

# *What Do We Mean by a Morally Educated Person?*

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**M**any would agree that, at present, moral education is one of the most demanding areas within the formal system of education. As a consequence, a great deal of literature on theoretical aspects of moral education, moral development and practical approaches to the teaching of ethics has been published for the last twenty years. My point in this paper is that it is impossible to introduce moral education at school unless we have a clear concept of a morally educated person. My goal is to arrive at such a concept, which we can use to evaluate our curriculum and our methodological procedures.

Of course, we must avoid any concept that could support either a relativistic approach to moral education or a dogmatic one. I realize that, as soon as we talk of a clear concept of a morally educated person, we are far away from any kind of relativism, yet this concept could be easily associated with indoctrination insofar as we seem to be proposing the moral ideal that it is up to us to decide for children. Nonetheless, there is a possibility of overcoming this problem without giving up the ideal that has to guide our teaching. Using an analogy coming from linguistic theory, I can suggest that a morally educated person is a person who has developed her/his own personality in three different

aspects: syntactic (reasoning skills), semantic (acquaintance with moral questions) and pragmatic (behavioral skills).

All three aspects are separated only for analytical reasons. They are all found together, strongly intertwined in everyday life. The first and the third will be analyzed from a procedural point of view, although avoiding any substantial assumption is almost impossible when behavioral attitudes are under consideration. I will refer only to the substantive aspect of ethics in the second one, in a serious effort to focus on putting aside any kind of indoctrination without converting moral education into a kind of empty formal education. At the same time, however, I will try to overcome the assumption that the only way of avoiding indoctrination is to give up on substantial moral questions. Had I identified substantive morality with any specific moral position, such as hedonism, Aristotelian eudaimonia or Kantian formalism, the assumption would be right (and we'll never insist enough that teachers have to be very careful with handing down to students their own moral beliefs, or the moral beliefs of the community where they are living). But there is not such a thing as ethics without morals, or formal procedures without a subject matter those formal procedures are applied to. More-over, it is difficult arguing that a morally educated person has nothing to do with a person with a good knowledge of the moral problems under discussion in their society.

**SYNTACTIC DIMENSION:  
THINKING SKILLS**

Let us start by expressing my point in the clearest and sharpest way. It is impossible to be a morally educated person if you do not have a mastery of the thinking skills, skills needed to develop higher order, or excellent, thinking. If you are not a good thinker, it is impossible for you to be a good person, or a morally educated person. No judge would ever consider a mentally retarded person accountable for his action. This is, of course, an extreme case, but it allows us to take into account the necessary role played by thinking skills in moral agency. This is not an all-or-nothing, in the sense that it is possible to find a wide range of degrees between the mentally retarded person and the person that is at ease in higher order thinking.

I admit that my position is a clear rejection of the classical position in ethics which tries to establish a clear cut line between the domain of values and the domain of facts. From this position, reason and understanding are cool and disengaged, and they apply only to facts or relations; morality and immorality arise entirely from the sentiments of approbation or disapprobation (Hume, 1972). Moral sentiments, therefore, are the only criteria we must use to determine the moral level of a person, even if it is admitted that reason plays a role in human agency. In the same way, I reject those statements that seek to establish a gulf between moral and scientific judgements, a position that, stemming from the previous one, goes a long way. Thus, I support a continuity of reasoning and a continuity of experience:

*This principle, on the one hand, protects the integrity of the moral judgement, revealing its supremacy and the corresponding instrumental or auxiliary character of the intellectual judgement; and, upon the other, protects the moral judgement from isolation, bringing it into working relations or reciprocal assistance with all judgements about the subject-matter of experience, even those of the most markedly mechanical and physiological sort. (Dewey, 1964, p. 60)*

It is beyond the bounds of this paper to present a list of the higher thinking skills that are involved in moral behavior, although some of them deserve closer attention. Let us consider, for instance, a person who cannot infer consequences

from a given situation, or who only does that in a very inappropriate or poor way. Such a person will get in trouble as soon as s/he has to make a decision in any actual situation where the consequences of what is done are just one of the most important criteria for an ethical evaluation of her behavior. She needs to analyze carefully the situation, then to infer what follows from her action. This involves logical or formal inference, but also causal inference, because our past personal experience shows us that from this cause follows this effect. At the same time, it involves the mastering of formal "if...then" and hypothetical syllogisms.

