Moral Autonomy and Moral Training

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The popular belief that school teachers should leave students free to choose their own moral values is both misleading and indefensible. This paper shows why, and concludes that early formation of moral habits is indispensable to achieving moral agency and moral autonomy.

Dans le domaine de l'enseignement moral, certaines théories devenues populaires se révèlent, à l'étude, à la fois indéfendables et propres à induire en erreur. Cet article met en question l'une de ces théories les plus répandues, à savoir qu'on doit laisser aux élèves la liberté de choisir leurs propres valeurs morales. Nous nous proposons de montrer en quoi ce raisonnement est insoutenable. La formation d'habitudes morales est un prérequis indispensable à l'exercice de l'autonomie morale.

Teachers are often heard to make remarks of the following kind: "I simply teach my students a method by which they can clarify the moral values they already have, but I always leave it up to them what values they choose" or "I merely present the facts of the case as objectively as possible, but I never impose on students my moral judgment about the facts; instead I leave it to them to make up their own minds, to make their own moral judgment." We believe that this way of thinking about moral "formation" of the young — a way which trades on a too rigid separation of fact and value, of moral content and moral form, and a resultant fetish about the neutrality of the teacher in moral education — is mistaken. In order to advance our claims about moral autonomy and moral training it will be first necessary to examine the meaning of expressions like: (a) "my moral judgment," "imposing my moral judgment" and (b) "making up their own minds" or "making their own moral judgement" have in this context.

Moral Discourse

(a) "*My Moral Judgment*"

It seems that this expression might not only carry the sense of "judgment attributable to me" but "judgment peculiar to me." If this is so, a teacher should no doubt be praised for trying not to influence the students to accept the teacher's moral judgment, i.e., a judgment of moral value that is thought to be unique. But what reasons are there for thinking that the domain of "moral judgment" is akin to something like that of "judgment of personal taste," that "honesty is good"

is on a logical par with "Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* enchants me?" Whereas the "my" in "my personal taste" makes sense, its meaning is strained, to say the least, in "my moral judgment." The more a judgment has the characteristics of "moral" the less exclusive and peculiar to the individual it will be. The difference between moral judgment on the one hand and taste on the other lies in the nature of the public character of the former. A moral judgment, unlike judgment of taste, must make justifiable sense to others, that is, there must be reasons upon which such judgments are based. The concept of "reasons" here is inseparable from the idea of there being publicly shared premises which support a judgment of moral value. This does not necessarily mean that a given moral judgment must be accepted by persons other than the speaker, as the reality of disagreement over moral judgments at certain levels makes plain, but it does imply that a moral judgment be "publicly warrantable, . . . that it admits of some publicly determinable procedure in virtue of which rational men *could* come to accept" (Nielson, 1986, p. 126).

It is possible, of course, that the mode of moral reasoning may yield a judgment that is unique to the individal, as, for example, in a judgment that leads to a particular act of heroism. Still, that judgment should be described as "moral" because of the public features of the premises used and of the reasoning from those premises. On the other hand, the inappropriateness of premises, their inadequacy, or the distortion in reasoning by an individual could lead to morally wrong conclusions as the celebrated case of Gordon Liddy in the Nixon administration during Watergate clearly illustrates.[1] Yet by itself this does not invalidate the classification of a judgment as "moral," i.e., as a judgment in the moral realm.

It may then be asked whether in classroom situations the teacher would be imposing his judgment of value on students if he exposed them to his argument and conclusions and invited honest discussion. Can the teacher in fact "educate" his/her students without exposing them to his premises, reasoning and conclusions as well as to the counter-charges which others may have brought against those arguments? The word imposing may be justified in the classroom when reasons for these other arguments and conclusions are not given sufficient recognition. But as long as the public character of the teacher's mode of reasoning and conclusion is evident, the terms "my moral judgment" and "imposing" are out of place.

(b) "*Making Up Their Own Minds*"

What does this expression mean in the context of moral judgment? Freedom to form one's own moral judgment is obviously not unlimited. Neither the premises nor the modes of moral reasoning are matters completely of individual choice. As Philippa Foot has pointed out:

> it is laid down that some things do, and some things do not, count in favor of a moral conclusion, . . . [and] that a man can no more decide for himself what is evidence for rightness or wrongness than he can decide what is evidence for monetary inflation or a tumour on the brain. (Foot, 1970, p. 177)

The more conscientious the moral agent is, the more he will assure himself that his moral judgments are based on sufficient situational data and on universalizable principles and values. This is not to say that alternative moral conclusions are not possible, but when they are, they must meet the criteria of being morally justifiable. Individual moral freedom is not the right to choose according to one's will, but rather the freedom *from* self-love or inclination to gratify one's own desires. Spinoza is close to the truth when he states that if one fully understands, one has no choice. He goes on to say that as long as a person remains free he has "no conception of good and evil" (Ethics, Part IV). Iris Murdoch endorses this view:

> Freedom is, I think, a mixed concept. The true half of it is simply a name of an aspect of virtue concerned especially with the clarification of vision and the domination of selfish impulse. The false and more popular half is a name for the self-assertive movements of deluded selfish will which because of our ignorance we take to be something autonomous. (Murdoch, 1970, pp. 99-100)

In light of this definition of freedom, the almost complete logical vacuity (and the possibly undesirable impact) of statements such as that in a free democratic society every individual has the right to choose his own (moral) values needs to be examined more closely.

