

Between Kant and Schopenhauer: Issues on Moral Motivation

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Abstract

Perhaps the single most important characteristic approaches to moral education have been the emphasis on moral reasoning (Plato, Kant, Aquinas etc.). While this emphasis is, I believe, a healthy one, there is some tendency to neglect the emotive side (motivational dynamics) and to suppose that merely verbalizing theoretically “higher level” moral reasons will correlate positively with moral behaviour (Kohlberg, 39). My contentions in this paper are first, that moral growth involves a gradual development of moral understanding (where there is a highly contingent and often misleading correlate between “giving reasons” and operating on a certain level of moral understanding); secondly, that moral maturity involves the gradual acquisition of a number of feeling dispositions like a sense of justice and an abhorrence of the unnecessary suffering of any sentient creature; and finally, that there ought to be a kind of harmony or fit between moral understanding or reasoning on the one hand, and the feeling dispositions on the other hand.

1. Introduction

The principal thesis of this paper is that for there to be a sound moral education, there must be a marriage between *moral understanding* and *feeling dispositions* respectively. This requires to be examined. To do this let me first describe briefly several sorts of failure that might occur in the process of moral development. There might, first, be a failure to develop moral understanding while the feeling dispositions develop in an otherwise normal manner. This would include an inability to think critically and clearly about moral problems and an absence of insight into the justification of moral rules and principles. I am supposing in this case that the child would have relatively normal experiences which would develop his or her capacity to love, empathize, and to feel trust and respect for at least some others.

A second class of failures in moral development could be described as a normal development of moral understanding, while the child lags in the development of feeling dispositions. This could easily happen if the child had considerable exposure, let us say in school, to educational programmes that focus on moral reasoning, but the home and social environment encouraged feelings of unworthiness, envy, suspicion, and hostility.

A third class of failures would involve deficiencies in both moral understanding and in feeling dispositions. Although there are countless ways in which cases of this sort could occur, I believe that it is instructive to notice that cases of this sort of failure are compatible with the most successful programmes that aim merely at “consistently conforming more behaviour”, and employ such techniques as operant conditioning or behaviour modification. I am not claiming that these techniques are inherently sinister or inhumane, nor that they should not be employed in any moral education programme. I am suggesting that if they are used by themselves and to the neglect of facilitating genuine moral growth, then one is courting failure in moral education of the worst sort.

The fourth class of failures I wish to describe pertains to the lack of harmony or fit between moral understanding and the feeling dispositions. However poorly we grasp the connections between reason or reasoning and the emotions, I believe that it is undeniable that the connections are there and that they are vital to our conception of mature moral conduct. One way of getting at these connections for purposes of moral education has to do with the notion of “relevance”. Emotive experience can be relevant or irrelevant to moral reasoning, and vice versa. We have a sense of irrelevance, for instance, whenever someone acknowledges that it is wrong to steal but admits that what prevents him from stealing is his fear of getting caught. We have a sense of relevance if the acknowledgment of the impropriety of stealing were conjoined with feelings of respect for property or feelings of indignation at the abuse of another’s property.

Another approach to clarifying connections between reason and feeling is to examine some of the criticisms that have been leveled at emotivist ethical theories. When the aim of moral discourse was claimed by C. L. Stevenson to be the achievement of 'agreement of attitude', the criterion of a "good reason" became any assertion whatever that was effectively persuasive in achieving this agreement. But our sense of moral relevance was shattered by examples of reasoning in which, for instance, a flattering comment caused someone to adopt a favourable attitude toward pre-marital sex. Regardless of the morality of pre-marital sex, it is certain that feeling flattered has nothing whatever to do with it.

Now it may be true that emotivism in the above form is no longer considered a viable ethical theory, but the problem of 'relevance' for moral educators is nonetheless real. Studies of attitude change and formation of feeling dispositions show that the causal factors involved in such change operate quite independently of the "logic of moral reasoning." A favourable attitude towards the teacher, for instance, is probably a strong causal factor in securing agreement in attitude with the teacher than any argument the teacher might be able to muster, however logically relevant and sound it is.

