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# RE-EXAMINING THE SOURCE OF MORALITY IN CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION: A BRIEF RESPONSE TO ARISTOTLE

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## Abstract

The work has established that the teaching of moral virtue (as providing a rationale for authoritative appeals to morality) has been woefully lacking in African schools today and so there is need to revisit it if children are to be moulded into good moral citizens. Through the use of conceptual analysis and the questionnaire method, it was observed that authoritative appeals to morality alone could not increase the child's moral awareness; neither did it improve the child's moral reasoning structures. About 60 pupils from four primary schools in Harare participated in this study and the results of the study showed that authoritative appeals to morality did very little in morally conscientising children in primary schools. The study also challenged Aristotle who had argued that moral virtues could not be taught as they were informed by habit (Ostwald, 1962: 33). The work advocated for the position that moral virtue cannot be formed by habit alone. Rather, it can be aided by moral instruction, as this would provide the underlying rationale or justification for authoritatively appealing to moral rules and principles. To this end, the paper re-examined some of the moral rules and principles (as sources of morality) with a view to establishing whether through appealing to such rules and principles, moral virtue can be successfully cultivated in our citizens. These two sources were divided into authoritative and rational appeals to rules and principles in citizenship education.

## Introduction

There has been a tendency to confuse authoritative precepts to morality or to reduce morality to mere conventions. Even in *The Republic*, Socrates is grappling with this problem where he is trying to convince the sophists that justice, as a moral concept, cannot be reduced to mere conventions, but is an inner state of the soul with each of its parts being able to fulfil its own function under the rule of reason which enlists the aid of the spirited part

(the feelings) in controlling the appetites (Crube, 1974: 86). This work will not, however, concentrate on arguments and refutations in *The Republic*, but it will show that although authoritative appeals to rules and principles can be very important to non-moral agents such as infants or kindergartens, in the first stage of Lawrence Kohlberg's stages of moral development, such authoritative appeals need not be taken as the final source of moral virtue, the end in view of moral instruction. Inasmuch as children will always be required to obey authority, they also need the underlying rationale behind such authoritative pronouncements, be it *defacto* or *dejure*. This work gives a catalogue of authoritative appeals to rules and principles and tries to explain how and why such appeals fall short of being called moral precepts. The work, therefore, seeks to show that reason and reason alone should define morality. Children need to know why certain rules should be obeyed or why certain actions should be avoided. This is the same project that Aristotle is undertaking in *The Nicomachean Ethics* to show that moral virtue should be informed by reason aided by habit. The only difference is that for Aristotle, moral virtue cannot be taught while the position of this paper is that moral teaching can complete the process. The project of teaching in schools can only proceed if the concept of virtue is re-emphasised. This may sound like a direct challenge to Aristotle who believes that moral virtue cannot be taught, but the point is that since it is possible to initiate children into certain authoritative rules and principles, all that instructors or teachers need to do is to explain to children reasons why we should respect certain rules or conventions.

### **Instrumentation and Procedure**

In this research, conceptual analysis was used as a research instrument to establish whether through appealing to authority alone, pupils can be introduced to moral reasoning structures and learn to be good citizens. It was established, during the course of this study, that children accepted certain rules in class without being rationally conscious of their implications to their daily lives. Of the 60 pupils who were studied at four primary schools in Harare, 54 (90%) showed that they avoided being late to school for fear of punishment by their teachers. They also wanted to do well in class because of certain rewards that came with such performances. It is, therefore, clear from this study that pupils were motivated more by extrinsic rewards to do well in class than by the fact that doing well was something good in itself. The research involved one infant class (grade 2) and one junior class (grade 5) but the results obtained were almost the same. The pupils and teachers

were informed about the purpose of the study. They were assured that the data they were to provide were for academic purposes only and that the research was being done in strict confidence.

### **Research Methodology**

The study was meant to establish whether by appealing to authority alone, children can be taught to be good citizens. Since this is a study in the area of Philosophy, the method of conceptual analysis was used although the questionnaire method was constantly referred to. This method was used to fetch answers from 60 pupils at four Primary Schools in Harare. The random sampling method was used to select the classes: namely grades 2 and 5. The only problem encountered through the use of this questionnaire method was that some teachers could not return the questionnaires on time and others decided not to return them at all, making it very difficult to come up with accurate information regarding the study. However, for those questionnaires which were returned, the responses were quite clear and precise. We will now delve into the core issues of the study by, first, briefly defining citizenship education so as to position our argument.

