how and discernment in handling moral matters. Notice that the last of these involves knowing and understanding *how*, whereas the other two involve knowing and understanding *that* (see Ryle 1945-1946). It implies that students should have the opportunity to apply what they learn about moral matters.

There is space here for only a brief indication of what these things amount to, but it should prove helpful to say something about all three. To develop understanding of moral concepts includes gaining knowledge of the criteria that govern their use. In the Western tradition this approach to ethics goes all the way back to Socrates, who, as Cicero tells us, 'was the first to call philosophy down from the heavens and set her in the cities of men and bring her also into their homes and compel her to ask questions about life and morality and things good and evil'.³ It is not that there was nothing approaching moral philosophy prior to Socrates; but, as Aristotle says, it was Socrates 'who first seriously investigated how the moral virtues with which he was concerned might be given general definition'. Along with the systematic use of inductive arguments, the attempt to develop a means of general definition was Socrates' chief contribution to philosophy, according to Aristotle.⁴ While the quest for general definitions may have been largely abandoned in Western philosophy, analysis of the language of morals is still prominent in the work of the moral philosophers. This tradition is one that could and should be incorporated into moral education. To take a simple illustration from the middle primary school, concepts such as fairness and friendship fall within this compass, and children of that age are quite capable of exploring the criteria that can be used to justify a claim that something is either fair or not fair, or that someone behaved like a friend, or did not. Students greatly increase their understanding of such concepts by investigating the criteria that govern their application.

Normative ethical theories help to systematise the ways in which people have approached and tried to justify moral judgements. In the Western tradition these are usually divided into teleological theories, deontological theories and virtue ethics. Regardless of the way in which we classify normative theories, for students to learn about what people in different times and places have relied upon to make and justify their moral judgements enlarges their social, cultural, and historical knowledge and understanding. These matters are closely related to subjects dealing with society and history, of course, but it doesn't follow that they are therefore matters of purely sociological and historical interest. Being knowledgeable about such things also helps students to learn to deal with the sources of disagreement over ethical matters in their own society.

³ Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, with an English translation by J.E. King (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1966).

⁴ See Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, 1078b, 17–29.

The philosophical approach to moral education has the kind of scope and complexity that lends itself to curriculum construction. To take an example for illustration, consider the criteria that apply to assignments of moral responsibility. This includes the role of such things as a person's intentions in acting and the foreseeable consequences of their conduct, and raises issues around the extent to which they had control of their actions. Consideration of these criteria leads to the question whether the intention with which someone acts is morally more important than the consequences of their actions, and to the exploration of such concepts as those of freedom and control. Again, attending to just one of these strands, we may observe that a person cannot be morally responsible for something over which they had no control. To claim that they *should* have done something is to imply that they *could* have done it, just as to say that they should not have done something is to imply that they could have avoided doing it. The adage that 'ought' implies 'can' leads to consideration of what 'can' and 'could' mean in this context and thereby to the knot of problems that make up the traditional philosophical problem of free will. As this example illustrates, a philosophical approach to moral education allows considerable latitude for the scope and sequence of a school curriculum—in this case, beginning in the early years with the elementary consideration of what it means to be responsible, going on to explore a range of concepts and topics in progressively more sophisticated ways, before eventually coming to the bearing of a traditional metaphysical problem on the ethical domain.

Developing students' knowledge and understanding is as much about process as it is about content. Knowledge and understanding in any discipline cannot be separated from being able to think in that discipline. Students must be able to think scientifically in order to understand science, for instance, just as they cannot be said to understand an area of mathematics unless they can carry out the relevant mathematical operations. The same is true of ethics. The key to the procedural or methodological side of studying ethics is that it involves *inquiry*. Ethics employs the tools and procedures of inquiry. This means that the philosophical approach to moral education requires those tools and procedures to be taught. Just as mathematics cannot be taught without introducing the tools of mathematics and having students learn how to use them to carry out mathematical operations, so it is in ethics. As with its substantive subject matter, this is not the place to enter into a detailed discussion. Suffice it to say that the procedures include (1) identifying an ethical problem or issue, (2) probing ethical problems and issues by asking appropriate questions about them, (3) addressing such questions by identifying possible answers that may be given to them, (4) engaging in the reasoned