One could easily come to despair at such facts as these and yield to the apparent irrationality of the whole process of moral education. My own conclusions, however, do not counsel despair; they point rather toward a number of approaches that display plausible and educationally useful interconnections between logicity and moral feeling dispositions. In the remaining part of this paper, I shall try to develop particularly significant aspects of the views of Kant and Schopenhauer, as they apply to the problem of establishing a harmony or fit between moral understanding and moral feelings dispositions.

2. Kant on Moral Motivation

Kant was more insistent than any other moral philosopher that motives to action ought to be relevant to their rational or moral justification. Only too often, however, critics have misunderstood his position on moral motivation or they have rejected him completely because of some minor unpalatable views. I will divide my account of Kant into three topics:

- (a) Incentives to moral conduct found in the authority of reason and respect for the moral law;
- (b) Transformation of the motivational energy of a sensuous impulse into legitimate moral volition;
- (c) An argument which displays the rational channeling of self-respect and self-worth into universal respect for humanity.

2.1 *Incentives to moral conduct found in the authority of reason and respect for the moral law*

The authority of reason no doubt derives from a great number of sources: reasoning, and principles of our understanding make knowledge and communication possible; logical principles are regulative of all thought, whether it be about objects in nature or questions about what one ought to do; normally, to merely understand a logical inference or a mathematical proof is to feel its necessity and to acknowledge its regulative authority in our thought. Of course, these are only assertions, and to experience the full impact of their truth would involve careful study of the operations of reason in all of these areas. It would also help to try to imagine what human thought and action would be like without these rational operations. Given this normal all-pervasive regulative function of reason, it seems easier to appreciate how merely recognizing the logical force of an argument that concludes with a moral prescription could effectively determine the will. In fact, if the moral reasoning were quite clear and tight, one might suppose that it would take an exceptionally strong anti-moral motive or impulse to get one to "fly in the face of reason".

We can approach the question of how reason can supply incentives to moral conduct from another direction by considering the nature of man as free and autonomous (although Kant does not believe that a metaphysical proof of this nature is possible). It is in our capacity as law-making and rationally self-determining agents that we become conscious of or experience a sense of worth and dignity as persons, in contrast with mechanically determined things. The incentives of self-respect and self-contentment are by-products of this awareness of autonomy. In the context of moral education, Kant is extremely wary of dangling incentives in front of the child, for actions will then be performed because of the incentive rather than the relevant moral reason. Nevertheless, he is eager to strengthen any incentives that do not distract from the essential awareness of duty. The incentives of self-respect and self-contentment can be viewed in this light. First, the moral logic must be made crystal clear, and for Kant this is best done by a Socratic method that emphasizes self-discovery of the principles involved. (The child may come to see clearly that doing "X" in situation "A" would be making an exception of himself since "Xing" in situations relevantly similar to "A" could not be willed as a reasonable practice for all persons.) One effect of the perception of the moral logic may be a sensation of being put down

or thwarted in one's desires or, as Kant expresses it, an experience of humiliation. But we must note that one could not feel humiliated or put down unless one also felt a degree of respect for the moral logic, and acting out of respect for duty or the moral law is proper moral motivation.

However, this is only half of the story, for the child can then be brought to understand that the moral logic is itself an expression of his own higher nature as a rational and autonomous person. So respect for the moral law involves at least the following three things: (a) an appreciation of the rigour of the moral logic; (b) a sense of being humiliated by or subordinated to this regulation; and finally (c) a sense of self-respect and contentment by virtue of being the author of the law and the master of one's sensuous nature.

There is a further interesting dimension to self-respect and contentment as moral incentives. While it is an irrelevant and non-moral motive to perform one's duty because it will make one happy, Kant allows that there is a relevant moral incentive in feeling deserving of happiness. The right thing must be done even if it involves a clearly calculable loss in one's happiness, but in doing the right thing – because one recognizes that it is the right thing – one contributes to one's very worthiness to be happy. Likewise in failure to do what is right when one knows what it is and could have done it, one may experience as loss of self-respect and a sense of being undeserving of happiness.

