

# What is Moral Education?

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As this subject is so personal to each individual and each society they inhabit, this article is personal in both its nature and content. I hope to show that as I consider morality to be an abstract concept, and that it is difficult to put it into any one category of behaviour, that this means that moral education cannot be defined categorically either. This article is essentially a discussion between me and the reader about what I consider moral education to be, based on my own experience of it and the reading and research into it I have undertaken. It is not an exercise merely to *define* moral education, as I do not think that is possible.

Morals and morality pervade every aspect of our lives. Even this piece of work is covered by moralistic guidelines as, if it were punctuated by gratuitous use of obscenities, it would be judged unworthy of an academic reading and assessment, as these have no place in its context or content. How do I know this even though nobody has actually told me this here and now? Bull in his book *Moral Education* (1969) explains this point thus: 'The child is not born with a built-in moral conscience. But he is born with those natural, biologically purposive capacities that make him potentially a moral being' (p.15). I know this because I was taught moral concepts and I am now fully aware enough to be able to process my actions in any given situation in respect to these concepts. Although I do not remember being sat down and actually "taught" to be moral, I was taught what was right and wrong and what was acceptable behaviour in all the spheres I participated in. These spheres were home, school, church, other people's houses, clubs and societies.

According to Wilson et al (1967, p.129): 'A child needs to accept ... a certain code of behaviour, parental commands, traditional rules etc.' Of course, all children have their own interpretations of moral concepts, and obeying these different rules in different situations was my first clue that they were flexible and that they depended on different factors. It became clear that the variation on a theme I had

to choose determined whether I was 'acceptable' as a person in each particular sphere. Durkheim (in Wilson, 1961) says:

The child must come to feel himself what there is in a rule which determines that he should abide by it willingly. In other words he must sense the moral authority in the rule, which renders it worthy of respect (p154).

After this came questions: why can I do this at home but not at school? Why don't other people's children have to do the same things I do in the same way?

This then started the processing stage. Once again, with guidance I was not consciously aware of all the time. Some things were universal across all spheres but were spoken of in different ways and were punished or rewarded in different ways too. But the foundation was recognizable to me as a child; it was just the application that had to be learnt in each case, and that happened again seemingly without conscious thought on my part. In this way, any deviation from this foundation was also easily recognizable and prompted an enquiry:

Teachers and parents should confront the child with their own moral codes in a very clear and definite manner so that, whether he accepts or rejects a code, at least he knows what he is accepting or rejecting (Wilson in Wilson et al, 1967, p.132).

Somewhere in the subconscious was an idea of what should happen, which led to the knowledge that if the opposite of this happened, it was wrong. This 'wrongness' was purely an instinctive reaction to something different when very young, but later a different wrongness could be attached to certain things; that of being morally wrong, going against that which is right and expected behaviour within that sphere. Children, unfortunately by their very receptiveness to adult or peer notions of behavioural norms, are also the most susceptible to behavioural abnormalities. They have not yet learnt the process part of moral education and cannot always fathom out for themselves what is wrong and what is right, or indeed, the reason it is wrong or right if it is not immediately obvious, i.e. 'something painful' is wrong. A framework of rules and conditions is essential, argues Wilson as the foundation of learning what is 'right' or 'wrong'. He argues:

The child needs other things, such as love, emotional security, food, warmth, enough sleep and so on. All these things as well as a framework of rules are necessary (Wilson, in Wilson et al 1967, p.129).

The misuse of affection, for example, is not enough at this age to cause concern until somebody else points out the wrongness, or until they have sufficient experience to work out for themselves that it is wrong, but more importantly, why it is wrong.

Moral education starts early but proceeds at very different speeds according to the domestic circumstances of the small child. It gathers momentum when the sphere is enlarged, or divides, and as this process is repeated throughout life. It evolves for each new sphere of society (e.g. family, education, and religion) and the circumstances encountered there. The inhabitants of these spheres play a very important role in the moral education of the child, whether they intend to or not. This does not change throughout a person's life. They and everybody they come into contact with influence, or are influenced by, that contact. Many familiar, but also many strange and indeed conflicting attitudes and behaviours will be encountered. Processes of practical moral education, as outlined here, also change over time, and between cultures and social groups. The classical French sociologist, Emile Durkheim, noted that:

Not only does man's range of behaviour change, but the forces that set limits are not absolutely the same at different historical periods (Durkheim in Wilson, 1961, p.52).