consideration of those answers and (5) arriving at justifiable conclusions. Such procedures cannot be carried out effectively without the use of appropriate conceptual and reasoning tools. On the conceptual side, these relate to such things as clarification, classification, distinction-making, definition, and examining and employing conceptual criteria. The tools of reasoning include justification, explanation, identifying assumptions, and inference-making, as well as attending to validity and soundness in constructing and examining arguments.

Learning to use these tools and procedures to address ethical problems and issues provides students with the means of thinking about moral matters in ways that they would otherwise be ill-equipped to do. Combined with knowledge of the kinds of considerations that inform ethical traditions, and an adequate understanding of ethical concepts, students become far more able to deal with moral matters in a thoughtful and reasonable fashion. The philosophical approach therefore provides a basis for practical moral decision-making which schools can build upon by providing opportunities for its application. We should not lose sight of the fact that genuine know-how and discernment come about through the application of knowledge and understanding to practical issues and problems, regardless of whether we are speaking of engineering or ethics. My task in this paper has been, however, to stress the need to embed moral education in the academic curriculum. We do not unleash engineers upon the world without the knowledge and understanding that only a thoroughgoing education in engineering can provide. Neither should those who graduate from our schools go forth into the world without an adequate grounding in ethics.

Why take a philosophical approach?

I will end by making a couple of further points by way of justification of the project. The first has to do with educating students intellectually and morally as whole human beings, and the second relates to the all too often neglected moral dimension of the subjects that they study.

Everything that we do in schools is infused with values. When it comes to the negative side of conduct and character, schools are concerned with such things as bullying in the playground, lack of respect for teachers and school property, absenteeism, lateness, and the like. Positively, they are concerned with things like love of learning, doing your best, making a contribution, and taking responsibility for your actions. Such values enter into the formal teaching environment in many

ways. Disciplinary measures imposed for cheating, and commendation for exceptional effort are obvious examples. Still, even things as self-evidently relevant to the formal teaching environment as dealing with academic misconduct, or putting stickers of approval on students' worksheets, do not negate the fact that there is a considerable divide between the intellectual and moral dimensions of school life. Indeed, it is common to regard students as moral beings so far as their general conduct is concerned and as amoral beings when it comes to the subject matter that they study.

Nowhere is this clearer than when moral education is confused with non-curricular instruction and training, whether in terms of the general school ethos, extra-curricular activities, or things like student welfare and religious instruction. In all such cases, students' moral development is not informed by their studies and is not seen as intrinsically related to its subject matter. It is only when students have the opportunity to inquire into the ethical aspects of subject matter that their moral outlook becomes intellectually informed and their understanding of subject matter is informed by their moral sensibility. In other words, by building the opportunity for ethical inquiry into the curriculum, and preferably across it, we have the opportunity to educate the young as whole human beings.

My second point follows on from the first. The educational integration of the moral and intellectual being of students requires the integration of the intellectual and moral dimensions of the subjects that they study. To properly acknowledge the moral dimension of studies means that students should be learning to make informed and reasonable moral assessments about events in history or issues in social studies, that their understanding of science and technology does not develop in a moral vacuum, and that even a subject like mathematics is not neglected. Mathematics may seem the most remote of subjects from moral concern, but it need not be treated entirely in that way. To take a simple example, the concepts of equality and equity have equivalents in the mathematical notions of equation and proportion. Equations deal with equals, while equity is a proportional notion. This is not an idle observation. The use of such mathematical equivalents can help us to resolve problems of a moral nature when quantification and calculation are required.

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