Reciprocity

The idea of reciprocity is regarded by many to be fundamental to morality. For example, it is a pivotal notion in moral traditions which accept some form of the Golden Rule, and it is reflected in those moral theories which are articulations of those traditions. It is central to many contemporary moral theories, such as John Rawls' widely acclaimed theory of justice as fairness.[1] It plays a pivotal role in the theories of moral development of Jean Piaget[2] and Lawrence Kohlberg[3]. And it has loomed large in the speculations of those sociobiologists who have tried to find biological roots for morality.[4] But one need not turn to such theories in order to see the centrality of the idea of reciprocity. It can readily be observed in conversations among children. However, as will be seen in the following discussion, reciprocity can take on many forms. In social relations reciprocity might be understood, generally, as "returning in kind." But this could include things as various as paying a debt, returning a favor, getting even, or teaching someone a lesson.

According to Piaget and Kohlberg, moral development is advanced by one's moral reasoning being thrown into "disequilibrium". The kinds of reasoning on which one has relied up to this point are seen to be inadequate to handle certain moral problems. The resolution of these problems, assuming resolution is possible, comes only after one has advanced to a more complex level of moral reasoning. Because of this, Kohlberg recommends the use of hypothetical moral dilemmas at strategic times (i.e., when students are ready to move to the next stage of moral development) as a pedogogical tool in moral education.

However, an alternative approach — one which does not rely on a stage theory of moral development — is to discuss with children situations which call for a variety of moral judgments even though no dilemma is involved. After all, moral dilemmas constitute only a small proportion of the circumstances in which most people exercise moral judgement. But, even in the absence of a moral dilemma, one often faces situations which are quite subtle and complex. Experience in dealing with these complexities and subtleties would seem to be as central to one's moral development as reflection on moral dilemmas. In any case, the following discussion is based on this alternative approach.

This was the final discussion I had with my fifth grade group from the Ransom Public Library in Plainwell, Michigan. We decided to videotape our last session at Western Michigan University. So, the entire group travelled twelve miles to "The University". Gone was our cozy room in the library. In its place was a large studio, complete with floodlights, several cameras, a microphone hanging from a boom, and a lot of complex gadgetry — a seemingly intimidating atmosphere for a group of fifth graders.

However, having seen this group in action for several months, I was confident that it would not take them long to adjust to their new environment. My main concern was that I select something which they would be able to discuss without special preparation. I told them nothing in advance about what we would discuss. I began the session by reading a selection from a passage in Lisa, the sequel to Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery.[5] In this episode Harry and Timmy go to a stamp club, where Timmy trades stamps. Then they go to an ice cream parlor. But Timmy does not have any money. So, Harry offers to buy Timmy a cone. Timmy accepts, announcing that he will buy next time. As they are leaving, someone deliberately trips Timmy. Timmy retaliates by knockng the tripper's book off the table. Then Harry and Timmy run out of the store and down the street. Later they discuss what has happened.

> "I couldn't let them get away with it," Timmy remarked when they saw they weren't being pursued and could slow down to a walk. "He didn't have to stick his foot out." Then he added, "Of course, I didn't have to do what I did either. But, like I said before, turn about is fair play."
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> "Somehow," Harry thought, "it isn't quite the same thing." But he couldn't figure out why. "I don't know," He said finally to Timmy. "The purpose of your stamp club is to exchange stamps. So, when you give someone stamps, you're supposed to get something back. Just like if someone lends me some money, I'm supposed to give it back. But if someone pulls a dirty trick on you, should you do the same thing to him? I'm not so sure."
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> "But I had to get even," Timmy protested. "I couldn't let him get away with it, tripping me like that for no reason."
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> A bit later they met Lisa and Laura. Harry told the girls what had happened and why he was puzzled. "It reminds me," remarked Lisa, "of last year when we were learning about how some sentences could be turned around and would stay true, while others, when you turned them around, would become false."
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> "Yeah," Harry agreed, "but there we found a rule. What's the rule here?" Lisa tossed her long hair so it hung over her right shoulder. "It looks like there are times when it is right to give back what we got and other times when it is wrong. But how do we tell which is which?"

PRITCHARD: Well, that's the end of the part of the story that I wanted to read; and what I'd like us to talk about is what happened in that situation and whether you think that what Timmy did was right or wrong — and why. Anybody have any ideas about that. Penny?

PENNY: I think that when somebody does something to you, you should be expecting something from them, because like the old saying, "Do unto others as they do unto you."

CARLEN: Sometimes if you were to do things back to them, then they would want to do it back to you, and it just turns out that it gets worse and worse. So, maybe its better just to ... just forget about it and let him be the child and think that it was ... that he shouldn't have done it.

