

CREATING A MORAL SELF

Joanna Górnicka-Kalinowska

University of Warsaw, Poland

Abstract. The paper shows some philosophical and practical problems of moral education such as the gap between moral knowledge and moral action. It emphasizes the role of emotional dispositions and human character in building moral identity. And it articulates the criticism of Kohlbergian conception as an insufficient approach to moral education. Instead, a theory of moral deep self is proposed as a better account of the acquisition of moral guiding motivation.

Introduction

I begin with some general remarks and intuitions. By education in the most current and proper sense we mean the process of acquiring knowledge organized in certain forms: we learn in school and in university; we teach ourselves, we are taught by parents, by school teachers, or in contact with social environment. Now, this is an educational process not only in cognitive sense. It is also an experience reinforcing our will, preparing us for future professional life, while influencing the tenor of underlying human relations such as friendship or competition.

It is not the cognitive sense of education that interests me the most. As a philosopher, I am interested rather in how people grow and mature in their personal and social development from an early age to adulthood. This is also a process of education – we acquire certain moral knowledge about norms, prohibitions, and duties which make possible our life in society – but it is education of quite a particular kind. In brief, notwithstanding any epistemological similarities, moral education is not the same process as learning mathematical or natural sciences, because only the former type of knowledge influences our relations with other people. Numerous works and discussions on will, virtue, moral motives, moral

character or moral personhood, prove our great interest in such issues as: how to improve human moral character, how to form a child as a morally good person, what kind of society we want to live in, etc.

In analyzing the philosophical phenomenon of moral upbringing, it is also important to explore some purely philosophical problems. Does ethical theory, focused on educational processes, require a metaphysical ground? What kind of values and beliefs would we like to promote – or to impose – on children? Normally we ask such questions of ethical theories *tout court*. In the case of theories of moral upbringing we tend to adopt a number of normative ideas rationally accepted in our culture which underlie educational procedures, such as: an ontologically grounded idea of humanity, the idea of personal autonomy, an educational model of parents and educators, or a model of proper educational institutions.

The fact that we have moral beliefs acquired in different ways – irrespective of their metaphysical roots – is a quite natural feature of the human condition. In educational practice two things seem essential: (a) how to bridge the gap between moral ideas and moral actions and (b) how and when these moral ideas become a ground of our personal and moral identity. So we ask as moral philosophers: when does a child become moral person, governing his actions by virtuous motives? When does practical rationality turn into moral rationality? Moral education can be developed in several ways, but its task is always the same: we want to develop a morally *good person*, well integrated by a coherent body of moral ideas.

A critique of Kohlbergian theory

The classic aim of moral philosophy, and an aim of every education theory, is to transform moral knowledge into a system of motives. It is evident that we have such knowledge at a relatively early age, but it is naive to identify – as Socrates mistakenly did – moral judgement with virtue. No one believes that moral knowledge automatically brings about good actions. Moral agency and moral upbringing cannot be adequately considered without reference to such terms as weakness of will, personal identity, moral character or virtues. Does moral judgement play a significant role in motivating moral action? Where is the missing link between moral cognition and action?

Contemporary moral psychology often refers to a kind of Kohlbergian project where a moral life is considered as a developmental parallel between cognitive and affective functions.

