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Values clarification and moral education

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Are traditional foundational disciplines adequate to the educational experiences they analyze?

Moral education and moral choice

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A question of continuing importance for the foundations of education is whether the traditional foundational disciplines are adequate to the educational experiences they help us analyze. Of course, this is not just a concern of educators; researchers in foundational areas are also led, at least occasionally, to ask how adequate their methods are for the analysis of human experience generally. But the question seems more persistent and bothersome for educators who use the methods of philosophy and the social sciences to understand educational experiences. Somehow the greater need to connect theory with educational practice makes the question of methodological adequacy more immediate for the educational researcher, who can't as easily push this concern into the background or wait for another generation of research before translating theory into practice.

Certainly it is more convenient to push concern for method into the background and get on with the research at hand, for such problems are perennially troublesome and usually tied into classical philosophical paradoxes that defy quick resolution. One such paradox that is especially troublesome in education generally and particularly puzzling in moral education is the individual/collective relationship mentioned by Professor Klohr in his essay "Emerging Foundations for Curriculum Theory."[1]

Most people concerned with moral education are familiar with the individual/collective dilemma in terms of two beliefs that seem to work in opposition to one another. On the one hand, we assert that actions which can be judged as moral or immoral necessarily involve individual choice. As moral agents, we can be neither praised nor blamed if we have no degree of choice or control over our decisions and actions; one of the defining characteristics of actions that we call "moral" is just this fact of individual responsibility. Ethical theories which focus on this factor of individual responsibility and duty share a Kantian emphasis on the formal aspects of moral decisions.

But there is obviously more to moral decision than individual duty and private choice. We must also assert that moral decisions are influenced by circumstances outside the individual, circumstances that are connected with the time and place of choice, with specific rather than formal factors, with the history of the individual as it is situated between past experiences and expectations for the future.

Moralists of the utilitarian persuasion would, in fact, calculate just such factors to the point of explaining how an individual is most likely to decide a moral question. Their emphasis on the collective or social side of the relationship aligns them rather clearly with the methods and emphasis of the social sciences. It is in this apparent conflict between Kantian or formalistic ethical theories and their utilitarian or naturalistic counterparts that we find one source of difficulty for the moral educator concerned with the foundations of his field.

For example, if the moral educator looks to philosophy to clarify this relationship between individual choice and social influence, he finds that the problem gets worse before it gets better. Philosophers in this century, with a few notable exceptions, have regarded moral decisions as matters of private preference and individual feeling. They have preserved the necessarily individual aspect of morality, but only at the cost of putting most moral questions beyond reasonable discussion and public evaluation. The result for moral educators has too often been one of reducing their task to helping students clarify their individual values, and while this is a worthy vocation, it just begins to scratch the surface of the process of moral choice and value formation. For such clarification must ignore the social nature of morality; moral consensus becomes little more than the tabulation of private interests. After individual value preferences have been clarified, the teacher must indeed be ready to move on quickly to the next topic of discussion; modern subjectivist theories of morality offer little help on the tough issues that logically follow individual clarification.

The moral educator can turn to the social sciences for help in understanding how external factors condition moral choice, for the social sciences seem to concentrate on exactly those social or external factors that the values clarification approach tends to ignore. But that strength in explaining how and why people choose and act as they do comes to the social sciences at its own high cost. For the conclusion that seems implicit in most social science research is that external factors **determine** individual decisions and actions; the moral responsibility that educators seek to enhance turns out to be an illusion. From a social science perspective, actions can be explained and even predicted, but in the course of such research we seem to remove the action being studied from the realm of morality. That is, we can hardly praise or

blame a person for "having made a choice" if that person has had a choice in the same way that Skinner's hen has had an egg.[2]

So far in this analysis I have stretched the opposing poles of the individual/collective paradox, simplifying each position and ignoring those developments in philosophy and the social sciences which have worked to mitigate the split. Unfortunately, such developments tend to fall outside the mainstream of the various foundational disciplines, so that it is usually quite difficult for educators to get in touch with them. This seems to me to explain why those curriculum theorists called Reconceptualists often look outside mainstream social science and sometimes to disciplines like literature and art for redirection; they deliberately seek out researchers working on the fringes or crossing disciplinary lines in order to reconceptualize problems that have resisted traditional solutions. Thus we might say that even though some philosophers and social scientists have begun to address the individual/collective paradox and have uncovered some promising directions for resolution, the paradox is still very much with us. And it proves to be especially debilitating in moral education, which has at its center the problematic relationship between individual choice and determining social circumstances.