These social forces will all 'educate' the individual and influence the kind of person they become. The person is always evolving and will be constantly changed by this interaction all their lives. These spheres are likely to overlap as well as repel each other: family, religion, career, friends, and school will all strive to mould the person into what they want them to be.

My understanding of the purpose of moral education is to show the child as early as possible to recognize these influences and to give them a foundation on which they can make judgements as they encounter each moral variant within the various societal spheres.

Musgrove (1978) says that moral education:

Must, therefore, take account of the way in which these choices seem to be made. Attention must be given to the knowledge needed, the relevant structures to be used, the skills necessary for interpreting the thoughts, feelings and actions of others involved, and to the process of weighting used by moral actors as they balance these elements (p.125).

Obviously a child can only be taught what they are capable of learning at any stage in their development, but this type of education is an all-round, all the time type of instruction and everybody is both learner and teacher with whomever they interact. Thus:

All morality consists of relationships between persons; that its three concerns are therefore, self, others and the relationship between them; and that the heart of morality is therefore respect for persons. [The child's concept of a person] does not have to be learnt as such, [but] it does have to be built up by moral education in terms of knowledge, habits and attitudes (Bull, 1969, p.127).

A large range and variety of interactions, then, will help a child develop a moral sense quicker than one type of interaction only. A narrow range of experience, therefore, leads to rigidity and stagnation in moral development as only one variant is being encountered and moral process is not being developed along with moral content. Whilst one needs to be in place to a certain extent before the other can function, they do need to run alongside one another after a short period as they influence one another at later stages in the child's development. Bull (1969), Straughan (1992) and Wilson (in Wilson et al, 1967) all talk about this in their own way. For example, Bull says:

The practice of virtuous action therefore involves three conditions: Conscious knowledge of it, deliberate will of it 'for its own sake', and an 'unchangeable disposition to act in the right way'. Moral education must clearly be concerned with all three (p.124).

Straughan is more succinct; he argues that:

What determines the level of moral development a person is at is not the particular action he judges to be right or wrong, but his reasons for so judging (1992, p.19).

Wilson (in Wilson et al, 1967) simply says that 'moral concepts involve the notions of 'intention', of 'understanding', and 'knowing what you are doing" (p.45). I obviously have my own views like everybody else on what morality is, what it means to me and the people I know, and unfortunately my own likes and dislikes of other people's morals.

Many books have been written about this subject and I am only touching on a very few of them here, as parents and indeed society in general, has shifting views on morality; or rather, the lack of it that children in each generation seem to show. Fears and worries over the state of the younger generations in many works are interchangeable. There is currently a debate going on about whether children in England are 'lazy' and obsessed with computer games, whilst ignoring the real world and moral issues, for example (see AOL Lifestyle, 2006). Minus the fears the about the possible effects on moral thinking of information and communications technology, the same sentiments and worries were written about in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and again in the 20<sup>th</sup> (see Frith, 1980).

Social change, progress and the leaving behind of the old ways all seem to be outpacing moral changes. As Marx and Engels noted (1848), with the development of capitalist society: 'All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned' (p.83). This process appears to apply to morality too, as values shift and change with developments in society. Morality, it seems, clings to the past and is slow to change. Emile Durkheim felt this very strongly:

What is meant by morality as we see it in practice? Certainly it involves consistency, regularity of conduct; what is moral today must be moral tomorrow (in Wilson, 1961, p.xi).

Musgrove, writing nearly a century later, noted that:

Because of the precarious nature of current moral meaning there will always be a tension between contemporary morality and what a few feel ought to be (1978, p.129).

Education is even slower to adapt, but then it never has caught up and actually led in the moral debate. As Musgrave makes clear:

The content of the moral curriculum, its pedagogy and pacing, the academic subjects to be involved and the school organization needed are all clearly related to the total social structure within which any school is set. Very rarely does a school attempt to change the moral code of a society (Musgrave, 1978, p.128).