The same can be said of other thinking skills that are the basis of any human agency. Look, for example, at analogical reasoning. One of the prerequisites of moral behavior is the ability to make analogies between two different situations that have some common characteristics. Many wrongdoings come from the inability of people to establish an analogy between the problem they are facing at this moment and similar problems or situations that might be, if the analogy is made, a guide in overcoming the problem. Making analogies is also a necessary condition of becoming a tolerant person who can understand and take into consideration other's points of view. In addition, analogical reasoning involves other thinking skills such as establishing relationships in general or between the parts and the whole.

We could make a large list of examples of the practical consequences of lacking such thinking skills. The same could be said of the list of basic thinking or cognitive skills. To summarize, we can accept Lipman's emphasis of the topic. First, it is possible to distinguish four major varieties of cognitive skills: inquiry skills, reasoning skills, information-organizing skills and translation skills. On the other hand, a tentative acceptance of his approach to complex thinking as excellent thinking or as a composing of critical and creative thinking is possible:

CRITICAL THINKING	CREATIVE THINKING	COMPLEX THINKING
Governed by criteria	Sensitive to criteria	Concerned with both procedural and substantive considerations
Aims of judgement	Aims at judgement	Aims at resolution of problematic situations
Self-correcting	Self-transcending	Metacognitive (inquiry into inquiry) aims at improvement of practice
Sensitive to context	Governed by context	Sensitive to context (Lipman, 1991)

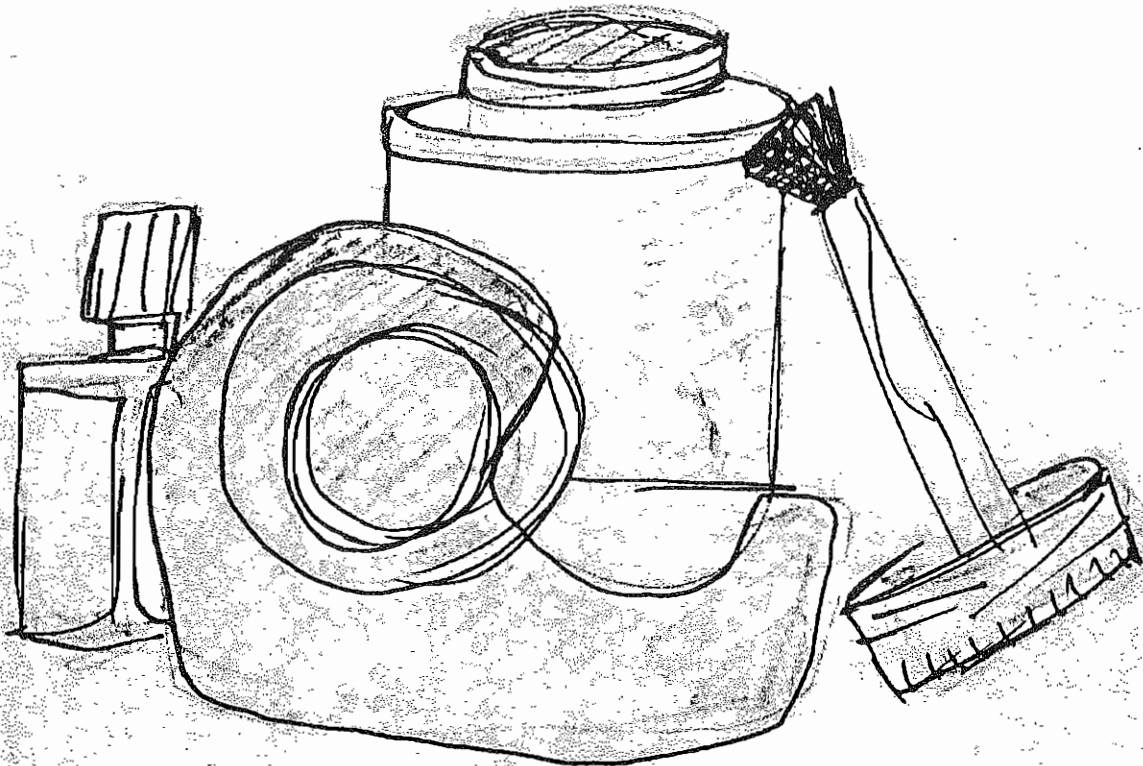
My point, expressed in a less provocative way, is that reasoning is a necessary condition for moral behavior. If your reasoning performances are poor, your moral behavior will also be poor.

