

Moral Reflection and Moral Education

John F. Covaleskie

Northern Michigan University

First, I want to thank Rosner for giving me a reason to revisit *The Gorgias*,¹ which I had not read in some time. It does, as she reminds us, raise some interesting questions about the nature of moral community.

Rosner points to two avenues of reflection suggested by *The Gorgias* and her class's reaction to it: "First, as a way of looking at the discourse within the dialogue itself, and also as a way of looking at the classroom discourse." As I considered *The Gorgias* with Rosner, I found myself considering two equally serious, but quite different questions that weave through the dialogue: (1) What is the content of the moral domain? and (2) What is the means by which we pursue moral development in our own lives? This raises a new question for us as educators: Is there a difference between the moral development of adults and the moral education of children?

To ask this question is, I suspect, to be half way to answering it. The sort of moral reflection that Socrates, Gorgias, and the others were engaged in, as was the case in Rosner's class, was the mature moral reflection of those who are already part of a moral community, the value and appropriateness of which they are able to consider and evaluate. While teachers surely need to engage in moral reflection themselves, that is not necessarily what they are doing when they are teaching. Rather, as teachers, their job is to bring new members into their moral community, which their moral reflections have caused them to affirm.

Putting a Deweyan perspective on this task points to the fact that we should bring the young into this community so that they are properly and seriously normed into it, but in such a way that does not preclude their engaging in moral reflection as adults. However, we note that moral reflection is done against the background of an existing moral consensus. Thus, Socrates contravenes the moral sensibility of his community in arguing against Polus to the effect that it is better to be harmed than to cause harm. However, he shows this to be so as a consequence of the moral principles accepted by the discussants. This ability to critique a society by the light of its own moral commitments is an important aspect of social progress, as Walzer argues persuasively.²

The distinction Rosner makes, following Dewey, between "customary" and "reflective" morality then becomes useful in considering the different ways we as adults function in the moral domain. And it is here that I may part company with her, though I am not sure this is the case. She seems to consider "customary morality" as a weaker and less productive sort than "reflective morality." Distinguishing between the two, she tells us that "reflective thought gave rise to nuanced and expanded discussion, while 'customary' responses, responses which seemed formed out of habit, tended to confine discussion."³ While I may be reading too much into Rosner's tone, she does seem to be recommending reflective morality to us as generally superior to the customary sort.

I wonder if this is so. First, in most of my life, I do want my morality to be “customary,” indeed, automatic. That is what we normally mean when we speak of someone possessing virtue; there is a settled disposition to act morally. When we shift our consideration to children and to their moral education, then clearly we are in a different moral world than Rosner and her classmates. For as we deal with children who are learning right from wrong, a great deal of what we want to do is to limit their degrees of freedom while good moral habits are inculcated. So the very openness that is an essential part of the moral deliberations of adults is a serious impediment to the moral training of children; similarly, the limits that customary morality places on the actions and judgments of children would prevent the sorts of moral conversations that Rosner and her classmates engaged in.

We also want to consider the difference between moral philosophy and moral education; I want to suggest that this latter difference maps, at least roughly, onto the distinction between “reflective” and “customary” morality. Taking these two together, I want to suggest that moral philosophy — “reflective morality” — is appropriate for adults in a way that it is not for children. Children are surely capable of moral insight (the work of Robert Coles is strikingly effective in making this point), but not of the sort of reflection that adults are. Further, even in Coles’s work, it is not clear the extent to which the moral insights of his children are themselves reflections of a clear and unambiguous moral education from parents or some other significant adults.

Children are relevantly different from adults. One difference is that the adults are part of a moral community already; they have been shaped into a particular sort of moral being by the community/communities in which they were reared. Now to understand the importance of “reflective morality” is to understand that the process is never completed, that our moral commitments are always open to revision and reconsideration, that moral development never ends. This is the stance Socrates occupies when he says that he would be most happy to be proved wrong about his beliefs; he is the paradigmatic learner, aware that the job of moral reflection and the consequent effect of moral development never ends; we are never morally perfect, and therefore our moral development is never completed.

Thus it makes both philosophical and pedagogical sense to differentiate between the moral education of children and the moral development of adults. For children, the most effective means of moral education may well be the sort of imposition of customary morality of which the cultural conservatives are so enamored. Now this causes a great deal of legitimate consternation on the part of social progressives. However, it seems to me that some moral teachings of cultural conservatives are objectionable not because of the way they are taught, but because of the content. Progressives want to make the claim that teachings on the right about treatment of the poor and of the different, and about social obligation in general are, to put it baldly, immoral. Arguments that are often phrased in terms of means (indoctrination versus something else) are more often really disagreements about content: What is it that constitutes proper morality? To answer this question, we must indeed engage in a different kind of reflection.

Thus the question becomes not just what is the Deweyan perspective on this matter, but also what are the instructional implications thereof? For Dewey himself was always quite clear about the role that education would play in moral formation, and the extent to which democracy required the development of certain human capacities over others. Thus, while humans are capable of both greed and generosity, rationality and irrationality, discipline or random behavior, democratic society requires the development of some of these traits over others. While Dewey believed that education for democracy required an “apprenticeship” in democratic life within the classroom, it did not follow that all decisions were to be made democratically. It did, however, require that decisions be made with attention to the intellectual, moral, and psychological requirements of democratic life (to whatever extent these things can be really, not just conceptually, separated). As he makes clear in *Democracy and Education*,⁴ and even more clear in *Experience and Education*,⁵ a child’s development needs to be under the conscious guidance of the adults charged with her care. This requires a balancing act between allowing the child too little freedom to develop the capacity for choice and so much freedom that there is no guidance of the development. Moral, like intellectual, development takes place within a formed community, which it is the job of the school to pass on to the children, who will be prepared at a later stage of their social life to consider and evaluate the moral consensus by which their social group lives. The job of education is, in some sense, to prepare every member of the moral community to be able to offer the sort of “internal critique” that Walzer describes as historically the province of a few. From a Deweyan perspective, the job becomes to teach children customary morality in such a way that they can become reflective about it.

1. Plato, *The Gorgias*, trans. W.C. Hembold (Indianapolis: The Library of Liberal Arts, 1952).

2. Michael Walzer, *The Company of Critics: Social Criticism and Political Commitment in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

3. *Ibid.*, 2.

4. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (1916; reprint, New York: The Free Press, 1966).

5. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (1938; reprint, New York: Collier Books, 1963).