### **Citizenship Education: A brief definition**

One cannot define citizenship education before defining the concept of a citizen, the concept of education and the concept of morality. A citizen, according to E.M Kirkpatrick (1983:230), is a member of a state, a freeman/woman or a civilian. Citizenship is, therefore, the state of being or of having rights and duties as a citizen. R.S Peters (1959: 85) defines education as a discipline that relates to some sort of processes in which a desirable state of mind develops. Education, for Peters, is a value-laden concept, that is, it is a moral concept. To be educated is to be moral. Morality relates to those social rules or principles that guide and regulate human behaviour. In this article, citizenship education shall be defined as instruction in morality or moral virtue.

### **Authoritative appeals to rules and principles in citizenship education**

It is important to note that many people today identify and equate moral principles with particular rules and these rules may often (though not always) depend on authoritative pronouncements of parents, teachers, or religious

institutions such as churches as sources of justification. To be moral, then, on this interpretation is simply to live in accordance with certain rules that are validated by appeals to authority, "that is what my father told me or that is what the Bible says" (Straughan, 1982: 54). This is not, of course, the only kind of justification that could be offered for such rules. One might appeal to other 'non-authoritative' considerations such as personal satisfaction, social cohesion, the preservation of family unit or the prevention of a sexually transmitted infection. Nor should it be assumed that only sexual rules might be identified with morality in this way.

Straughan (1982: 55) maintains: "because the main point of issuing authoritative pronouncements is to rule out the possibility of independent judgement, attempts to define the 'moral content' this way are bound to be futile." Nothing can become morally right because someone says that it is so, and that obedience to an authority is, strictly speaking, irrelevant to the business of moral decision-making. Rather, some degree of free choice and independent judgements seems to be a necessary part of what it means to be a moral agent (Peters, 1981: 252). Given that authoritative pronouncements may be based on mistaken assumptions or wrong premises, it would be absurd for one to hold on to such appeals as, I love CAPS United Football Club or Dynamos Football Club, without having a rational basis for that. Authoritative pronouncements can only be used as sources of justification if they are accompanied by a rationale. Against this background, Straughan (1982: 26) quotes Kurt Baier who says,

If I hold that it is wrong to drink or smoke because my father says so, and if it really is the fact alone that he does say so to which I am appealing, then my belief is of an arbitrary kind, which cannot count as a moral judgement. But if I hold that it is wrong to drink or smoke because my father has pointed and explained to me the dangers and problems which these activities may create...then my belief does not rest upon the mere fact of his making a pronouncement, but upon other considerations to which he has drawn my attention and which I have independently evaluated myself.

As Baier maintains, a person may value the moral advice and guidance of some people on the basis of them directing his attention to the moral aspects of situations in a way which the person may find illuminating (*Ibid* 1982: 62). Clearly, extreme versions of this view which rely solely on the fact that such-and-such an authority exists and pronounces will result in rigid codes of

conduct being laid down for children to follow unquestioningly, often reinforced by punishments to be inflicted for breaches of the authority's rules though whether such a process can properly be allowed the title of moral education is questionable. Immanuel Kant, who argues that morality cannot be hypothetical but rather categorical, heavily challenges this. Hypothetical imperatives for Kant, set conditions for actions, for example, if you want to get the job, then you should pass the interview. Morality cannot be understood this way but in the categorical sense, which stipulates reasons for actions. For instance, "murder is bad because it is motivated by bad intentions" (Guyer, 1998: 81).

However, the highest moral accolade will probably be reserved for respect of authority itself as a general rule or principle, because it is only through adherence to that precept that such a system can be maintained: "Conversely, critical questions will be treated as educational and moral vices rather than virtues, as they may pose a threat to the status and reputation of the authority in question" (Straughan, 1982:57).

The description of the source of moral virtue sounds proper, yet there must be a few teachers or parents who can deny ever having responded to a child's "why...?" With that most economical of answers, "Because I say so!" and indeed is this answer always to be deplored? Elaborate, reasoned explanation and justification is inappropriate in the hurly-burly of a classroom or play ground of family riot, and an emphatic reference to the teacher's or parent's role as an authority on such occasions may be the most effective (or the only) way of supporting a moral directive. Yet, although this kind of procedure may occasionally be justifiable, Straughan (1982: 57) argues that,

The fact remains that a system of control, which tries to transmit a particular code of conduct to children, simply by pointing to the fact that the code is prescribed by some authority, cannot claim to be doing anything that can be called either moral or educational.