One philosopher and social theorist whose recent work may be helpful to moral educators is Jurgen Habermas. For a variety of reasons, his work is not generally known in this country, although it is widely read in his own country of Germany and throughout Europe.

Habermas' work is admittedly difficult, especially for those with a philosophical background in the Anglo-American tradition of empiricism. Moreover, those works by Habermas that have been translated into English for the most part do not address educational questions directly. His most widely known work, **Knowledge and Human Interests,** is in fact a critique of positivism. And the education-oriented essays of **Toward a Rational Society** focus on problems of the German educational system during the 1960's and thus resist quick application to educational problems in this country.

But perhaps it is this very foreignness that makes Habermas' work significant to the problems of ethical theory and moral education. For with his philosophical roots in Continental philosophy, especially in the works of Hegel and Marx, Habermas has been able to bring new light to the individual/collective paradox that has defied so many Anglo-American researchers. This is not to say that Habermas avoids or rejects philosophers and researchers in our tradition; he has, in fact, been influenced by philosophers as diverse as the American pragmatist Charles Sanders Peirce and the British analyst John L. Austin. He is also conversant with social science research from Max Weber to Jane Loevinger and Lawrence Kohlberg.

In fact the one translated essay by Habermas that directly addresses the problem of educational foundations is a critique and reconstruction of Kohlberg's theory of cognitive moral development.[3] That theory, which has gained some popularity among moral educators, posits six stages which form a hierarchy of qualitative-distinct ways of deciding moral questions and, thus, of guiding moral action. On the basis of 20 years of investigation, Kohlberg has found that a child passes through a number of discrete and invariant stages of moral development, moving from an ego-centric basis for de-

Chart 1

EXPLANATION OF THE STAGES OF MORAL CONSCIOUSNESS (KOHLBERG)

Cognitive Presuppositions	Stages of Moral Consciousness	Idea of the good and proper life	Sanctions	Range
IIa Concrete-operational Thought	1. punishment-obedience orientation	1. maximization of pleasure through obedience	Punishment (deprivation of physical rewards)	natural and social environment (undifferentiated)
	2. instrumental hedonism	2. maximization of pleasure through exchange		
IIb Concrete-operational Thought	3. good-boy orientation	3. concrete morality through gratifying interaction	Shame (deprivation of love and social recognition)	primary reference to persons or groups
	4. law and order orientation	4. concrete morality of an internalized normative system		members of the political community
III Formal-operational Thought	5. social-contractual legalism	5. civil liberty and public welfare	Guilt (reaction of the conscience)	citizenship as such
	6. ethical-principle orientation	6. moral freedom		private persons as such

Source: Lawrence Kohlberg, "From Is to Ought," in Theodore Mischel, ed., *Cognitive Development and Epistemology* (New York, 1971), Table 1, Definition of Moral Stages.

[3] Reported in Dick Howard, "Moral Development and Ego Identity: A Clarification," *Telos*, 27: p. 179.

cision through a later adherence to social conventions to a more reflective or "post-conventional" stage. (See Chart 1) As we might expect from Kohlberg's labels, most people reach the third or fourth stage of cognitive moral development and remain there for most of their lives. Only a few, Socrates or Jesus or Martin Luther King, for example, seem to attain the broad universal principles of Stage Six.