Such a scheme, with rationalist antecedents in Kantian and Socratic philosophy, is based on a heavy reliance on the intellectual abilities of a person. On this account the person resolves difficult strategic and moral situations by engaging her logical capacity, empathetic skills and pro-social attitudes, thus coming to the level of universal moral rules at the end of moral development. However, Kohlberg's theory lacks strong educational implications because he does not say how to provide motivation to act morally. He does not explain how our natural cognitive and emotional competencies are formed; he does not say either if we can count on them in every situation. It is almost as if the problem of moral evil does not exist – independently of what we mean by it at any stage of personal development. In the Kohlbergian scheme moral evil would appear merely as some kind of lack: lack of hedonic reactions, lack of empathetic abilities, incapacity of thinking in civic terms, or lack of understanding of highest universal moral principles. So, believing that moral development is the natural, inevitable phenomenon resulting from natural, emotional and intellectual development of the person, Kohlberg presents some kind of naturalism. However, he forgets that there are other psychological, also natural phenomena, such as weakness of will, moral indifference or aggression, which can be harmful for morality. That is a real concern of moral educators. The Kohlbergian scheme does not indicate how to resolve essential educational dilemmas: how to pass from moral conviction to action. All decisions made from the perspective of Kohlberg's stages 1 - 4 are strategic, and the fact that two last stages involve the moral reasoner's respect for certain values does not mean that they have a special motivational force. The cognitive skill of reversibility, the ability of putting oneself into another's place (common to Kohlberg and Kant) does not correspond to proper moral action; nor does it evoke a deep feeling of duty. It is also not clear that respect (in theory) for such values as social contract, the idea of life, the idea of greatest good for the greatest number, or the idea of liberty, incline anyone to right activity at the expense of his private pleasures. Kohlberg does not tell much about the agent's emotional reaction to transgression of moral rules – such as sentiments of guilt or shame.

Moral philosophy has always been a big educational utopia – in the best sense of the term. Its essential problem is to find the proper significance of *good*

and to show the way to practise it. Normative projects which indicate moral goals without indicating how to achieve them are useless from an educational point of view. The greatest moralists – Aristotle, Kant, Hume, Mill – explored individual character skills and tried to examine to what degree general norms can influence our real actions. They attempted to find a way to shape human character in view of moral excellences. Aristotle analysed in a very detailed way the process of passing from moral conviction – through taking decision, the force of will, stability of character, virtuous dispositions – to moral action. Kant was aware of the resistance of sensuality to moral aims; he was also aware of fact that overcoming this resistance in the name of autonomous will is a difficult, quite individual process requiring the force of will and purely moral motive. Hume examined the very nature of emotions inclining people to moral actions and analysed the different motives of our choices. Mill tried to show that associating virtue with pleasure leads to virtuous actions. All these projects to a great degree individualized the human subject, indicating psychological space where the individual moral development can take place.

The Kohlbergian theory does not give this possibility. On that theory we do not know much about the subject of moral life, except the fact that the human being is theoretically capable of resolving some moral dilemma in a natural way. On Kohlberg's account this occurs by means of a special logic corresponding to the individual's level of cognitive-affective development. At the lower stages of such development our motivations are rather simple: they have a hedonic and strategic character. What Benhabib has termed the „generalized other” – is common to the approaches of Kant and Kohlberg. It is an attempt to imitate socially accepted personal patterns and is also strategic. But the question remains: Why and how might the empathetic skill of putting oneself in others' position motivate a person to proper moral action? We can easily imagine a cruel and malevolent activity based on this competence – simply aiming to harm to other people. It is not clear either that adopting such social values as civic obedience or respect for law enable us to bring about morally good results. It is not clear why or how the idea of life protection, liberty, or *summum bonum* for the greatest number, can have a big motivational force. In Kohlberg's theory the fact that we accept universal moral values at stage 6 because they are the part of our civilization does not grant the theory's application in social life. Recognition of universal values and their philosophical promotion by great critical moral consciences (Socrates,

Ghandi) indicates only the desirable direction of our activity. I do not deny that Kohlbergian theory contains many interesting and philosophically attractive claims, but we cannot on this basis answer the key question of how to construe the theory of human selfhood. This task has to be a real object of educational efforts - where moral conscience remains an open space for pedagogical deeds. Though the Kohlbergian scheme is generally a formal one, rarely referring to concrete moral ideas – in describing the sixth stage of moral development Kohlberg indicates some important values, such as freedom, respect for persons, justice and certain utilitarian ideas.

Contemporary critics of Kohlberg's theory propose to divide moral life into 4 interacting components: moral sensibility (evaluating situations in terms of consequences of our action on others), moral judgement (cognitive skill to recognize the rightness of action), moral motivation (priority of moral concern over utilitarian goals) and moral character (self-regulatory capacities to make decisions in the same way in similar situations) (Nunner-Winkler, 2007, pp. 399-414).