### SEMANTIC: ACQUAINTANCE WITH MORAL QUESTIONS

One common mistake regarding moral questions is the reduction of moral values to something internally rooted to the formal aspects or procedures such as the thinking skills we have just mentioned.<sup>1</sup> There is a very old Spanish proverb that says that hell is full of good will, taking into account the fact that many times it is not enough that your intentions of doing whatever you are doing are good intentions. We have to look carefully at the consequences of our actions — unless we really do not care or we disregard our action itself — but then our behavior could hardly be considered moral behavior. More or less the same has to be said of formal procedures, or thinking skills. Whenever we think, we are thinking **in** something; there are no thinking processes without content, and every thinking process, and its level of performance, is related to the

content. Practical thinking skills only can flourish if we think heedfully on practical questions; ethical development of a person can only be built on the discussion of moral questions.

Returning to the previous quotation from Dewey, there is a continuity between moral judgement and scientific judgement in the sense that it is impossible to make any moral judgement if we lack the experience, the bulk of data and knowledge that are relevant to the topic under discussion. Look, for example, at two of the most demanding moral problems at present: ecological protection of nature and genetics engineering. Some ecological disasters come from a lack of knowledge, such as in the destruction of the ozone layer in the atmosphere. In the same way, we often consider that when a person says, "I'm sorry, I didn't know," he is giving a poor excuse for his behavior, not a good reason, so we often answer, "You had to know." We cannot be expected to do the appropriate thing unless we have enough information about the problems that are involved in these domains. Experience is, again, a necessary condition, although it is not, of course, a sufficient condition for judgement. I realize that one of the problems of the technical approach to reason is that it strengthens the role



of experts, putting aside any moral evaluation of the data and converting all of us into people dependent on the wisdom of others. Everybody knows that one of the most basic tools for oppressing people is hiding or distorting information; ignorance is the food of slavery.

When we consider experience or information as criteria for evaluating the level of moral development of a person, we have to face two problems. The first one is the impossibility of mastering the sheer quantity of information that presents itself at present. We are not suggesting that a morally educated person is some kind of living version the British Encyclopedia, nor are we proposing that people ought to enter into the task of acquiring all kinds of information. As Umberto Eco and other scholars have said, one of the characteristics of our world of mass media is that too much information causes a real dis-information: information becomes just meaningless noise. Rather, it is a matter of balance, or of learning to discern and incorporate relevant information, the information needed to become people who can think and decide for themselves in the framework of a community. The same balance is needed to overcome the growing role of the experts we have just mentioned. The expert is the kind of person who knows a great deal about a very small domain of experience, who lacks the minimal ability to relate his knowledge to everyday life or to global problems of mankind. One point in behalf of humanities in education has to do with the fact that humanities — when they are taught in the right way — can help children to overcome this meaningless overspecialization.

The other problem we have to cope with is the conservative desire to get education back to handing down to children the bulk of "basic data" they are supposed to have in order to become good citizens. We are not proposing that morally educated people are those who have memorized from their first year of school life thousands bits of data about the history of their country, traditional values or natural and social sciences. Even if some "basic" data is necessary, it is a useless task to decide beforehand which are the data all of us need, and it is much more appropriate to get the information — no more, no less — that is required in every context to make sense of our lives and to handle the problems in a critical and creative way.

Nor are we suggesting that such data or information as is necessary in the development

of our own personal life is some kind of ready-made stuff that is on the outside, clearcut and waiting for us to take in. Reality is, to a certain extent, a social and personal construct; it is up to us to decide which are the relevant facts, and our decisions are the effect of the kind of personal life we are aiming at and the kind of world we wish to live in. Taking facts into account is not the same as accepting the world — and ourselves — as it is; things do not have to be as they have been for years, and that is very important whenever we are talking about social and cultural reality. The cultural background we come from is a basic starting point for building up our own personal identity, but it is not the last word. When experience becomes a ballast that impedes us in making a difference, we begin to decline in our moral development — we are missing the point.

