

'Moral Education: Morality versus Hegemony', *International Journal for Applied Ethics*, University of Delhi, Vol 6, 2017-18, 53-65, ISSN: 2321-2497.

Moral Education: Hegemony vs. Morality

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Abstract

The paper inculcates the path of modern education by implementing cum ensuing the form and content of moral education from the stances of prescriptivist R. M Hare and existentialist Sartre. In the first part of the paper, Hare's tune for language centric moral concepts and its prescriptive plus universalistic application for society enhance an outlook for moral education where learners should be taught to apply morality from a prescriptive sense, not by memorizing it in a descriptive manner. Besides, Sartre's existentialist appeal delineates moral education as a free choice of a learner where any institutional hegemony becomes trivial.

The second part of the paper focuses on the content of moral education. What sort of moral laws make the content of moral education justifiable? Here Russell's approach takes a pertinent role. We should secure modern education from the social and state's anarchism. A way out that I depict in the last section of the paper stresses on moral education that evades itself from the repression of the pedagogue or rigid principles. Modern education should quest for *why* and liberal neutrality not by following the rigid rules obediently. Moral education teaches children about their own rights and the rights of the other in a beneficial manner.

The legendary thinker Bertrand Russell best expresses the aphorism on which my paper concentrates, as he notes:

What I do mean is that the educational system we must aim at producing in the future is one which gives to every boy and girl an opportunity for the best that exists. (Russell, 1960, 13)

Therefore, the dictum aims to depict gender-neutral education system basing on the best existing possibilities for the development of modern education in a universal prudence. Here education is not any *ornament* that makes only advantage for the rich person in the society. The uniformity that modern education pursues must be cradled on the scientific and moral

centric elements, which are seldom confined in the boundary of anarchism and aristocratism. The policy, which the modern education should uphold, is nothing but the Kantian maxim that generates morality to an end instead of a mean. Nevertheless, we should grant our education from the level of means for the students. We must treat the students as ends by wiping off our inclination towards aristocracy and biases towards excellent category students. These are the general principles of morality that refrain modern education from the hegemony of societal hierarchy that I will confer later.

The Form of Moral Education

The conception of morality has different ways and philosophers put their fingers to work out the structure of morality and its relation to education in different outlooks. R. M Hare, an eminent ethicist gets rid of the traditional definition of morality from the sense of right and wrong and virtue, vice etc. He emphasizes morality as essentially interlinked with language and its structure. An agent can comprehend the notion of moral terms through the meaning of the term used in language. Therefore, language is the medium of morality and for Hare, ‘the language of morals is one sort of prescriptive language’. (Hare, 1952, 1) The structure of language not only depends on prescriptive sense, but also in its descriptive uses. Similarly, morality has some descriptive sense like the statement ‘She is a good girl’. Hare considers this sort of sentence becomes reminiscent because of the shrewd notion of description about the particular girl or subject. Moral language does not favor descriptivism like science; it ensues prescriptive values about the point ‘what one should do or not?’ Hare’s model of prescriptivism about morality ties with the universal terminology and articulates moral judgments as universal cum prescriptive. The interesting point is that Hare’s conception of morality is not led by the mere two necessary conditions like universal and prescriptive. This theory also added an agent’s *action* that is guided by moral principles as another condition that sounds more intriguing. Hare’s account straightforwardly focuses on Kant’s *categorical imperative*¹. However, it seems true that prescription and universality cannot be the necessary conditions in every moral case as it would be hard to choose two situations as comparable. We cannot find two situations as the same in all aspects because time and place cannot remain alike. So providing universalized treatment equally seems unpersuasive. Even the contemplation about the close connection between prescription and action policy instigates a difficulty to live up to the mark. One should have to admit the ground level *gap* as an

¹ Kant says, ‘Act only on that maxim which you can at the same time will to become a universal law’, see, Immanuel Kant, *Moral Laws*, ed H. J Paton, London: Hutchinson, 1948,29.

indispensable feature of moral life. We find a gap in normal moral cases like in principle and in practice or more precisely in our ideals and actions. What an agent morally desire cannot be wholly fulfilled. This gap between principle and practice is not bounded by psychological disquiets, but it overrides prescriptivism and actions by entangling with other types of moral insignia like legal, aesthetics, economics, etc. Hare’s account leads to moral weakness in the mentioned cases where moral actions are outrun of moral principles. For an instance, the creation of any aesthetic art or the changeability of any particular law in a particular society does not rely on any rigid prescription of morality guided by the universality as Hare called for.