2.2 Transformation of the motivational energy of a sensuous impulse into legitimate moral volition.

The maxim of our action is the actual principle of an action or of a contemplated action. Obviously, it is a kind of action in which we have some interest whether it be self-regarding or other-regarding. Thus we may say that prior to any process of rational and moral justification, the maxim of our contemplated action is motivationally charged by some desire, interest, or inclination. Before one could say that an action on some maxim was that of an autonomous moral agent, the agent would have had to subject the maxim to the test of rational and moral principles. If the maxim fails to gain the rational – moral seal of approval, so to speak, there will be the common internal struggle between what one wants to do and what one believes one ought to do. Kant focuses on examples of this type because they demonstrate most clearly the concepts of the moral worth of an action and the necessity of acting out of respect for the moral law.

However, the great majority of our maxims surely gain the rational-moral seal of approval. If one has a sensation of thirst, for instance, and an inclination to take a drink, the motive of one's action would be, at this state heteronymous (that is, caused by something outside of the self-legislating activity of the agent). To become an autonomous moral motive, the inclination to take a drink must undergo a transformation. One may formulate a maxim to the effect that, if anyone experiences thirst and judges that his body needs liquid, and if there are no overriding moral demands at the time, then one ought to satisfy one's thirst by taking a drink. The original sensation of thirst, together with affirmations of the other conditions in the principle leads to an autonomous moral action. One has then acted on a principle that one's intelligent nature has formulated and judged to be objectively right or justifiable for any rational agent. Even when the motivational energy of a sensuous impulse supports a moral volition, the elements of duty for an autonomous moral agent appear to be two-fold: (a) we are obliged to subject all maxims to test; and (b) we are obliged to act only on maxims that have been legitimized by applications of rational and moral principles.

With the above discussion in mind, it is interesting to recall the moral definition of happiness that Kant espoused shortly after writing the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Happiness, he says, in so far as it depends upon our choice and not upon accidental circumstances, is nothing but 'well-ordered freedom.' "Well-ordered freedom, the exercise of which occasions self-satisfaction, is the unity of all actions under general laws and is equivalent to morality" (Beck,215).

2.3 An argument which displays the rational channeling of self-respect and self-worth into universal respect for humanity (Paton, 95-96).

I will proceed in a stepwise fashion and attempt to clearly expose both the logical development and the motivational changes.

- (i) We may begin with an individual's possible vague sense of his own worth. This may, for some, find expression in certain fundamental beliefs, such as the belief that one ought to be able to satisfy one's desires, and that one's existence should be preserved and enhanced rather than abused or lessened. Because of the natural ego-involvement in the original perception of self-worth, there is no problem in accounting for the considerable strength of motivation supporting it. Although the individual may never articulate this working or subjective principle of volition, we may formulate it for him as follows: I will act in such a way as to treat my own existence as having intrinsic worth and not merely instrumental worth.

- (ii) In the competitive give-and-take of social existence, the individual will find that others frequently do not respect the individual's sense of his own worth and he will often feel used, abused, or thwarted in his attempts to satisfy his interests. Thus, he will have an interest in making a public claim about the worth of his existence. He comes to believe then that his judgment that he is an "end" (a source of values to be respected) and not a mere means is justified – i.e., that there are good reasons for making this judgment. Armed with a sense of the objective validity of his belief in his own worth, he will press upon others his claim to be treated as an "end" and not merely a means. I should like to point out here that once the individual makes the move of pressing his claim upon others "by logic" as opposed to "by force", he is well on his way toward a moral commitment, as the following steps will show.
- (iii) Just what reasons might the individual give to support his belief about his own worth and his right to be treated with respect as a person and not a mere thing? Isn't it just those features of his existence that make him something more than a thing – e.g., his ability to use language and communicate, his ability to formulate rules of conduct and act on them, and indeed, his ability to be free or autonomous? Hence, his justification of his own worth consists in the possession of a rational nature. Either rational nature is valuable in itself, or it is capable of conferring intrinsic value on any being possessing it.
- (iv) The logic of giving reasons necessitates that if the individual's claim is justifiable for him on the grounds of possessing a rational nature, then he must acknowledge that it is justifiable for any person possessing a rational nature. The individual's motive for acting morally is a consequence of his recognition that his own sense of intrinsic worth and desire to be treated as an "end" and not a mere means, is justified only in if he respects others as being equally entitled to such treatment.
- (v) Hence, the individual is rationally committed to the moral principle: act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an "end."