CHIP: Well, sometimes when somebody does something to you to make you mad you don't even think about it or anything like that, then it's no fun for them, and it just ruins ... their play. That's what they wanted to do.

KURT: Well, if you keep letting them push you around and stuff, then they grow up to be like that and then if they used to be buddies, and you ... you may not be buddies when you grow up, and it wouldn't be so good.

PRITCHARD: So, which side are you on? Do you think that what

... what Timmy did was maybe okay — or not okay?
KURT: Yeah, it was okay.
RICK: It's okay to do something to somebody if its a nice thing and have them do it back to you; but, two wrongs don't make a right.
PRITCHARD: So, you think the difference here is that what Timmy did wasn't really nice, and what happened to him wasn't nice, but the trading of stamps and ice cream cones — those were nice?
RICK: Well, I guess it's something nice, and its a — it's a pretty good deed to do something back to him that's nice. But if it's just something wrong, then it's not a very good idea.
EMILY: I think if somebody trips me I would just walk and just ignore the person, because ... what the person really wants is attention and his friends to laugh at him and stuff like that. So I would just have walked away and not done anything.
PENNY: I agree with Emily. It would be better to walk away, because if ... you push off his books, well, he was probably expecting it, because he knew that bothered you. So, if he knew you every time he saw you, he'd probably try to trip you. So if you just walked away, then he wouldn't think it bothered you.
CARLEN: I can see how Timmy wanted to throw his books off because he could get you really mad. But you have to be able to ignore it and not be able to do it, because then ... because if he will do it, then he will keep on doing it so he will get attention.
LARRY: Well, I think he should start with the problem and tell the kid to leave you alone, because you didn't do anything to him, and he had no reason to trip you. So you should just tell him to leave you alone. That'll be the end of it, maybe, unless the kid sees that he can get a rise out of you and he just keeps on, you know, pushing farther and farther. Sometimes you do need to get even. Well, actually, there's not such thing as even, because then he'll get even.
PRITCHARD: So, what does it mean when we say, "I had to get even"? Does it really make sense?
LARRY: He didn't have to. He wanted to, but he didn't have to.

I had not expected Larry's answer. I thought he might say a bit more about his view that "there's no such thing as even", since each person will keep on trying to "even the score". But Larry made a new, and equally important, point. He made a distinction between what one has to do and what one wants to do. By challenging the claim that one must try to get even, Larry was suggesting that one cannot avoid responsibility for one's actions.

So far the discussion had focussed on the question of effective tactics as well as what it would be right or wrong to do. In determining what to do, the students recognized the importance of considering both the reasons why another might engage in aggressive behavior and the short and long term consequences of responding to that aggression in one way rather than another.

I then raised the question of how what Timmy did differed from Harry buying an ice cream cone for Timmy, with Timmy saying that he would do the same next time.

JEFF: Well, you're not hurting anybody when you buy them an ice cream cone ... Like, if someone buys you an ice cream cone, then you say you'll repay them and buy them one. Then they'll buy you one. Well, it's okay to do that. But if somebody hurts you, well, then, it's not really right to go back and hit them.
EMILY: Like, for that kind of thing, a person is giving you something that you can — you can use and you need; and that's a nice thing to do, and you should do nice ... something nice to that person to repay them. But, like, the only time you should hit a person if they hit you is to defend yourself — not to get even ... with the person.
PRITCHARD: Why do you think that the only time that you should hit somebody is to defend yourself instead of to get even? Why is there a difference there for you?
EMILY: Because, why would you want ... if you were mad at a person, then I could see why you would want to hit him but that's no reason to hit a person.
PRITCHARD: That's not a good reason, you mean?
EMILY: Uh, huh.

Emily's comment was significant. First she wondered why anyone would want to hit someone if it was not self-defense. Then she apparently realized that sometimes people do want to hit others even when it is not self-defense. So, she shifted her concern from what one might want to do to what one might have good reason for doing. That is, she shifted from the question of motivation to that of justification. Carlen picked up on Emily's concern for good reasons, or justification.

CARLEN: I agree with Emily ... When he bought him the ice cream cone, it was ... he was paying him back in a very nice way and not ... not getting back at him, but just paying him back and doing something nice. Well, it wasn't like he was pushing off his books to get back at him because he was really mad. And, like, when somebody boxes and somebody hits you in boxing, like you gotta hit back to just defend yourself.
PRITCHARD: Okay. That's a good example. Amy?
AMY: She said what I was going to say.
PENNY: I agree with those guys, too, because if you do something nice, and then you feel that, like, if somebody did something nice to me, then I'd fell bad if I didn't do something nice to them. So, I'd have to repay that back to them and that's kind of like — it's not getting even — but it's, well, it's just kind of ...
CARLEN: Doing a favor.
PENNY: Yeah! Doing a favor and paying them back and getting even is a different kind of, um, explanation.

