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Reasonable Plurality and Moral Education. New Perspectives on Old Paradoxes

Pluralidad razonable y educación moral. Nuevas perspectivas sobre viejas paradojas

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Abstract

This article faces an old paradox of moral education: the apparently logical impossibility of choosing the transmission of agreed-upon values and the autonomous exercise of reason. The author takes an epistemological position in which human learning is considered the result of an interaction of individual developmental processes and the acquisition of knowledge. She assumes knowledge as a category subjected to criteria of truth, and this, as preceded by an agreement concerning values. She states that transmission of the community consensus is not only inevitable, but is essential to the development of the autonomous deliberative game and to the exercise of critical intelligence as well. However, she warns us against a possible danger: the mere transmission of accepted principles and values may place moral education under a heterogeneous direction of conduct. Educators should, by all means, avoid such a risk. She suggests seeking a

reasonable plurality as a means of transmitting agreed-upon values. The notion of reasonable plurality derives from a feature assigned to John Rawls' concept of "overlapping consensus".

Key words: Moral education, moral development, philosophy of education, values education.

Introduction

Invading the field of moral education means facing theoretical and practical conflicts which have perplexed philosophers, pedagogues and psychologists down through the ages. The problem of the teaching content and practices is, without a doubt, one of these conflicts. Nevertheless, It is not a problem that can be stated in an isolated manner, at the margin of debates about the intent of education, the utopias pursued with its practice, or the beliefs and knowledge linked with the manner of understanding knowledge acquisition and the development of skills. In this space, however, it is impossible to state many of these problems in depth, nor is it my intention to do so. The purpose of this essay is limited to discussing only the old problem of moral education, and trying to offer a new perspective for analysis. It has to do with situating the discussion in relationship to axiological neutrality in education, from a viewpoint which considers the place transmitted knowledge occupies in the development of the moral personality.

The debate over axiological neutrality

After many years in which conservative theories which proclaimed the need for transmitting specific moral contents to the young were dominant, the Twentieth-Century decade of the seventies witnessed the emergence of the cognitive-evolutionary theory which, supported by Piaget's thesis on psychic and intellectual development, turned a liberal face toward traditional and moral education, and rejected the transmission of moral standards and practices as an alternative for promoting autonomous thinking. Axiological neutrality was its banner against the prevailing indoctrination of the previous years.

Until very recently, the cognitive-evolutionary theories of moral education, led principally by Lawrence Kohlberg, had taken a prominent role in discourses and educational practices. However, in the last decade of the twentieth century, important questions surfaced to put this model on trial. Not a few scholars in the field, in different ways and from different perspectives, have argued Piaget and Kohlberg's statements on education and moral development. In this space, I will concern myself with only of a pair of them, whose alternative proposal leads to an other analysis that I consider fundamental.

Betty Sichel and David Carr spoke out against the cognitive-developmental model, accusing it of rejecting the dispositional spheres in its explanation of the psychic

structure of morality. According to Sichel and Carr, the virtues, understood as excellence of character, are the essential components of human disposition toward morality; the requirements of Piaget and Kohlberg's theories of axiological neutrality silenced the educational task's essential timbre on the subject of moral training. The emptiness of the teaching on specific moral content, which leads to the cognitive-evolutionary perspective is, according to these authors, one more of those jointly responsible for the tones of rampant individualism which characterize the societies of the last decades.

While they are far from attempting an associationist explanation of moral learning, Sichel and Carr call for the habit, and the early and regular practice of the moral behavior widely accepted by the community, as a solid foundation for the formation of the moral personality. They consider moral reasoning to be not just a step following the evolution of formal logical thinking, as Kohlberg's theory suggests. On the contrary, it requires as well, solid training in values and moral beliefs acquired as part of shared experience, the fruit of belonging to a community.

Obviously, this has practical consequences for education, contrary to what is postulated by the cognitive theory; for if experience in the practice of values, habit and insertion in communitary beliefs constitute the primary sustenance of moral conduct, then this is the moral equipment: "[...] those of the qualities or virtues ordinarily accepted in human family discourse, those that should remain at the heart of moral education" (Carr, 1991, p.93).

The concern of these authors for emphasizing the role of values and community beliefs in education is closely linked with the Aristotelean idea of society as a constitutive core of virtue. For Aristotle, the construction of individual virtue is not something apart from the cultural mechanism of community life. Both individual and collective virtue are part of a cultural commodity furnished by the society (Aristoteles, 1954). In that case, Sichel and Carr's thesis, which maintains that morality is not strictly an internal affair, but is a problem of the relationship between the individual and the collective, has its basis in the Aristotelean concept of man as a social being, which concept links moral existence with belonging to a social group.

Betty Sichel (1988) maintains that belonging to a social group (that is, the roots possessed within the group; the markings its history leaves on individuals; the early acquisition of its shared values; the ideals it holds in consensus; its accepted belief; the profound understanding of its symbols, metaphors, rites and rituals) are powerfully involved rationales and affective processes that incline agents toward its values, desires, moral sentiments, purposes, special interests and particular ideals.