On the basis of this theory, Kohlberg has developed an approach to moral education that pushes students to higher levels of moral development, primarily through the use of ethical dilemmas. Thus, a student at Stage Two is presented in classroom discussion with a fictional ethical situation that demands a more comprehensive analysis than is available within Stage Two reasoning. For example, a student is asked to formulate a course of action for an impoverished husband who is tempted to steal the expensive medicine his wife needs to survive. Such a fictional situation helps the student to realize that individual needs and desires may compete with or be over-ridden by agreed-upon conventions. Kohlberg carefully sets up the terms of each fictional dilemma so that the student is forced to look beyond his stage of moral development in order to arrive at a satisfactory resolution. The student may be forced to move from an egocentric Stage Two decision to a Stage Three fear of punishment or towards a Stage Four refusal to show disrespect for the laws against theft. Confronting these dilemmas and examining possible resolutions is supposed to foster the cognitive development of students in relation to these ethical questions.

We should note how Kohlberg defends this approach from the twin dangers of indoctrination and subjectivism. First, his approach concentrates on the form of the moral judgment rather than the content; it also demands a classroom atmosphere of dialogue and mutual respect. This emphasis on form and interaction among students and teacher lessens the likelihood the teacher or the student's peers will impose their moral decisions on the individual student and thereby deny him the opportunity

to make his own moral choice. Secondly, Kohlberg contends that the greater comprehensiveness of the latter stages of his hierarchy provides an objective progression in the **structure** if not in the content of ethical judgments and moral explanations. Thus the value neutrality or subjectivity of the values clarification approach, for example, is replaced in Kohlberg's curriculum with a **formal** objectivity.

There is much more to Kohlberg's theory of moral development, and much of it is helpful and convincing. But one quickly notices the Kantian emphasis in Kohlberg's theory, especially as it focuses on the cognitive factors involved in moral decisions and actions. Kohlberg has indeed preserved individual choice through the various stages of moral development, but seems to ignore those factors that seem external and non-cognitive, factors that have been analyzed in great detail by the social sciences.

Kohlberg's justification for proceeding in this manner is that the cognitive aspects of moral development are the most important factor we have so far discovered. He would admit that non-cognitive and utilitarian factors influence moral decisions, but he holds little hope for connecting internal and external factors, or individual and social perspectives, beyond the limited connections now made in Chart I.

So, as valuable as Kohlberg's research and interpretations have been, we are still left with the unresolved dilemma of individual choice in a world that is unavoidably social. We have not been able to approach the strict standard that Robert Paul Wolff sets forth in his analysis of Kantian ethics:

> ... an adequate foundation for moral theory requires some coherent way of understanding men's actions **both** as causally determined, predictable, natural events **and** as rationally initiated, policy-directed actions. None of the familiar dodges, relaxations of the conflict, or reinterpretations designed to dissolve the problem will do. . . . If any sense is to be made of responsibility and action, then one and the same bit of behavior which can be explained physiologically, predicted statistically, and brought within the scope of a scientific theory must also be capable of being consistently understood as issuing from the autonomous action of practical reason.[2]

But this is precisely the challenge that Habermas takes up in his reconstruction of Kohlberg's theory. He

Chart 11

ROLE COMPETENCE AND STAGES OF MORAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Age Level	Level of Communication		Requisite Reciprocity	Stages of moral consciousness	Idea of the Good Life	Range	Philosophical Reconstruction	Age Level
I	actions and their consequences	generalized desire/aversion	incomplete reciprocity	1	maximum pleasure/minimum unpleasantness through obedience	natural and social environment		IIa
			complete reciprocity	2	ditto through exchange		naive hedonism	
II	Roles	culturally interpreted needs	incomplete reciprocity	3	concrete morality of primary groups	groups of primary reference persons		IIb
	Norm systems	(concrete duties)		4	concrete morality of secondary groups	membership in political community	thought according to ordered rules	
III	Principles	universalized desire/aversion (uses)	complete reciprocity	5	civil liberties public welfare	all as citizens	rational natural law	III
		universalized duties		6	moral freedom	all humans as private persons	formalistic ethic	
		universalized interpretation of need		7	moral and political freedom	all as members of a fictitious world society	universal linguistic ethic	

From Dick Howard, "Moral Development and Ego Identity: A Clarification," Telos 27: p. 180.