The separation (at least in theory) of these fields of our moral life abandons a mechanistic structure of moral development in Piaget-Kohlberg style and formulates instead quite a simple claim based on everyday observation. On this latter account people may be seen to differ in many aspects: in moral knowledge, in level of moral motivation, or of moral sensibility. And such characteristics should not be tied into some close parallel to intellectual development. Educational practice can concern each and all of such characteristics. This was pointed out by Aristotle, who called attention in his *Nicomachean Ethics* to cognitive elements in morality: to *phronesis* (or practical reason), to force of will (resistance to passions), or to shaping our character. The term *will* was a fundamental *novum* in his theory, in opposition to Socratic naive intellectualism, because at least the act of will highlights the importance of decision in moral action (alongside moral knowledge), and the *will* also individualizes moral persons. We know the normative content of moral rules or virtues – the main goal of moral education – because they are the core of our civilization, but the individual choice, an effect of our self-government or even useful strategy, is always an action that is profoundly personal; its moral value calls for a demanding act of evaluation. This effort of overcoming one's weakness, independently of the content of moral rules, is well described in Aristotle's analysis of *akrasia*. Therefore, in reproaching people for a poor relation between their moral beliefs and actions we address, so to speak,

every person separately. In most cases we criticize a person for lacking a strong moral will and for lacking a critical self-evaluation. In acts of will one articulates her auto-reflexivity, self control or self-governance.

Moral identity and the question of *will*

It is difficult to consider moral education without engaging with the idea of the moral identity of the person, where the cognitive skills, moral reasoning, emotions, and character states are inescapably related, and structurally interwoven. Even admitting for the purposes of analysis that the moral life can be divided into different parts: motives, character, virtues, moral knowledge which are formed in the process of moral upbringing, we can interpret it as a sort of narration of succeeding holistic stages of educational process. However, we must not forget that: (1) our moral experience is essentially personal, notwithstanding the social context of human experience; and (2) persons differ from each other in their capacity for auto-reflexivity, or critical self-understanding. As Thomas Nagel points out, we are functioning in two orders: the natural one (predictable emotional reactions, acquired moral rules or trained character) and the *noumenal* order, where the uniqueness of one's moral acts and decisions depends on non-transparent acts of will, possible, if at all, only by a profound self-reflection and by the image of one's own person (Nagel, 1989). These two perspectives are put together in moral life, but only one of them can be the subject of discursive analysis.¹

The first gives us the possibility to discuss the content of normative systems of values, to consider strategies of reacting to the external world and to work on proper pedagogical training resulting in learned, para-moral reactions on social situations. The second is the first-person perspective of our deep experiences, conditioned by our individual view on the world; it is also the experience of moral comfort, moral effort or moral motivations sometimes easily given up for personal benefit. Therefore, in an educational process we should try to influence not only the person in her *natural* para-moral functioning but also to influence her non-transparent experience of will, the very core of her *self-identity*.

¹ Discursive analysis, or so-called scientific approach, generally concerns visible and predictable aspects of human behaviour - which we can compare in different persons. The moral phenomena, always lived from 1-person perspective are subjective, like psychological states or cartesian *cogito*.

Bernard Williams points out the uniqueness of human *self* in his essay 'Persons, character, morality' (Williams, 1981). He criticizes two classic modern conceptions of morals (Kantianism and utilitarianism) for lacking the precise idea of personal identity. According to Williams, these theories are incapable of showing the way we pass from moral convictions or moral commands (and not from indications of how to realize a life plan (Rawls) or how to adapt to social life) to real moral actions.

A man who has such a ground project will be required by utilitarianism to give up what is required in a given case just if that conflicts with what he is required to do as an impersonal utility maximizer when all the causally relevant considerations are in. That is a quite absurd requirement. (ibid., p. 14)

The Kantian position is not much better. As Williams says:

...impartial morality, if the conflict really does arise, must be required to win, and that cannot necessarily be a reasonable demand on the agent. There can come the point at which it is quite unreasonable for a man to give up in the name of the impartial good ordering of the world of moral agents, something which is a condition of his having any interest in being around in the world at all. (ibid., p. 14)

