

A Philosophical Approach to Moral Education

Philip Cam

School of Humanities and Languages

University of New South Wales

Moral education is a field of contention. Let me give an illustration to explain what I mean. There has been a long tradition in the USA of equating moral education with character development. This requires educational activities designed to develop what are taken to be desirable character traits. Such a scheme of things faces the obvious difficulty of settling on an agreed list of traits, but much more problematically it privileges what is known as virtue ethics, which ties morality to character, over other ethical frameworks, such as those that focus on the consequences of conduct, or on the intention with which someone acts. Commitment to a consequentialist ethics or to one centred on motives also has practical educational implications and is philosophically controversial. The same is obviously true of religiously inspired moral education that focuses on a religion's moral rules or commandments. Each scheme has philosophical and educational implications that are at odds with the others.

One way of dealing with the problem of competing schemes is to question whether moral education should have such things as ethical behaviour or character development as its proximate aim. What if moral education were directed instead at ethical knowledge and understanding? Such is aim of the philosophical approach to teaching ethics. Rather than settling on a scheme that is philosophically committed, it allows students to engage in an exploration of ethical subject matter, providing them with the opportunity to think about traditional virtues such as honesty and integrity, as well as the role of moral principles and the consequences of actions in regard to proper conduct.

This shift in aim corresponds to an old distinction between education and training. The traditional approaches set out to train young people to behave ethically according to one or another set of criteria, or to build desirable character traits. The philosophical approach aims to develop their knowledge and understanding of the moral domain in much the same way that we educate them in other domains, such as in science, mathematics, history or social studies. This is not to disparage training. Schools involve students in various kinds of training. Training in sport is an obvious example. Alongside sports training, however, we also have health education, which aims to develop students' knowledge and understanding of the determinants of good health. A similar distinction needs to be made in regard to moral education. Moral training goes along with behaviour management and the social training that students receive from a wide range of school activities. Moral education, properly speaking, is a field or aspect of study within the curriculum.¹ While we may (indeed, *should*) provide opportunities for students to apply their ethical knowledge and understanding, that ought to be as an adjunct to their studies.

Let me say something at this point about moral instruction. After all, moral education has often been delivered as "teaching by telling". This is not education in the sense of the exploration of concepts and principles, or the acquisition of critical judgment, but then neither is it training that aims to inculcate habits simply through practice. Moral instructions are either explicitly or by implication commands, rules, or codes of conduct with which we are expected to comply. Moral instruction informs the receiver of their moral obligations. This means that moral education delivered through instruction effectively centres on telling

students what to think and how to behave. Yet telling someone to accept something doesn't mean that they will, any more than the outward conformity of their conduct means that they do so with knowledge and understanding. More is required in order to morally educate someone than simply to instruct them. Knowledge taught by instruction is not knowledge acquired by students unless they both understand and accept it. This requires them to grasp the embedded ideas and to submit related propositions to appraisal and judgment. Developing these powers is something in addition to telling students what to think. For that, we need to cultivate their ability to think about the subject matter in which we instruct them.

The contrast between the philosophical approach and moral instruction and training is all the more obvious once we acknowledge that there is a moral dimension to school subjects, to which moral education should attend. In 2011, I was a consultant for the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority to help develop a framework for the general capability of what was then called Ethical Behaviour in the Australian curriculum.² Ethical Behaviour was one of the capabilities to be embedded in subjects across the curriculum. My co-developer and I immediately recognised that something was amiss with the tag 'ethical behaviour' in a curriculum context. Perhaps the easiest way to see this is to consider assessment. Since the curriculum for each subject was to have the general capability of Ethical Behaviour embedded in it, assessment in a subject would have to reflect the extent to which achievement standards for Ethical Behaviour were met. This suggests setting up curriculum standards for ethical conduct and grading students accordingly. It presents the peculiar prospect of adjusting marks in academic subjects on the basis of non-academic performance. That is indicative of a category error—of confusing or conflating things that belong to one logical category with things that belong to another category.³ In this case, it is to conflate conduct that is properly evaluated by reference to academic criteria with conduct that is properly evaluated by reference to moral criteria. Happily, the general competence on which we were working was eventually changed from Ethical Behaviour to Ethical Understanding, a title that reflects normal academic criteria and assessment standards.