The epistemological concept

At first glance, it seems simple to undermine an educational theory whose view of ethics fits so easily into the social and cultural heritage. One of the few certainties we have about morality is that you cannot just stick to the notions imposed by social norms; that the principles, beliefs and moral values, social mores and conventions that tradition transmits are subject to evaluation; and that it is the task of the autonomous moral agent to submit them to his own reasonable judgment. No doubt some considerations of this kind make of the theories of Sichel and Carr a vulnerable scheme of explanation and prescription for moral education; above all at the beginning of the Twenty-first Century, when we are attempting to face the challenges of the moral and civic training of our future generation, and seeking to create autonomous agents capable of recreating the world of morality so as to direct their actions toward horizons of greater justice and freedom.

In spite of this, not everything these authors propose should be discarded in an attempt to understand the theoretical foundations of a viable moral pedagogy. Some elements of their theories shed light on half-forgotten secrets in the conceptual labyrinth of problems pertaining to moral education. One of these elements has to do with the epistemological concept underlying their proposal. Relations. Although Sichel and Carr take little time in explaining the epistemological concept they use for corroboration of their theories, it is not difficult to infer the general statements that support these—namely, that human learning cannot be seen as the result of individual development, or as the atomized result of a universal and invariable evolutionary sequence, but must be understood as a dialectic spiral in which acquisitions of knowledge and development of thought are mutually assumed.

This concept has been defended by epistemologists and psychologists in recent decades. D.H. Hamlyn is an example. According to Hamlyn, knowledge presupposes some criterion of truth, and the criteria of truth are always the result of a valorative agreement. Therefore, individual learning is an initiation into the knowledge of a framework about which there is broad agreement, even though there exists a certain margin of divergences from some particular norms.

The child has to pass from a stage in which there is no distinction between the ego and the non-ego, to a stage where there is a correlative consciousness of himself and other spatiotemporal objects with a particular identity [...] There is no intrinsic difficulty in imagining that the child must learn to know his own identity as a person with a body; as distinct from other bodies with other identities. He could not do it alone, based on truly private experiences; the child is in the world and is part of it from the start, he is put in a situation to make this distinction by adults. His attention is drawn to them by the circumstances of his upbringing [...], so that the differences among the objects of his consciousness are imposed upon him. The corrective role played by adults has fundamental importance. Only through this, I believe, can emerge the concept of truth, and therein, the concept of judgment (Hamlyn, 1977, p. 345).

An analogous explanation of the knowledge acquisition process is found in those contemporary educational theories and practices which rely on the psychological theses pioneered by Lev Vygotsky in the Soviet Union. According to these, intellectual and psychic life is the result of “social impregnation that makes up the organism of each individual”—impregnation understood as a “dialectical movement, rather than unilateral from the inside out” (Menschinskaia, 1995).

For Vygotsky (1979), the psychological development of a child is not, as it is for Piaget, a stable point, but a flexible interval which is modified according to the internal progress of certain cognitive structures, as related with the experiences and acquisition of information and meanings obtained from the environment. Thus, specific learning engenders an area of potential development, for the reason that it stimulates and activates internal processes within the framework of the interrelationships which, although they are external conditions, become internal acquisitions. The development potential of a child includes, then, an area of continual movement which links the ability of independent action with the capacity for imitative or guided action.

This idea of a flexible range of psychological development, which Vygotsky calls the “Zone of Proximal Development”, has broad implications for moral education, because it establishes that cognitive development is partly the result of the adult’s guidance and the imitation that is played on the court of everyday experience with the society’s ways of life and interpersonal relationships. In this sense, Perez Gomez holds that :

[...] It is not so much the activity and coordination of the individual’s actions that are responsible for the formation of the formal structures of the mind, as it is the appropriation of cultural baggage produced by the historical evolution of humanity and transmitted in the educational relationship. Humanity’s historical conquests communicated from generation to generation imply not only content, or knowledge of spatiotemporal or cultural reality or cultural space-time, but also assume forms, strategies, models of knowledge, research, relations, and so on, which the individual grasps, comprehends, assimilates and practices. Thus Vygotsky stresses the value of instruction, educational transmission, and tutored activity (1993, p.50).

Unlike Piaget, Vygotsky and his disciples do not conceive of activity as reduced to the individual’s isolated interchange with some objects of his physical surroundings. Although they do not rule out this possibility, they put the accent on participation in group processes of cooperative pursuit, of interchanges of ideas and images in the learning of the cultural tones and meanings of the collective. In that sense, the physical experience of the child is not viewed as neutral and devoid of social content.

All experience takes place in a humanized world, with characters that sustain a real, socio-historical intention underlying the manifestations and organizations of the elements with which the child interacts. Within this mediated world, conditioned by man, the psychic development has its beginning (Perez Gomez, 1995, p.18).

This idea of the beginning of psychic development, supported by the aforementioned epistemological concept, requires reflection on that experience to which the agent is bound in the process of moral growth. Experience, in Aristotle, as in his contemporary followers, is understood as a habit, as the practice of virtue that defines and demands community life.