Getting children to be obedient, for Straughan, is not teaching them to be good. The learning of conventional rules and principles is problematic in that "...young children do, as a matter of fact, see the dictates of authority as a sufficient and valid form of moral justification" (Straughan, 1982: 58). For Straughan, appeals to authority may, however, be unavoidable when dealing with young children...it would be surprising or paradoxical to discover

that children have to pass through certain non-moral stages of thinking before they can get to grips with morality proper. If we wish children to come to exercise their moral judgement at some stage, it would seem that to offer, simple reasoned justifications for rules even to young children can at worst do no harm, and may at best encourage the gradual development of more rational thinking (Straughan, 1982: 58).

As Peters postulates, "teaching implies the exercise of various forms of authority. So teaching children to be good citizens can hardly be a totally non-authoritative business even though morality can never be defined in terms of mere obedience to authority" (Nibblet, 1963: 18). Authoritative appeals to moral rules and principles remain the starting point of moral education, not its end in view. But if authoritative appeals cannot supply the subject matter of moral rules and principles, what other sources can we look to? Many philosophers have held that morality is essentially a rational matter and that reasoned justification forms its central core. Peters has, in this regard, come up with what can be referred to as rational appeals to rules and principles in morality and moral education. For Peters, all authoritative pronouncements should have the underlying rationale.

### **Rational appeals to rules and principles in citizenship education**

Peters begins with what he calls the activity of "practical discourse" or "practical reason": "the situation postulated is one in which any individual, possessed of public language, asks the question, 'what ought I to do?' " There are alternatives open to him and he is asking for reasons for adopting one alternative rather than another (Peters, 1966: 121). If a person is seriously discussing with others or with himself what he ought to do, Peters maintains that he is thereby accepting the importance of seeking reasons for action and is also acknowledging implicitly the validity of certain moral principles (*Ibid*, 1966: 121). For instance, the principle of fairness or justice can be established in this way, because by searching for reasons why one should treat somebody in one way rather than another, one is tacitly granting that different forms of treatment are justified only if different situational factors exist. In other words, "fairness means treating people in the same way unless there are relevant differences between them and looking for these relevant differences is an integral part of considering seriously what one ought to do" (Straughan, 1982: 74).

Peters also deduces the principles of truth telling, freedom, consideration of others' interests and respect for persons. Truth telling, for Peters, becomes a necessary moral principle, because for a person seriously to ask: "what ought I to do?" presupposes that he is concerned to pursue and discover the truth. Freedom entails non-interference when doing what one perceives as good, that is, consideration of others' interests. Respect for persons entails committing oneself to listening to what other people have to say about the matter and respecting their view points ( *Ibid.*, 1966: 75). This is exactly what Kant's second maxim says about respect for persons, "act so as to treat humanity always as ends and never merely as means to your own ends" (Raphael, 1981:56).

So Peters seems to be taking a cue of this Kantian maxim as stipulated in the categorical imperative. The argument here seems to be that human beings have a rational capacity and this differentiates them from lower animals like dogs, donkeys and monkeys that are not bestowed with this capacity. As a result, they (human beings) deserve respect. Expecting people to respect authority unquestioningly, without providing a rational basis is tantamount to treating them merely as a means to one's own ends. From a Kantian perspective moral virtue cannot proceed this way. For Peters, as quoted in Straughan (1982: 75),

These principles do not provide straightforward answers to questions about what one ought to do in any particular situation. To implement the principle of fairness, for example, one would have to decide what counts as a 'relevant difference' between two people, which might justify treating them differently. The principle alone will not tell a teacher, for instance, how to treat children of different abilities, backgrounds, ages and sex within the same moral area. Telling the truth may not always be thought compatible with considering others' interests.

These "practical problems", as Straughan (1982: 76) likes to call them, however, do not pose any real threat to Peters' position, for he is not claiming to provide a moral instruction manual with answers tailor-made for all contingencies, but rather a general framework of guiding principles which all moral deliberation must take into account. The main difficulty about Peters' argument is that one must participate in the moral field or area, or in Straughan's terms, one must be a moral agent before its force can be felt. As Straughan (1982: 76) postulates:

Once I am in the (moral) position of "seriously" asking questions about what I morally ought to do, then I may well be implicitly accepting that there are necessary, moral principles of the kind which Peters describes, but have to be playing the moral game before I can see the point of its rules.

Peters seems to be saying that before accepting any rules there is need to seriously reflect on them, to puzzle through rather than to simply accept them because they come from a respectable authority. The power of reason should dictate whether these moral rules would have a binding force to us or not.