#### PRAGMATIC DIMENSION: BEHAVIORAL SKILLS

I would like to start this last part of my paper by expressing my point again in the clearest and sharpest way. It is impossible to be a morally educated person if you do not have some very specific behavioral dispositions or attitudes. I am almost reversing the statement I made in the first part, pointing to the fact that nobody can perform a good reasoning if s/he does not show good attitudes, if s/he is not a "good" person. Outside of a strict analytical description of human beings, there is no such thing as reason split from feelings and sentiments, the basic ingredients of attitudes. In order to be a morally educated person, or just a person, understanding and sentiments have to work together. We have to reject the notion that in many instances the way in which we understand something is inseparable from our caring about it; every time we exclude understanding from care, or care from understanding, we are viewing them in a very narrow way.<sup>2</sup>

I mentioned earlier the case of mentally retarded people, and I presented them as people who never can be considered moral agents. The same is true for psychopaths. Such people can be considered very smart, provided we reduce reasoning to the most empty technical procedures, as independent of practical consequences for one's own life and the lives of others. The psychopath is a person characterized by emotional instability,

impulsive behavior and amoral and asocial feelings. They lack just the personal attitudes, or sentiments, that would allow them to enter into the moral dimension of human life. They are not wrongdoers, they are not principled egoists; they just do not play the game.<sup>3</sup>

It is possible to think about attitudes as formal procedures of moral behavior, and that is our position. If I suggest "care" or "empathy" as basic ingredients of a morally educated person, I am not suggesting that they are "good" from a moral point of view; I do not identify "care" with altruism, a widely appreciated moral virtue, used many times as a criteria of moral development (Blasi, 1989). I am only assuming that they are necessary conditions for every intersubjective dialogue or for playing the moral game; I cannot talk with anyone if I do not strive to understand what the other person is saying, his or her own point of view, the beliefs or values he or she is taking for granted, and so on. At the same time, whenever I talk to anyone, I am assuming that they are trying to understand my own point of view. In this dialogue, we can agree or disagree, but always based on the fact that we understand each other. Of course, we can stop talking, but that is not particularly constructive.

Nevertheless, it is much more difficult to make a clear distinction between procedures and substantial content in the case of attitudes than in the case of thinking skills. If I keep making this distinction it is because it has very important pedagogical consequences that we cannot explore in this paper, and because I am looking for a model of a morally developed person where very different versions or moral life can be included. I can disagree with principled egoists or with hedonists, but I can't say that they are not morally educated people just because they do not share my own principles. Some critiques of Kohlberg's approach highlight his biased concept of moral development. Care, empathy, tolerance or dialogue have to do with the process, with procedures, but they have at the same time a substantial dimension that goes far beyond empty procedures.<sup>4</sup>

I am also assuming that there is a basic moral thesis that underlies my argument in behalf of the development of attitudes and sentiments, and the case of the psychopath again sheds some light on the problem. As I said, the psychopath just does not want to play the game. The moral game starts when we discover both sides of the coin: we are accountable for

our decisions and choices, we can not give up (philosophers like Kant and Sartre have explored in depth this human condition), but at the same time we are in debt to others and to ourselves. The face of the other, and my own face after looking at myself, is what awakens my moral accountability — an approach that has been developed by Levinas.

This is not the moment for presenting a complete list of the moral attitudes needed in order to be a morally educated person, but it is possible to mention four, following a interpretation of ethics from Ricoeur (Ricoeur, 1990). First, we stress self-esteem, as a necessary condition to develop our own personal project; secondly, we refer to care, as the prerequisite for entering into ethical relationship with others; thirdly, we need to empathize and to tolerate others' points of view if we want to build a society based on justice. And last, since ethics aims at action, courage is also needed to sustain and put forward or personal moral biography.

## CONCLUSION

Only a very short remark. A morally educated person is one who is able to attain some meaning in his or her life. Plato would say that it is the person who loves wisdom, and Aristotle would say that it is the virtuous person, one who is ruled by "phronesis" and shows in his life good judgement. Perhaps the word wisdom is the best way to refer to the kind of morally educated people we are looking for.

## NOTES

1. This mistake comes from Kant who reduced ethics to formal procedures and focused only on goodwill in in sense of "doing by duty." In the topic we are considering in this paper, this mistake is a very important one because it is used as one of the most accepted criterion in evaluating moral development, such as in Kohlberg.
2. We are almost quoting Prichard, Michael S.: *On Becoming Responsible*. Lawrence, K.: University Press of Kansas, 1991. P. 47., although we might be going farther than Prichard.

3. A broader and more accurate explanation of the case of psychopaths can be found in Pritchard, Michael S.: o.c., ch. 3, pp. 39-57.
4. Ann Margaret Sharp, who often says that in Philosophy for Children we avoid any substantive position and only focus on procedures, has to admit the substantial implications of the process. In her last paper on "Peirce, Feminism and Philosophy for Children," she says that: "Both (feminism and Philosophy for Children) pay particular attention not only to the content under discussion, but to the way we do philosophy — **the ethical, political and social implications of the process.**" (Emphasis added).

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