Now the question is that if we transit Hare’s formal account of morality to moral education, then the picture sounds more interesting. In Hare’s own words:

I am convinced that if parents first, and then children, understood better the *formal* character of morality and of the moral concepts, there would be little need to bother, ultimately, about the content of our children’s moral principles; for if the form is really and clearly understood, the content will look after itself.
(Hare, 1973, 164)

Hare’s account of moral education stresses on moral action vigorously, which intends to see moral judgements from the level of guided action of a moral person (in the case of education it means moral educator). Moral educator must have the sense that moral principles are not for the purpose of lip-service that the linguistic approach upholds, but for practical application or a choice for a better life. Parents or teachers should bear in mind that moral principles are not mere descriptive (or the statements of particular facts basing on descriptive language) that children/learners require to recapitulate. Moral principles are indeed prescriptive that one should practice in life and should adopt the best one from his/her society. What will moral education teach learners or children? Hare proposes that moral education, relying on a universalistic ground instructs a learner not to give privilege on his/her owns interest, but love and treat the others with an equal pace. This procedure of moral education steps forward only if the children or learner precisely learn how the language of morality works and besides, how they preserve the moral principles more elegantly in their acts and lives. Rawls once says similarly:

We do not look at the social order from our situation, but take up a point of view that everyone can adopt on an equal footing. In this sense, we look at our

society and our place in its objectivity. We share a common standpoint along with others and do not make our judgments from a personal slant. (Rawls, 1971, 516)

Though Hare’s account of moral education refuses to detain itself in the domain of the *Principle of Utility* that conflicts with the prima facie principle of beneficence, yet the conception of sensitivity towards others (in Hare’s words, *treating the interests of others as of equal weight to one’s own*) in moral education stands as more noteworthy. In his later work (Hare, 1981, 10.2-11.5), Hare intends towards the analysis of moral language from a formal way of moral ‘intuition’ that inserts a good set of principles interlinked with acquisition of moral attitudes. Moral attitudes have moral intuitions, which preserve moral content and moral feelings, whereas the goal of moral education is not only to uphold the moral feelings or moral intuitions, but also to act following them.

Another appealing theory that I would like to emphasize now is a formal theory that might differ from the previous one, as it is no way a systematic ethical theory. We can call this formal theory as Sartre’s outlook on externalism. Actually, here, I aim to focus on Sartre’s claims of morality and moral education. In *Existentialism and Humanism*, Sartre refutes any delve in favor of moral language, intuition or in short philosophical prudence. Sartre’s existentialist plea delineates existence of human beings that precede their essence. Sartre thinks that what is perceived is not the objective study of things; it is mainly the result of the subjective activity of mind. Sartre says:

The word “subjectivism” is to be understood in two senses, and our adversaries play upon only one of them. Subjectivism means, on the one hand, the freedom of the individual subject and, on the other, that man cannot pass beyond human subjectivity. It is the later, which is the deeper meaning of existentialism. (Sartre, 1963, 29)

For Sartre, man is responsible for all his actions and he is nothing but *what he makes of himself*. In the Introduction to Sartre’s book *Existentialism and Humanism*, Philip Mairet is wonderfully clarifying the Sartre’s position on morality, saying that man is born as an ethically unbiased personality and ethical conscience arises when philosophical thought and undue societies distort his/her will. Unethical actions for Sartre are a contradiction of the self or one may call it as self-deception (in French ‘Mauvaise’). ‘Moral’ is the replica of ‘freely chosen’ and acting it accordingly.

Sartre is not inspired with the ongoing analysis of good from Moore’s sense of cognitivism where good is not considered as objective property; rather it is an intuitive quality. He does not like to take the conception of morality as prescriptism (Hare’s position) that promulgates by the use of language and even he dislikes to accept any emotive theory, which considers good as an emotional reaction (Stevenson’s position). Sartre believes that moral values are the experienced part of human life that mainly comes through activities and experiences of life, not anyway related to the objective sense of morality. The reflective consciousness of human life is inseparable with values and so values cannot exist in the non-human domain. Moral values according to Sartre’s view have a tie to humankind. We should choose the best value not only for us, but also for the humanity. This is a Kantian aspect of universalism, deeply adored by Sartre in his ethical milieu. However, Sartre differs from Kant when he wrote:

Kant declared that freedom is a will both to itself and to the freedom of others. Agreed: but he thinks that the formal and the universal suffice for the constitution of a morality. We think, on the contrary, that principles that are too abstract break down when we come to defining action. (Sartre, 1963, 52)