According to Dearden (1998: 173), "this clearly imposes on the scope of Peters' theory, but the fact remains that the vast majority of people do qualify as moral agents, in the sense that they sometimes ask moral questions and make moral decisions they are often unclear as to what sort of reasons count as morally relevant in deciding what they ought to do. In this situation, Peters' account is particularly handy as it draws the attention of the moral agent to the hidden implications of asking moral questions, by describing a specific set of moral principles to which he must already be committed, perhaps unknowingly."

Peters dwells significantly on the business of moral education. This account of morality suggests some particular problems likely to be encountered in teaching children to be good citizens. Straughan maintains that Peters' theory presupposes a moral agent asking 'serious' moral questions and following the rule of the moral game, but Straughan asks: How do children learn to play this game? (Peters, 1974: 253). Morality, according to Peters, is based on principles though not in a rigid or unreasoning way. He says:

My concern is for the development of an autonomous type of character who follows rules in a rational and discriminating manner, that is, a person must be able to use rationality to follow certain rules at the expense of others. He must not only come to know what is, in general, right or wrong; he must also go beyond the level of what Plato called the "doxa, that is correct opinion," so that he sees why such rules are right and wrong and can revise rules and make new ones in the light of new knowledge and new circumstances (Peters, 1974:253).

But how can children be encouraged to develop towards this level? This is the paradox of moral education. For the major difficulty here is that young children are far from being rational or autonomous characters able to appreciate that reasons can justify rules and that rules can be in partially evaluated and revised as was observed during the course of this study. As Peters argue, "the brute facts of child development reveal that at the most formative years of a child's development, he is incapable of this form of life and impervious to the proper manner of passing it on" (*Ibid*: 271). It is for this reason that Peters sees habit formation as playing an essential part in the moral development of young children; "they can or must enter the palace of reason through the courtyard of habit and tradition" (Peters, 1974: 272). Peters seems to be borrowing this idea from Aristotle. In book 2 of *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues that, there are two categories of virtue, namely, intellectual virtue and moral virtue. Peters further remarks,

Intellectual virtue, for Aristotle, owes its origin and development chiefly to teaching and for that reason requires experience and time. Moral virtue, on the other hand, is formed by habit, ethos and its name ethike is therefore derived by a slight variation, from ethos. This shows too that none of the moral virtues is implanted in us by nature, for nothing which exists by nature can be changed by habit (Ostwald, 1962: 33).

Thus, the virtues are implanted in us neither by nature nor contrary to nature. We are, by nature, equipped with the ability to receive them and habit brings this ability to completion and fulfilment (*Ibid*, 1962: 33). Aristotle, here, seems to be suggesting that moral virtues cannot be imparted to children by means of formal instruction, but he is somehow silent as to how habit and habit alone can form these virtues. The thesis defended in this work is that while it may be difficult, or rather, impossible for moral virtue to be taught (as Aristotle reasoned), moral instruction can enhance habit in the candour of moral formation. It is this teaching or moral instruction which will provide the underlying rationale as to why some actions are good while others are bad. Moral instruction will help children to run away from dogmatic authoritative appeals to moral rules and principles and appreciate the meaning and value of such rules and/or principles.

It is my humble submission, in this paper, that habit and habit alone cannot provide justification for moral decision-making. It has to be aided by some form of moral instruction or teaching. The argument that Aristotle is

presenting is deductive and is more applicable to the occident than to the African context. In the Shona society, when children inquire about biological issues like, *Mhamha mwana mamuwana kupi ?* (Mum, where did you get the baby?); the children are often told all sorts of stories like *ndamutenga kuchipatara* (I bought him or her at the hospital). All this is meant to hide information, which is considered taboo to persons who have not yet matured and cannot build moral concepts at that age. But when asked to justify her position by the child, the mother would simply say, "Babies are bought." This makes sense to the child at that age. It is during the adolescence stage that the child will discover the real truth.

The argument remains that, there is a level at which children need to be taught values and virtues without hitting the target. This should not be interpreted to mean that children could not attain moral virtue through teaching. All the superstitions in the Shona and Ndebele culture serve as teaching methods in the area of morality and etiquette and as justification can be easily provided for them. *Ukagara munzira unoita mamota* (if you sit on the road, you will develop boils). This proposition should not be taken literally to mean that sitting on the road is catastrophic to health, but is meant to safeguard children against common road accidents. The expression is hidden but much stronger than simply telling children not to sit on the road because of the prospect of accidents.