adds to the developmental psychology emphasis of Kohlberg's work a sociological dimension, one that relates the six stages to the process of socialization. By thus drawing on the work of George Herbert Mead and Talcott Parsons, among others, Habermas moves Kohlberg's theory from a monologic basis to a dialogic basis. Another way to describe Habermas' direction is in terms of the social contract theory that underlies so much of our social and political thought. Habermas would pose two questions of the familiar social contract theory that has its counterpart in Kohlberg's Fifth Stage: 1) How do moral agents entering into a social contract become responsible agents in the first place? and 2) How do the interests of individuals combine to constitute universal principles, that is, how are ethical universals formed?

From a historical perspective, both questions can be traced back to Hegel's critique of Kantian ethics. Both point to the weakness in Kohlberg's theory, and in formalistic ethics generally, namely, their static and individualistic foundation. But what is most important here is that Habermas calls our attention to the dynamic and social nature of moral development. He brings to Kohlberg's theory much-needed sociological insights into how we become aware of ourselves as agents acting in the world, into how we come to see the interaction of intentions and consequences in our actions, and of how we gradually recognize norms and the conditions for applying those norms to our decisions and actions.

Once again we must note that Habermas' reconstruction is a detailed and complicated critique, as one can see from the various columns in Chart II. But his broadening of Kohlberg's base gives moral educators a better theoretical foundation for their work in schools, one that moves beyond a static conception of already-formed individuals aligning themselves with already-established moral principles or stages. As a result, a student's question about why he can't follow his private value position and cheat on the next test need not create a crisis in the moral education curriculum. In fact, from Habermas' perspective, such a question would provide the opportunity to consider a number of important ethical issues. Rather than avoid the issue, a teacher could advance the discussion by asking the student to consider the nature of conventional classroom rules against cheating, the tension that usually exists between private interest and social welfare, and the role that the teacher often fulfills in the classroom as enforcer of society's rules and regulations.

Admittedly, these topics may prove hazardous for the moral educator. In the first place, the teacher's own role is likely to come under the scrutiny of his students. Secondly, these topics are sure to provide the teacher with more puzzling moments than are likely to occur within the supposedly neutral values clarification curriculum. The teacher might even find that simple questions, like those about cheating, lead finally to discussions concerned with things like the function of testing in the schools, a topic that seems complex no matter how advanced one's stage of cognitive development.

This last example points, however, to an additional benefit of Habermas' approach. That is, Habermas is able to posit a Seventh Stage of moral development, one that moves beyond a Kantian base in universalized duty to a basis in moral and **political** freedom. This base is dialogic and social rather than monologic and subjective. At this stage, we have more than the formal goal of Stage Six to serve as an end point for our theory of moral development. We can now consider the consequences as well as the form of our moral deliberations, we can take into account factors like human needs and welfare, and we can finally add a certain degree of content and specificity to ethical theory and moral education.

To sum up, we might say that Habermas wants to consider social and external factors without reducing ethics to a utilitarian calculation; at the same time, he wants to preserve individual choice without adopting the abstractness of ethical formalism. His efforts certainly need greater development and application, but they do offer us a view of moral education that avoids the subjective and inconsequential flavor of so much of what passes as moral education. In contrast, Habermas' reconstruction provides a basis for taking moral education seriously. It not only offers us a compelling explanation of the interactive nature of ethical universals and the interplay between individual autonomy and social constraints, but it accounts for those conditions that surround moral education and ultimately moral choice.

Notes
1. Klohr, Paul R., "Emerging Foundations for Curriculum Theory" (This issue)
2. Skinner, B.F., "On Having a Poem," **Saturday Review,** July 15, 1972, pp. 33-35.
3. Jurgen Habermas, "Moral Development and Ego Identity," **Telos,** 24: pp. 41-55. See also Dick Howard, "Moral Development and Ego Identity: A Clarification," **Telos,** 27: pp. 176-82.
4. Robert Paul Wolff, **The Autonomy of Reason** (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 217.

4