To educate, one needs to know what to teach and what the outcome of that teaching needs to be. This, then, is the key problem. When it comes to morality and moral education, nobody has a fixed idea on that outcome. Durkheim identified this, as he says:

These common qualities constitute other essential elements of morality, since they are found in all moral behaviour, and consequently, we must try to identify them. Once we understand them, we will have determined, at the same time, another basic element of moral character – that is to say, what it is that prompts man to behave in a way corresponding to this definition. And a new goal will be indicated for the educator (in Wilson, 1961, p.55).

Wilson et al (1967) say roughly the same thing, as:

If we want to be able to show that certain types of education produce 'morally educated' people, we must first identify a 'morally educated' person so that we know what types of education to look for (1967, p.191).

As it is constantly evolving, the concept of a morally educated person is also at the whim of changing circumstance. One cannot determine what forces or lessons are required to make up this morally educated prize if one cannot agree on what form the prize should take in the first place. Even science and mathematics, which also shift and change, do so methodically and therefore an educational plan can be drawn up. What it is to be 'moral', however, is an abstract notion and as such covers all disciplines and any and all change in any one of them affects it. When all of these are in flux at the same time – and for the last three hundred years or so they seem to have been in this state without any let up at all – morality is tossed about between all of them like a leaf on a breeze, never actually settling. It focuses on one apparent certainty, only to find another has changed and that the focus is no longer clear. It would not be so bad but these shifts attack the very

foundations rather than just the form of the structure it supports. The attempt to live and teach the moral life is constantly being shored up, but never completely rebuilt, for:

The object of much contemporary moral education in so-called free countries is to make moral men-in-the-street into morally well-informed citizens, but to some extent, and even in non-democratic societies, the process of growing to adulthood inevitably poses questions that force many people to reconsider the moral recipes learned in childhood and routinely applied up to that moment (Musgrave, 1978, p56).

This then, affects the moral content, but, at the same time, also the moral process, as all these different areas influence, and are influenced by each and every change. It is a never ending spiral, and it seems all anyone can do is constantly play catch-up.

It seemed so clear in earlier centuries: right and wrong were quite clearly defined and nothing was allowed near the foundation of their morality, and indeed there was nothing that could not be absorbed and included over time. The difference now is that there seems to be no time to absorb one change before another comes and the old ideals can only go so far before they encounter a circumstance they were never meant to cope with as quite simply it did not exist then. Moral projects, values, and ultimately moral education, all founder on the 'speed of life', which appears to be increasing (see Neary and Rikowski, 2000).

The one great defender of the stable moral life that kept things the same for centuries was religion. Once this was questioned and found wanting in the face of new circumstances (the Enlightenment being the biggest one, but also industrialisation and discoveries by, Copernicus, Darwin, Einstein and others), they vainly tried to resist. Religion's power over people's moral content and processes, in Europe especially, was slowly broken. The religious foundation of morality was considered unstable. Durkheim acknowledges this but claims:

...to replace it usefully, it is not enough to cancel out the old. A complete recasting of our educational technique must now engage our efforts (in Wilson, 1961, p.14).

However, a stable foundation for morality is necessary in any society so that it can move forward effectively, and the problem is that nothing has replaced the foundation that

religion kept so solid for so long. Of course, during the time and places where religion was significant, progress and evolution was slowed down. Thus, it appears that in order for society to evolve and progress a trade-off has to be made and morality' like religion, seems to become a discarded item.

I will finish this article by saying that I myself have endeavoured to teach morals and morality to my own children. I made choices for them that I considered the right ones for our situation and the social spheres and forms that we inhabit. As they have grown older they have questioned these choices and either accepted or rejected them as they have seen fit. As Wilson notes: 'A child or adolescent must be given a clear lead, and a chance to rebel against it' (in Wilson et al, 1967 p.152). Their actions and choices will change again in time when another set of circumstances they encounter force a rethink of their earlier actions, just as mine have done throughout my life. This is part of the never ending moral education that every individual and society goes through and it has to be recognised that this cannot be put in a box, labelled and pulled out to be used as and when required by moral educators. However, in attempting to do that, some issues have been resolved, to some extent, by the individual, at the individual level:

Moral principles and actions are things which the individual can only believe and do for himself. He can be helped but not forced (Wilson et al, 1967, p.142).

In a way, therefore, we must each make sense of the shifting sands of morality. Although we can look to guides, such as parents, teachers and priests, eventually we must try to carve out our own moral sense. Ultimately, we must become our own moral educator.

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