Williams' conclusion is clear: we are so different regarding internal moral structure that it is impossible to adopt an abstract Kantian vision of personal identity. And he draws the same conclusion for the moral subject as a more or less passive receiver of pleasant states in utilitarian theory. Neither the principle of maximisation of pleasure nor that of transparent anonymity in impartial and impersonal morality are adequate in understanding the particularity of moral thinking and reasoning in determining our decisions. We are not interchangeable, because we differ regarding our desires, life projects, characters or moral luck. Criticising Parfit's theory, Williams observes that the narrative moral uniqueness of every human being is a quite personal experience, irreducible to natural facts, such as satisfaction of desires, or to or being governed by the rules of practical rationality (Rawls). Narrativity of our self and of moral experience cannot just be divided into temporal segments, such as our past or future selves. It is always one's own life's perspective, embracing past and future, although viewed from the actual moment. According to Parfit, there is not any metaphysical personal identity. We are living our life as continuous due to the continuity of memory; our present and past states of mind are only *connected*. But as moral educators we must treat human

life as metaphysical, unconditional unity (fluency) in time. So it is necessary for pedagogical purposes to accept a philosophical idea of personal identity.

Williams' researches have provided valuable insights, not least the idea of not letting morality be reduced to natural facts. But here I want expand the analysis of the importance of *will* by raising further questions and calling on further philosophical perspectives in pursuing these questions. The questions are particularly important from an educational standpoint. They include: Apart from their strategic dimension what specific character do moral motives have? When and how do moral reasons turn into moral motives? How is moral character formed and what does it depend on? The sources I wish to draw on in addressing these questions include Harry Frankfurt, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Daniel Dennett and Anette Baier.

The importance of self-reflective capability

Frankfurt, in his two-level construction of his theory, gives a response to at least some of these questions by referring to the concept of will. This concept doesn't refer to natural, hedonic attitudes such as *wantonness*, but to second order volitions, whereby first order desires are shaped in the act of free will. It is also helpful here to recall an important distinction in Wittgenstein's *Notebooks 1914-1916*. His notion of *will* appears when defining a human agent, maybe only in a *first person* position. According to Wittgenstein, being a subject of thinking is not as sure as being a subject of will. Wittgenstein distinguishes between *will* as a phenomenon dependent on other phenomena, whether psychological, biological or physical, and *transcendental will* as conscious activity, that is the *bearer of the ethical*. In his *Philosophical Investigations* wanting is clearly separated from will as a moving force. 'The world is given, but my will enters in it from outside' (Wittgenstein, 1961, p. 74e) also 'Wishing is not acting, but will is acting' (ibid., p. 89e).

According to Wittgenstein, our wanting is not an activity, it is a sort of passive experience. Our will, on the contrary, is a real activity. *Will* in an ethical sense ('transcendental will') is the bearer of good and bad; phenomenal will is simply an ability to command our limbs (Tagebucher, 171, PW 216). In Wittgenstein, moral activity of the *will* and the dependence of *wanting* on the natural world, seems to be a good analogy to Frankfurt's theory of the hierarchical subject. According to Frankfurt, humans have a capacity for reflexive self-evaluation manifested in so called *second order desires*. In order to be a person one must identify with one's

freely chosen desires – desires to have or not to have different *first order* desires (spontaneous, non-reflexive *wants*). A decision made from the level of *second order* desires engages our will while deliberating about our motivations, thus moving us to action. So Frankfurt describes human beings who are incapable of dealing with second-order desires as *wantons*, in opposition to *persons*. We become persons through the acts of normative moral will. In the theory of Wittgenstein it is *transcendental* (ethical) will, as primary to will *tout court*, that is responsible, for example, for moving a hand to eat one's dinner.

Affirming moral order in one's own life is solely a matter of *will*, an element external to the simple desires of a trifler (a *wanton* in Frankfurtian theory). According to Frankfurt, the essential psychological feature enabling a searching analysis of ourselves is self-relexivity, manifested in higher-order acts of *will*. Frankfurt likes Descartes's philosophy, so we can understand why self-reflective consciousness is for him a concept that is particularly important and useful. The ability to examine our own conscious acts and decisions is in Frankfurt's philosophy a way to gain distance from oneself and the basis for a better, impartial account of our behaviour. If we were to determine the identity of *wanton* (in Frankfurt's theory a *wanton* person is a human acting in nonreflexive way, according to his spontaneous desires), the description would involve relatively simple psychological structures subordinated to natural desires, and lacking moral motives. The description would identify a being with anthropological features, but not moral ones. Perhaps such a being could be trained, but it would make little sense to speak of moral education in this context. Such a 'training' is surely not what moral educators would like to achieve, even if society felt better with this outcome than without it.