But if the experience of habit in moral behavior offers a platform for sustaining moral deliberation, must it necessarily be seen as a form of heteronomous direction of behavior? Or can it be understood as no more than that base which allows the deliberative game pertaining to the norms that might regulate it? On the basis of new theoretic developments that seek to explain and guide moral education, these questions, I think, would have to occupy a relevant place.

Rethinking an old paradox

The eternal paradox of moral education, that which seems to make incompatible transmission of traditional values and the impulse toward critical exercise, is being re-stated. But it is stated today, it seems to me, from a renewed perspective, a perspective that offers theoretical and practical solutions which need not conform either to the conservative and rigid transmission of values, or to a debatable axiological neutrality. Without sharing all the premises of Sichel and Carr's theories, or those of Aristotle himself, it is feasible to recognize the value of habit and transmission of shared social values, especially if those habits and assessments are the subject of a teaching which, far from sacrificing the development of cognitive skills, would encourage the exercise of self-evaluation and boost critical thinking as tools for questioning and recreating principles and values.

But to say this is to demand that we recognize, first, that the Kohlbergian notion of neutrality offered indisputable advantages, in the sense of framing education in an environment where differences in social customs, religious beliefs, personal opinions, life projects, moral practices, sexual preferences and political doctrines are respected. And this requires finding alternative forms of moral education that would conserve these advantages, and at the same time, meet the need established by an epistemological concept requiring a place in the educational process for the cultural and moral heritage that pervades the regular coexistence of social groups.

I maintain that approaching the idea of plurality would play a decisive role in this task. If the Kohlbergian prescription for axiological neutrality in moral education were replaced by a view associated with the plurality of values, the effects of

respect for differences would remain intact, and there would be gained, with it, the advantage of admitting the transmission of knowledge, beliefs and outlooks harmonious with a wide variety of life projects and different ways of understanding goodness and the good life. The variety and difference, it seems to me, would be additional elements favoring the developmental processes of moral autonomy; they would permit learners free choice, reasoned and responsible within a wide variety of ideas about goodness, and about very different and legitimate life projects.

In a word, the idea of plurality must be carefully delimited, since it might be found objectionable by those who see danger in accepting any sort of rule or principle without considering its moral characteristics. Too broad an assumption of plurality, in the arena of education, would be required to approve any opinion, practice or principle whatever; it would be obliged to consider as equally valid, for example, the defense of human rights and that of some racist doctrine.

The delimitation of the idea of plurality is to answer, then, to the notion of “reasonableness” or “rationality that John Rawls uses in defining his concept of “overlapping consensus”, a concept that allows one to escape the sort of ethical relativism which could draw too broad a notion of plurality.

The Rawlsian “overlapping consensus” is a complex idea that refers to the manner in which political liberalism, as a public concept of justice, sees diversity as a result of the fruits of human reason within the framework of free institutions. For the moment, however, I am not trying to describe all the identity features of the “overlapping consensus” in this theoretical context; I simply want to highlight a key element that draws on Rawls's vision of this form of consensus.

[...] We are looking for a consensus of reasonable comprehensive doctrines (as opposed to unreasonable or irrational doctrines). [where] the crucial fact is not pluralism, but reasonable pluralism [...which] is not an unfortunate condition in human life, as we might consider pluralism in itself, because it allows doctrines that are not only irrational, but foolish and aggressive. In shaping a political conception of justice so that an overlapping consensus may be gained, we are not subjecting ourselves to an existing unreasonableness, but adapting and submitting it to the fact of reasonable pluralism, which is itself the result of the exercise of free human reason in conditions of liberty (Rawls, 1995, p.146).

The “fact of reasonable pluralism”, thus understood, imposes necessary restrictions on the diversity of conceptions as to what is good. These are restrictions that prohibit going beyond limits that are not arbitrary, but are “reasonable”. They are limits that prevent, for example, violating the rights of others or violating the constitution of a constitutional state. At the same time, and because we are speaking of pluralism, there cannot prevail only one concept of good, which leaves room for an immeasurably wide range of reasonable doctrines.

Apparently, this idea of reasonable pluralism well suits the cognitive-developmental approach to neutrality, since it offers a solution congruent with the need to allow autonomous choice and the free exercise of reason to which moral education, properly understood, is committed. In turn, it allows an incorporation into the school curriculum of a great diversity of moral content which operates as a platform for the development of critical intelligence and contributes to the enrichment of autonomous deliberative processes on ethical codes and conduct.

Hence, we can return to the old paradox of moral education, and avow that there need be no incompatibility between the transmission of values and the fostering of critical intelligence development. Moral growth is not built at the margin of the customs, identities, belongings, ideals, principles and practices that shape social life; but neither is it reduced to that. Its backbone does not cease to be—as Kant suggested—the autonomy of reason. There can be salvaged, then, the theoretical incompatibility and practice which there was through to be between the transmission of moral doctrines (provided they are reasonable and plural) and the stimulation of critical exercise and a willingness to change.

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