2.4 Schopenhauer and the Metaphor of the Reservoir

My second contention above asserted that moral maturity involves the gradual acquisition of a number of feeling dispositions like a sense of justice and an abhorrence of the unnecessary suffering of any sentient creature. The implication of the third contention has been that there should be a harmonious interdependence between the emotive and the rational-cognitive aspects of the individual's morality. Let me now develop this interdependence further by exploring a difference perspective on the individual's moral attitude toward others than that expressed in the Kantian argument. A deeply felt concern for or love of others must rank as highly relevant emotive experience in support of principles of justice and benevolence. Some theorists would go even further and maintain that the principles are dispensable if we have the all important love of others. It is difficult, however, to make clear sense of what such an ethic would be like "without principles."

There are several valuable points in the moral philosophy of Schopenhauer pertaining to this problem. True moral motivation, for Schopenhauer, has its origin in our feelings of compassion for the sufferings and happiness of others. Such feelings of compassion are psychologically possible because of our capacity to identify imaginatively with another and "in the case of his woe as such, I suffer directly with him, I feel his woe just as I ordinarily feel my own; and likewise, I directly desire his weal in the same way I otherwise desire only my own" (Schopenhauer, 143). These experiences of compassion may provide a motive, in the first degree, that prevents the individual from causing the suffering or the violation of the fundamental rights of another. Since, for Schopenhauer, "injure no one" is the first principle of justice, this degree of compassion is considered to be its motivational foundation. A higher degree of experiences of compassion incites the individual to go beyond the duties of justice to perform supererogatory acts of active help.

Now Schopenhauer recognizes that "it is by no means necessary for compassion actually to be stirred in each individual case, for it would often come too late" (150). He thus comes to the position that "although principles and abstract knowledge generally are by no means the original source or first foundation of morality, they are nevertheless indispensable to a moral course of life: they are the receptacle or reservoir which stores the habit of mind that has sprung from the fount of all morality ... viz. compassion" (156). It is firmly held principles that make possible the self-control needed to act consistently in accordance with our moral obligations.

I am particularly intrigued by the suggestive metaphor of a principle taken to be a reservoir of the mind. The shape of the reservoir as a general disposition to judge and to choose is determined by a combination of rational reflection and concrete evaluative experience. If we lack concrete evaluative experience, in this case in the form of instances of

compassionate identification in the lives of others, the reservoir goes dry or fails to form properly in the first place. Instead of a firm conviction we have a motivationally impotent abstract formula. If we lack sufficient rational reflection about the principle, (i) it may not have adequate generality, (ii) it may lack precision of meaning, (iii) it may have an inadequate justification, and (iv) it may fail to form a coherent system with other moral principles.

The moral educator must be sensitive to the stages of moral development of the child and engage in types of theoretical reflection with the child that are consonant with the child's understanding (Kohlberg 87). However, the educator should also be alert to the need for concrete evaluative experiences that are relevant to the child's growing comprehension of moral principles. Although there are a number of kinds of such experiences, I believe that "compassionate identification" represents a type that is of special importance in moral development. It is important both for its relevant emotive content, filling the motivational reservoir of the principles of justice and benevolence, and for its exercise of the imagination in the process of identification with the situation of another, which is so essential for moral judgment (Hare, 93 – 95). Rousseau, who was a strong influence on both Kant and Schopenhauer, tells us that "we must offer to a young man (or woman) objects on which the expansive force of his heart can act, which expand and extend it to other beings, and which cause him everywhere to *find himself again outside himself*" (Schopenhauer, 186).

3. Conclusion

I have asserted that there is a highly contingent and often misleading relationship between (a) giving reasons on a questionnaire and (b) genuine moral understanding. Clever sophists can emerge from a process of learning to repeat answers that teachers or parents or peers expect or like to hear. I have also claimed that many of the causal factors in shaping moral attitudes and feeling dispositions are irrelevant to their rational-moral justification, thus creating a lack of harmony or fit between the two. The only solution, I believe, is a balanced programme that gives equal stress to moral reasoning and to opportunities for relevant emotive and evaluative experience. We must be alert for ways in which reason and feeling may be constructively interdependent in moral motivation, as the discussions of Kant and Schopenhauer attempts to illustrate.

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