The naturalistic description of *wantonness* cannot properly be applied to moral beings with *self-reflective* abilities. Only from the level of second-order volitions can our intentions be directed towards moral plans that we can consciously put at the core of our psychologically and morally integrated life plan. Frankfurt does not care much about the content of normative desires, but he emphasises a distance between phenomenal and noumenal sides of our lives. Auto-reflective self-consciousness examines critically what's naturally non-reflective and spontaneous in us. We shape our acts of will from the level of *moral self* – regardless of particular moral content forming its basis – to achieve conformity between our actions and our ideals. The human who is strongly distanced from his simple

desires becomes more fully a person through acts of will that engage with normative ideas. Frankfurt's theory goes back to a Cartesian idea, unfortunately with all its imperfections for moral philosophy. Frankfurts's work continually emphasises the importance of will. It is not only a disposition of reason or senses, but also a part of something extremely important for morality: *self-reflection*. While Kohlberg bases his idea of development of morality on the concept of intellectual development, the idea of *self*, understood as a field of possible pedagogical deeds, is based on a deeper understanding of the *psychological structure* of human being.

An insight by Daniel Dennett will prove useful here. He points out six elements constituting the psychological structure of moral personhood. According to Dennett, only a fully developed self can bear responsibility; but for this to happen one has to be a human person, capable of interacting morally. Firstly, one has to be a rational being (Kant, Rawls, Aristotle). Secondly, one has to be a physical being capable of experiencing conscious states and acting intentionally (Strawson). Thirdly, one has to be able to relate to this being in some way or another, e.g. by adopting a stance of respect. Fourthly, the object toward which this personal stance is taken must be able to reciprocate (Strawson, Rawls, the Golden Rule). Fifthly, she has to be able to communicate verbally; this condition is presupposed silently by all social contract hypotheses. It also eliminates animals from moral world, creatures incapable of abstract thinking. Sixthly, and most importantly, a *person* has to be able to experience *self-reflective* states (Anscombe, Frankfurt) (Dennett, 1976).

Only the sixth condition makes one a moral person. Apparently the concept of *moral person* is for Dennett the fundamental condition of ethics. He emphasises the transition from a metaphysical theory of person to the view of person as a responsible agent. The first three conditions are necessary, but not sufficient. We can imagine physical, conscious, rational beings, working in an intentional way, but they are not necessarily human persons. Even plants can be described as *rationally* and *intentionally* directing their growth towards sunlight. But is not the fourth condition – the ability to reciprocate feelings – typical for humans? According to Dennett, intelligent animals (god, chimpanzees) apparently are able to feel others' intentions, needs and desires, therefore they can also formulate second order projections like 'I think X needs y', eventually 'X expects z'. Here there is nothing more than strategic expectations, calculated for some beneficial result. (A dog gives his master a paw not from respect for his needs – like the

companionship of an obedient animal – but because it wants to receive its favourite food). Therefore we are left with a fifth condition – the ability to verbalize intentions and reflections about other people's thoughts and desires. Even here Dennett hesitates: is every verbal statement deeply intentional? Can't we imagine acts of communication as manipulation, lies and intentional misleading? However, the deep essence of communication is the honest message and according to Dennett and Anscombe verbalization of our convictions is also a form of honest interior dialogue with oneself. Looking at the sixth condition of being a moral person, the ability to gain distance from oneself, Dennett concludes that at the same time the ability to convince ourselves about certain reasons should be a part of our moral silhouette, or at least of our intentional system of desires. He argues that we take part in a specific inner game of 'questions and answers' which should lead us to full understanding of our own arguments and decisions. Therefore, the fifth condition, the ability to verbalise our thoughts and intentions, is itself the basis of self-reflectivity and of the internal dialogue preceding moral choice. So, on Frankfurt's analysis, a Cartesian first person self-consciousness becomes a structure upon which the idea of responsibility can be founded.