Moral Autonomy

From what has been discussed, it should follow that in the moral realm, each individual cannot be autonomous in the sense of selecting his data, choosing his own principles and, therefore, his own conclusions. But to meet the criteria of moral thinking, every individual has to become mentally involved in the processes leading to a moral decision. In that sense, individual autonomy is a necessary condition of moral judgment. If a person automatically obeys orders and does actions almost reflexively, he is not a participant in moral life. Of course even here, if the person has concerned himself with the rightness of accepting the judgment of those giving him orders or advice, he could, in an extended sense, be said to be a "moral" agent. It is not only conceivable, but probable, that many members of a community who consider rightly that they are unable to look at all the relevant premises and data on the situation and engage in moral reasoning, accept moral judgments on the authority of others. This is no more undesirable than many members of a community accepting scientific and medical judgments on the authority of those most knowledgeable in relevant fields, like nutrition, radiation dangers, and so on. Nevertheless, conditions of free and critical discussion in a community are necessary if the moral judgments of individuals and institutions considered authoritative are to be guarded against becoming self-serving and authoritarian.

Autonomy is a necessary condition not only of moral decision but also of expressing that decision in moral action. But it is not sufficient for "moral agency." According to Aristotle, three conditions must be met: The agent "must have knowledge; the agent must choose the acts and choose them for their own

sakes; action must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character'' (Ethics, BK II, Chapter 4). If one cannot but act, or not act voluntarily, such ''action'' does not belong to the moral domain. What impinges on this voluntary condition of moral action has to be carefully examined in planning programs for moral education. Any such program will be incomplete that does not incorporate moral training of children aimed at the development of firm character. If a naive dichotomous division between education and indoctrination can confuse the connotation of moral autonomy and freedom, a similar naivete in drawing the line between free rational action and conditioned acts can lead to a lack of emphasis on moral training. Morality is as much an issue of behaving as it is of thinking and choosing. The goals of moral education need therefore to include preparation of young people to act in moral ways as well as developing the process of thinking morally and making intelligent moral decisions.

Moral Training

In a significant though often overlooked passage, R.M. Hare refers to the ''close connection'' between ''the form of morality and its content'' (1964, p. 62) and points out that in *practice* it is impossible to pass on the form without ''embodying it in some content,'' i.e., in concrete moral principles ''which we think in themselves desirable.'' This, he affirms, does not amount to indoctrination provided it is the teacher's intention to have students in the end come to appraise the principles for themselves. ''We can [then] happily start by securing the adherence of our children — if necessary by non-rational methods — to the moral principles which we think best, provided that these are consistent with the form of morality . . .'' (p.62-63). This adherence of children to moral principles and rules is crucial to their early moral formation, the essence of which is the cultivation of appropriate habits of action in situations of their daily lives. For it is by means of habit that moral virtues or character develop. Habit, says Aristotle, is but long practice that becomes our nature in the end (Ethics, BK VII). We become just by practice, or repeatedly doing just acts, temperate by temperate acts, and so on (Ethics, BK II). Habitual acts and attitudes are not identical to conditioned ones, the difference lying in the respective intentions. That the responses of a moral agent to situations may be at many times almost automatic or characteristic does not entail a lack of moral autonomy. As Nowell-Smith has pointed out:

> What I do will depend on my character; and this . . . is not a lamentable restriction on my freedom of action. For to say that my choice depends on my character is not to say that my character compels me to do what I do, but to say that the choice was characteristic of me (Nowell-Smith, 1954, pp. 287-88).

What Hare meant by ''non-rational methods'' is not exactly what Plato, for example, claimed to be the most influential approach in the development of a moral sense and of strength of will in children. Plato emphasized the moral influence of good music and good art. But both Hare and Plato obviously realized

the importance of environment and, in the case of Hare in particular, of adult example in moral upbringing. Environment, example, and experience, i.e., having opportunities to help others in need or less fortunate, are preeminently non-rational methods of moral training.[2] In this environment must be featured a set of basic moral rules or principles, the firm but consistent urging of children to following these rules (with the use, if necessary, of reward and reprimand) and an ethos of steady and enduring affection and concern. By learning to follow the rules of morality, children will begin to sense or feel what moral life is about. A fuller grasp of morality, its rules and principles involves in the end being able to apply principles to appropriate situations in life and that, in turn, calls for judgment. Thus the formation of a moral judgment capability is rooted in the early routines of moral training and rule-following. In the practical context, then, moral rules form the basis of both moral virtue (and action) and moral judgment.

The development of needed habituation of children to rule-following is significantly aided by adult example. What this seems to involve is an expression of moral living by adults through words and deeds which demonstrate a constant and consistent commitment to principles such as honesty, fairness, and compassion. Of course this must be shown in front of children, as it were, so that they may observe and (it is to be hoped) be encouraged and inspired to imitate what they see parents and others who matter to them are doing, thinking, and feeling. As Hare pointed out, "We have to start sharing with our children, quite early on, the secrets of our moral thought" (Hare, 1979, p. 99). Parents especially "should not . . . keep their children in the dark about their feelings" (p. 103) nor how their feelings are affected by the actions of others.

Conclusion

The main points made in this paper may be summarized as follows:

(1) Expressions such as "my moral judgment" and "imposing my moral judgment" are misleading and represent a lack of understanding of the public character or nature of morality;
(2) Moral agency is as much a matter of moral action as it is of moral reasoning and judgment;
(3) The formation of early moral habits is not a replacement for developing moral reasoning and judgment but an indispensable condition of it and of moral life in general;
(4) Non-rational methods of early moral training, which are not methods of indoctrination, are central to the development of moral sense including judgment and character.

Notes

1. The case of Liddy shows how a person with ostensibly good intentions can so thoroughly misread situations that his resultant moral judgment (and action) is

badly warped.

2. For a further discussion of these matters, see Kevin Ryan (1985) "Moral and Values Education" in *The international encyclopedia of education: Research and studies*, Vol. 6, pp. 3406-3413; and Kevin Ryan. The new moral education," *Phi Delta Kappan*, November 1986, pp. 228- 233.

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