Penny and Carlen had made an important distinction, that between repaying a favor and getting even. Both could be regarded as types of returning in kind, or paying back. But Penny and Carlen regard the latter as harmful and the former as beneficial. So, as Penny said, they have "a different kind of explanation".

PRITCHARD: Suppose that Harry and Timmy were walking along, and Timmy said, "Let's get an ice cream cone", and Harry said, "Yeah, that's a good idea". And they go into the store and Harry has money for the ice cream cone, but Timmy doesn't. And, in fact, Harry has enough money to pay for both, but Harry says, "Too bad you don't have enough money. I'm not going to get you a cone." Then Harry buys a cone and walks away with Timmy just eating the cone and Timmy doesn't have one. What should happen there? Next time should Timmy do the same thing back? What do you think, Carlen?
CARLEN: I think that Timmy would be discouraged enough. But to get a good reputation and to maybe teach Harry to do it the next time, if Timmy had enough money to buy two cones and Harry didn't have any, to buy him one.

PRITCHARD: To teach him a lesson?
CARLEN: To teach him a lesson.
PRITCHARD: Is teaching someone a lesson different from trying to get even, or is that the same thing.
CARLEN: It's different because ... I think it's different.
PENNY: If you teach them a lesson, you're not going to hurt them, and if you get even, you're gonna hurt them.
PRITCHARD: Because you got hurt in the first place?
PENNY: Yeah.

Carlen's suggestion was one that had not been made before. Instead of returning in kind in the sense of literally doing the same thing to another, one could do to another what one would want the other to have done. This is a more hypothetical form of reciprocity. Why do this? Not to "get back" at someone. Rather, it would be to teach a lesson — a lesson in more desirable reciprocal behavior. Perhaps Penny is a bit optimistic in thinking that teaching someone a lesson will never hurt them, but her point gains plausibility if it is recast in terms of intent. [Although it should be acknowledged that, for some, "teaching a lesson" is scarcely distinguishable from "getting even".]

Carlen went on to suggest another quite subtle, way of teaching a lesson. This requires refusing to meet the expectations of the aggressor. So, instead of returning in kind by hitting back, one is to return in kind in the sense that, by ignoring the aggession, the discomfort received is returned in a different form to the aggressor.

CARLEN: Something else on ... the hitting thing ... If you would just ignore them ... they're expecting you to do something back, it would be a ... they would get, like, a taste of their own medicine, because it would react on them. You're not doing anything. It would discourage them inside that you did this and they didn't do it back.
PRITCHARD: If they thought about it ...
CARLEN: Yeah.
PRITCHARD: Then they might think that way.

Since we were nearing the end of our session, I thought it would be good to try to pull our ideas together. So, I reminded the group of Penny's initial comment after I had read the passage from Lisa.

PRITCHARD: Penny, when we first started this, you said something like what we all know to be the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you'd have them do unto you." What does that rule mean when we talk about all these different examples? Does it mean different things in different situations? What do you think?
PENNY: Like, if you think about what you're doing to people — if you want them to do it to you, how would you feel if they were doing it you, and kind of saying, "Well, I wouldn't like that, so I won't do that to that person."
PRITCHARD: Even if they do it to you?
CHIP: That's what the rule would be. Do unto others as you want them to do unto you. If somebody pinches you, it doesn't necessarily mean that you want to pinch them, because if they pinch and and you don't want to pinch anybody, if you don't do it, then it goes along with the rule, and it doesn't mean that you have to pinch him back.
RICK: There's an exception to the rule.
PRITCHARD: Okay, Rick?
RICK: If you want a kid to rumble with you, you don't start beating his face in and then say, "Hey kid, you want to rumble?" If you want — like, if he's a kid your size or something, you don't just start fighting with him. You first of all ask if he wants to do it, too. Certain things, like, if you want to — "Hey kid, you want to kill each other?" You don't go up and kill him first so he can kill you — like ask him or something.

If the Golden Rule is understood to apply only to overt, physical actions, then Rick's point is excellent. However, if it also applies to the appropriateness of saying or not saying certain things, one might reply that Rick has not really found an exception to the Golden Rule. Instead, he has shown the need to broaden its scope. Carlen suggested a different restriction on the Golden Rule.