For Louis Alvin Day (2003: 6), the question of whether morality or moral virtues can be taught is difficult and controversial, it must, however, be confronted directly. For Day, there are two schools of thought on this matter. Cynics contend that ethics is not a proper subject for study at all because it raises questions without providing clear answers (*Ibid*, 2003: 6). Besides, the sceptics argue, knowledge of ethical principles and norms does not necessarily produce a moral person. On the contrary, when confronted with real ethical dilemmas, people will ignore whatever wisdom was dispensed in an ethics course and act in their own self-interest. And in all candors, there is some credible evidence, spanning the last fifty years that character education classes and conventional religious instruction programmes apparently have no significant influence on moral conduct. Sceptics also argue that children's moral development is completed before they reach school and thus, that such character education classes can have little effect (*Ibid*, 2003: 6).

This view assumes, of course, that moral maturity...unlike physical maturity ends at a very early age, a dubious proposition at best (Day, 2003:7). Indeed,

we are a work in progress, ethically speaking. Age is no barrier to the cultivation of moral virtue or the accumulation of moral wisdom. Day seems to be making a very crucial point here, which is in line with the position taken by this work, that children are capable of assimilating moral values through teaching or moral instruction as they have the potency by virtue of being human beings.

This project starts at informal (family) level where parents use folklores and superstitions to impart moral knowledge to their children. The project is then taken over by schools where the teaching becomes formalised. The other school of thought represented by optimistic proponents of formal ethics training holds that ethics is a subject like Maths, Physics or History with its own set of problems and distinctive methods of solving them. In this view, there is a body of moral knowledge that awaits the ethically inquisitive mind.

Thus, the study of ethics is the key to understanding moral conduct and to improving the human spiritual condition. Surely, the optimists contend, this objective is worth of attention in academic curricula. Socrates reflects this view when he remarks bluntly in Plato's *Apology* that, "the unexamined life is not worth living." However, even Socrates, apparently doubted at one time that morality was teachable, but the urgent public criticism of the ethical standards of the professions, in general compels us to accept the optimistic view of ethics instruction. This also vindicates Peters' position that children must be taught a set of "basic rules" which they come to adopt as habits in as rational a manner as is possible for them at that time, until they are able to think more critically about how such rules must be justified.

However, Peters raises a fundamental question: "But how are we to decide what these "basic rules" are to be? (Peters, 1974: 272). Again we are faced with the problem of defining the subject matter of morality. Peters sees no difficulty here. He argues that there is considerable agreement between "reflective people" about what the basic rules are, those concerning contracts, property, the care of the young and the avoidance of pain and injury. Indeed, Peters takes a utilitarian stance here. These rules, in Peters' view, are necessary for any tolerable form of social life and are closely connected with the more general moral principles already mentioned (Straughan, 1982:78).

There is probably more room for disagreement here than Peters allows over which "basic rules" children should be taught. This list of rules is a short one,

which could hardly constitute an adequate moral code for young children yet even this limited set of rules, may not be accepted by all reflective people as being unquestioningly moral. Bring together a group of parents which includes some Marxists, child-centred atheists, some squatters, some gypsies and some fundamentalist Christians all of whom would, of course, claim to be reflective people, and you are not likely to find much agreement over particular rules about property, contracts and the care of the young, even if they all accept the general principles which Peters enumerates. Straughan raises this question, "so are we to decide upon a commonly agreed set of moral rules to which children should become habituated in the early stages of their moral development?" (*Ibid*, 1982: 78).

Despite these difficulties, which tend to confront any study of morality and moral education, Peters' work in this area is extremely useful. In particular, the way in which he tries to reconcile his account of morality with the facts of child development produces a realistic picture of how moral education might proceed, it illustrates well, how philosophical questions have to be asked about the nature of morality itself before one can decide whether or not one can teach children to be good citizens or whether it is possible to instruct children in moral virtue:

### **Conclusion**

The work looked at morality and moral virtue with a view to showing how and to what extent authority can be used as a source of morality and/or moral rules and principles in the moral development of the African child. An attempt was made to show that authority could only provide the raw materials and reason could complete such efforts, for authority without justification in the cognitive moral development of the child is bound to be futile. The work also looked at the place of moral instruction or teaching as the window through which moral virtues could be attained. For all intents and purposes, Aristotle, the Cynics and the Sceptics had defended the thesis that moral virtue could not be taught as it was attained through the courtyard of habit. In the final analysis, the paper challenged this Aristotelian position by maintaining that habit alone was not enough to justify the existence of moral rules and principles, hence, the need to place emphasis on moral instruction or teaching both at informal (family) and at formal (school) level.

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