Annette Baier goes even further; she shows how Cartesian distance from one's conscious content can shape moral archetypes. She is not emphasising the verbalisation of convictions, or even the game of 'questions and answers', as much as acquiring in childhood such competence in internal language as makes creating ideal models of action psychologically possible.

Being conscious is not enough to make a (moral) person. For that we need Cartesian consciousness of ourselves and our place in the world, not merely consciousness of the stimuli relevant to what in fact is self-maintenance in that world (...) Both our goals and our beliefs, even those which concern satisfaction of our animal needs, take a form which animal intentional states could not take. Unlike animals we have the concepts of self and others, of presence and absence. (Baier, 1985, p. 88)

So, according to Baier, to become a moral person is to embark on a path of verbalisation. Without language self-knowledge would be impossible. This is not knowledge about the natural world – the knowledge of hunger, danger or what differentiates us from others – but self-consciousness built upon it: the self-reflective basis for *moral will*. In the beginning, a child learns simple relations with others using pronouns like *I, you, we, they*. By participating in a discourse, operating with images of oneself and others, he gradually achieves a state of

self-consciousness of Cartesian type. According to Baier, learning the pronoun 'you' plays a crucial role in distancing from oneself. Criteria once used for self-evaluation are being transformed into criteria used interpersonally; the child is feeling that he is a part of community bound by an internal system of mutual obligations. Before we get to be first-person (for ourselves) and third-person (for others) we are in this particular sense *second-person* – says Baier. Two messages fit in this Cartesian rhetoric. Firstly, the structure of internal dialogue allows us to gain distance from oneself and to examine ourselves from a point of view of a system of values rooted in society. Secondly, using the second-person pronoun (Baier) allows us to construct a model of ideal person as a part of community. By virtue of this particular duplication of consciousness, I am at the same time myself – a natural being with a set of particular desires – and idealised other (Mead): I am me and you. Maybe right choices are being made from *your* point of view, but in reality it is *I* who chooses. This is a slight departure from Frankfurt's idea, who does not see a need to grammatically verbalise the distance between second-order and our own, spontaneous desires: so to speak, between *you*, represented by second order desires which are often socially accepted normative projects, and *me*. Maybe the game between imagination and moral commitments is sufficient.

On this analysis, Frankfurt's 'second order volitions' (with resonances of Wittgenstein's transcendental will) that are made possible by self-reflective consciousness constitute the field of acts of the conscious moral will. But how is such conscious moral will shaped? How can we influence it? That is the problem of moral educators: how to transform moral aspirations generated in didactic processes into motives and acts of will.² Grounding moral upbringing on the concept of *self*, understood as self-reflective psychological structure, provides a promising orientation for addressing the problem. Such an orientation suggests a picture of the ideal person, with moral convictions, inclinations and desires. Thanks to auto-reflexivity we can distance ourselves from our own desires while at the same time being constantly confronted with the systems of value respected by others.

² From the internalistic point of view, value judgements defining the *good* become sufficient reasons and an efficient motivational force to act; it seems, however, that this Socratic position is not very useful and effective in practical life and in educational practice. It is naive to hope that moral knowledge about the meaning of good is enough to act morally.

For moral psychology probably the easiest way to resolve all educational and moral problems is to analyse the logic of moral imperatives and to follow feelings accompanying choices, because these structures are based in culture, somatic to some extent (emotions), and statistically susceptible to interpretation. Unfortunately the nature of self-reflective *ego* is a tougher material, only accessible to the moral agent. She is the only subject aware of the extent of the moral distance from her desires and of the transition from simple wants to the level of Wittgensteinian transcendental *will*. But even this psychological phenomenon can be shaped. For Annette Baier the only good educational perspective is a dialogue with a child developing his reflective self. Through the dialogue we teach a child his being in a world of other humans and we teach him how to respect other people's needs and desires.

Correspondence

Joanna Górnicka-Kalinowska, Insitute of Philosophy, University of Warsaw, Krakowskie Przedmieście 3, 00-047 Warsaw, Poland, e-mail: joangornicka@uw.edu.pl

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