CARLEN: I think that the rule would go to the ice cream cone if Harry were to buy Timmy one. Then Timmy would have to buy Harry one again next time they go. I don't think it's the hit thing. I think that it shouldn't be there. I don't think that the rule is supposed to have you, when somebody hits you, to hit them back just to get them back.
EMILY: If you had money to buy two ice cream cones, and the other person you were with didn't have any money to buy an ice cream cone, and it would be just vice versa, ... if the other kid had the money to buy two ice cream cones, and you didn't have the money to buy two ice cream cones, then you would want to buy you an ice cream cone. So ... you should buy the other kid an ice cream cone.
PRITCHARD: So, what you're talking about is what you would want people to do to you and not what they actually do to you. [Larry then reopened the discussion of tactics — whether ignoring the person who hits you will work. Carlen continued to claim that ignoring might work.]
LARRY: But you were saying — you were saying that you should defend yourself also. So, if they hit me more than twice, I'm just going to belt them back.
CARLEN: Well, that's if they keep on hiting you and hitting you and you can't do anything ... I would hit them back.
CHIP: I think both these things are sort of right. Okay, now, if someone comes up and he ... attacks you and everything and he hits you and everything, then she can — then you can ignore them. But if it doesn't work, then you have to go to something else. But you can ignore them also, Larry, and then if it doesn't work and someone comes up and belts you, then you have to do something. You don't have to do something else, but it usually comes to you have to think of something else to do to stop from doing it; and maybe you don't want to hurt the guy and then you have yourself a problem.
RICK: But if you — if you want somebody to do it then, and you're thinking they'll pay you back or something, and you go out and buy them an ice cream cone, or whatever, you gotta take the chance that maybe they won't pay you back, Like, they could say, "Oh. Oh, this must be the cone you owed me three years ago. I'm glad you paid it back. Now get lost boy. Thanks." And he just may just — because you're doing it to him — he may never pay you back.
PRITCHARD: So, does that mean that we should be cautious when we are doing favors?

CHIP: Uh, huh!
PRITCHARD: Because you don't know? Would you do someone a favor only if you thought they would return it later?
GROUP: Yeah, no, no, no, no, ...
LARRY: You shouldn't always expect someone to return your favors.
RICK: You should try to give, not receive.
PRITCHARD: If someone does you a favor, do you think that you should always do something nice for them? [Group: Yeah, yeah, yeah ...]
CARLEN: If it's a favor. If it's a favor, then you want to do it, do something back to them and pay up for them for what they did, and do it to them also; but if it was just a hit or something, you don't want to do it.
PRITCHARD: How about if someone thinks they're doing you a favor, but it's something that you really don't want? But you know they're trying to do you a favor?
CARLEN: You should accept it as a favor.
PRITCHARD: And then do something nice for them?
RICK: Try to just give. You don't need to receive all the time, because ... if you just give ... and others are in the giving mood, you don't have to worry about not receiving something, because everybody's going to feel the same way. They feel a lot better to give, but they know that everybody else will be giving, and they'll receive still.
PRITCHARD: So, you think it might be a better world if everybody had the giving attitude, because you'd always get something back anyway? Jeff?
JEFF: You should always do favors even though somebody hasn't done any favors for you. Like, if somebody does a favor to you, you should just do a favor for them, even if they haven't done one to you — to be nice.

Rick's last suggestion, supported by Jeff, was impressive. Rather than focus on specific exchanges of favors, Rick brought the group's attention to the general practice of doing favors. Although it is unlikely that all will benefit alike from the widespread practice of doing favors, Rick had astutely pointed out that favors need not come from those to whom one has extended favors. Thus, from a utilitarian perspective, the practice of doing favors even for those from whom one has not received (nor ever will) has much to commend it. This could be thought of as a form of indirect reciprocity.

As I was about to add to a new wrinkle to the discussion, I was signalled that our videotaping session was about to end. I posed my question anyway.
PRITCHARD: How about if they've done you a disfavor? How about if the kid who tripped Timmy — suppose that Timmy had a chance to do that kid a favor later? Do you think he should do it?

It was annouced that the taping was finished. The cameras receded, and the lights dimmed. Buy my group carried on for several minutes. They had performed well before the cameras. But obviously they were not merely performers.

Michael Pritchard

Footnotes:
[1]Rawls, John, A Theory of Justice, Harvard University Press; Cambridge, 1972.
[2]Piaget, Jean, The Moral Judgement of the Child, Free Press: New York, 1965.
[3]Kohlberg, Lawrence, The Philosophy of Moral Development, Harper & Row: San Francisco, 1981.
[4]See, e.g., Arthur Caplan, ed. The Sociology Debate, Harper & Row: San Francisco, 1978.
[5]Both of these philosophical novels are authored by Matthew Lipman of the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children; Montclair State College, Upper Montclair, New Jersey.

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