It is not quite so obvious that the same would have been true had we been asked to embed moral instruction throughout the curriculum. Still, that would have raised the prospect of students being marked for their knowledge in a subject *and* for subscribing to the moral values in which they were instructed. It would have been to insist on prescribed answers to moral questions and to regard all other responses as wide of the mark or incorrect. In short, the mistake involved in embedding moral instruction throughout the curriculum would be to build moral judgments into the curriculum on the same basis as such things as statements of scientific fact and mathematical procedures and to teach and assess them accordingly.

To sum up my remarks so far: Moral instruction and training takes many forms in schools, including rules of conduct, everyday behaviour management, religious instruction, and character-building activities. They aim to guide behaviour in morally approved ways and to encourage the development of valued qualities and habits. All such efforts can be contrasted with developing an understanding of the moral domain through the systematic exploration of moral concepts and the principles of moral decision-making and judgment within the academic curriculum. The latter requires a form of moral education that goes beyond instruction and training.

The knowledge and understanding that students are expected to gain through the philosophical approach is that pursued in ethics. Ethics is the study of morality that, among other things, explores the language of morals, the sources of moral knowledge, the conditions of moral responsibility, and the justification of moral principles and appraisals. When we consider what kinds of knowledge and understanding are to be gained through such a study, three things stand out. They are knowledge and understanding of (1) moral concepts,

(2) ways of forming and evaluating moral judgments and, insofar as they inform practice, (3) know-how and discernment in handling moral matters. Notice that the last of these involves knowing and understanding *how*, whereas the other two involve knowing and understanding *that*.⁴ It implies that students should have the opportunity to apply what they learn about moral matters.

Unfortunately, I have time for only the briefest explanation of these things. A couple of comments will have to suffice. An understanding of moral concepts includes knowledge of the criteria that govern their use. In the Western tradition this approach to ethics goes all the way back to Socrates, who, as Cicero tells us, “was the first to call philosophy down from the heavens and set her in the cities of men and bring her also into their homes and compel her to ask questions about life and morality and things good and evil”.⁵ It is not that there was nothing approaching moral philosophy prior to Socrates, but as Aristotle says, it was Socrates “who first seriously investigated how the moral virtues with which he was concerned might be given general definition.” While the quest for general definitions may have been largely abandoned in Western philosophy, analysis of the language of morals is still prominent in moral philosophy. This tradition is one that could and should be incorporated into moral education. To take a simple illustration from the middle primary school, concepts such as fairness and friendship fall within this compass, and children of that age are quite capable of exploring the criteria that can be used to justify a claim that something is either fair or not fair, or that someone behaved like a friend, or did not. Students greatly increase their understanding of such concepts by investigating the criteria that govern their application.

Normative ethical theories help to systematise the ways in which people have approached and tried to justify moral judgments. For students to learn about what people in different times and places have relied upon to make and justify their moral judgments enlarges their social, cultural, and historical knowledge and understanding. Being knowledgeable about such matters also helps them to understand the sources of disagreement in their own society in dealing with ethical issues.

The philosophical approach to moral education has the kind of scope and complexity that lends itself to curriculum construction. To take an example for illustration, consider the criteria that apply to assignments of moral responsibility. This includes the role of such things as a person’s intentions in acting and the foreseeable consequences of their conduct, and raises issues around the extent to which they had control of their actions, including whether they were in a position to do otherwise. Consideration of these criteria leads to the question whether the intention with which someone acts is morally more important than the consequences of their actions, and to the exploration of such concepts as those of freedom and control. Again, attending to just one of these strands, we may observe that a person cannot be morally responsible for something over which they had no control. To claim that they *should* have done something is to imply that they *could* have done it, just as to say that they should not have done something is to imply that they could have avoided doing it. The adage that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’ leads to consideration of what ‘can’ and ‘could’ mean in this context and thereby to the knot of problems that make up the traditional philosophical problem of freewill. As this example illustrates, a philosophical approach to moral education allows considerable latitude for the scope and sequence of a school curriculum—in this case, beginning in the early years with the elementary consideration of what it means to be responsible, going on to explore a range of concepts and topics in progressively more sophisticated ways, before eventually coming to the bearing of a traditional metaphysical problem on the ethical domain.

Developing students’ knowledge and understanding is as much about process as it is about content. The key to the methodological element in studying ethics is to remind ourselves that we are talking about *inquiry*. Ethics employs the tools and procedures of inquiry. This means that the philosophical approach to moral

education requires those tools and procedures to be taught. Just as mathematics cannot be taught without introducing the tools of mathematics and having students learn how to use them to carry out mathematical operations, so it is in ethics. As with its substantive subject matter, this is not the place to enter into a detailed discussion. Suffice it to say that the procedures include (1) identifying an ethical problem or issue, (2) probing ethical problems and issues by asking appropriate questions about them, (3) addressing such questions by identifying possible answers that may be given to them, (4) engaging in the reasoned consideration of those answers and (5) arriving at justifiable conclusions. Such procedures cannot be carried out effectively without the use of appropriate conceptual and reasoning tools. On the conceptual side, these relate to such things as clarification, classification, distinction-making, definition, and examining and employing conceptual criteria. The tools of reasoning include justification, explanation, identifying assumptions, and inference-making, as well as attending to validity and soundness in constructing and examining arguments.

Once we make this inquiry collaborative, social procedures also come to the fore. This includes listening to others with whom you disagree, being reasonable in dealing with differences and disagreements, and developing a more inclusive outlook. Students engaged in collaborative inquiry learn to see themselves as members of a cooperative community where they value each other's contributions and refrain from dominating or excluding others. They become used to considering different points of view, of accepting fair criticism of their ideas and arguments, and withholding judgment or changing their minds when appropriate. By exploring their thoughts and ideas together, they learn to show respect for people with whom they disagree, to be considerate of individual and cultural differences, and to develop care and concern for each other. Collaborative ethical inquiry is, in sum, a form of moral training. It provides a direct link between moral education and training.

Learning to use these tools and procedures to address ethical problems and issues provides students with the means of thinking about moral matters and engaging with one another in ways that they would otherwise be ill-equipped to do. Combined with knowledge of the kinds of considerations that inform ethical traditions, and an adequate understanding of ethical concepts, students become far more able to deal with moral matters in a thoughtful and reasonable fashion. The philosophical approach therefore provides a basis for practical moral decision-making which schools can build upon by providing opportunities for its application. We should not lose sight of the fact that genuine know-how and discernment come about through the application of knowledge and understanding to practical issues and problems, regardless of whether we are speaking of engineering or ethics. This only serves to acknowledge the need for education in addition to training. We do not unleash engineers upon the world without the knowledge and understanding that only a thoroughgoing education in engineering can provide. The point of my remarks this evening is that neither should those who graduate from our schools go forth into the world without an adequate grounding in ethics.

¹ This is the approach taken in my *Teaching Ethics in Schools* (Melbourne: ACER Press, 2012).

² For an overview of the general capabilities in the Australian curriculum, including what is now called 'Ethical Understanding,' see <http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/generalcapabilities/overview/general-capabilities-in-the-australian-curriculum>

³ The notion of a category error, or category mistake, was first introduced by Gilbert Ryle in *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1949), Chapter 1.

⁴ The distinction between 'knowing how' and 'knowing that' also comes from Ryle. See *The Concept of Mind*, Chapter 2, and 'Knowing how and knowing that,' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Vol. 46 (1945–1946), pp. 1–16.

⁵ Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, with an English translation by J.E. King (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1966).