The conception of judging that depends on the content of morality seems impulsive. One should have to invent it through the venture of freedom. Human universality is constructed in the choice of an individual (choice of myself), but that needs not underrate the intention or the benevolence of others. Sartre’s view in no means reluctant to admit the possibilities of moral values in a universal sense. Sartre’s account stresses only those actions as well that are guided by freedom and free choices of the agent. In *Existentialism and Humanism*, his approach against morality becomes more close to social theory. If we imply Sartre’s moral account in the case of moral education, then this stimulating insinuation certainly underlines the policy of independent judgment in creating moral choices. The exterior authorities or institutional despotism should not bound moral education. Roger Straughan writes:

Sartre’s emphasis upon this feature of morality encourages us to think critically about how it might be interpreted in the content of moral education. By implication, he rejects the idea of *teaching* children to be good, by thrusting upon the children themselves responsibility for their choices and actions, and by requiring them to ‘invent the law’ for themselves in order to qualify as moral agents. (Straughan, 1991, 61)

So doubtlessly, freedom is necessary for a child's education and side-by-side moral education attains its merit only if learning of the children grows in the natural good way escorted by freedom itself. One can genuinely question what would be the benefit of moral education for the child if we admit that one cannot teach a child or a learner to be good. Sartre's answer would be to leave the child alone, and allow making her own decision naturally and not anyway feared by authority, doctrine and even by the moral principles. The moral instructors should trust in the natural instincts of the learner and leave them alone in the realm of the pre-existing rules, laws and societal assumptions where they can freely decide their own lives and actions. We should encourage them to take their decision by themselves and be responsible for their own action and its outcome for the rest of humanity. A child becomes a man when he/she can take her/his own decision and the decision ingress to humanity. Sartre believes that since free choices depending on agent's own wish and moral concern cannot be a capricious exercise, so our choices need to be nourished by the conception of our responsibilities. Moral decision is an act that is like a new creation, which cannot dominate by any predetermined rules and laws. Its moral values remain in itself. The aptitude to recognize ourselves for what we are—without exaggeration—is the chief issue, since the principal value of human life is the inescapable responsibility to our moral decision. Man must be cared for the burdens of responsibility for his/her free actions and moral choices. Moral education becomes meaningless if it does not concern about the apprehension of freedom and responsibility together. What an individual prefer is a better one and nothing can be measured as better unless this individual choice turns towards the better facilities for all.

The Content of Moral Education

The content of morality supersedes in the case of subject of moral rules and principles. Here the conception of defining morality and also moral education to an extent rely on the content itself as the subject matters of morality express the content of the moral rules and principles like the conducts and behaviors of human that ought to be guided by moral content like honesty, truthfulness, justice and so on. The content of morality entangled with the principles and laws guide the conduct of the moral agents. Similarly, in moral education, we need to teach children a set of moral principles and norms of the society with the intention that they can equally give their attention to the interests of the others. The content of the moral rules and laws must be grounded on an implied and explicit justification like in a school the content-based moral lesson to the children should be equated with some authoritative declaration. Here the authority may be parents, teachers, or any holy book.

The account of content-based moral education cannot snub any non-authoritative deliberation like personal wish, social cohesion and family preservation. Let us take an example. ‘Don’t spit in class rooms’, this type of moral education based rules prescribed by the school authority do not reflect that this authoritative declaration has no non-authoritative part like family preservation and self adequacy. No family will allow their child to spit at room or even it is against personal hygiene as it can spread some diseases. One very challenging point already pointed out by two different thinkers like R. M Hare and Sartre is that nothing can improve in moral education if the authority prescribes to perform it to the learners by snatching their own way of thinking.

Can we call a moral belief like ‘It is wrong to spit at the class room because my teachers say so’ as a moral judgment? In Sartre’s sense, we cannot consider the person’s belief as moral judgment because he/she has no self-regulating choice here. In this case, the authority guides the person’s choice. The person may perhaps abhor following the rule for him/her or for the society. Here obeying the rule is maintained by him/her just because of the instruction of the school authority or parents from his/her childhood days. Moral authority becomes a contradictory one only if we disclose Sartre’s view regarding moral education. However, the critics can well argue that authority less moral prescription or freedom without any restriction goes arbitrary, that is undoubtedly a moral failure of humanity.

In the very beginning part of his well-known paper “Freedom Versus Authority in Education”, Russell says:

FREEDOM, in education as in other things, must be a matter of degree. Some freedoms cannot be tolerated. I met a lady once who maintained that no child should ever be forbidden to do anything, because a child ought to develop its nature from within. ‘How if its nature leads it to swallow pins?’ I asked; but I regret to say the answer was mere vituperation. (Russell, 1966, 127)

Moral education is controlled by different external factors like educators, parents, religious institutions, states and even the child itself (like in the case of Bernard Shaw and so on). Each factor carries its own viewpoint with its own good and bad sides together. The present world offers us a different panorama. Here education and to an extent, moral education is not only controlled by the authority of the states, but the impulses of the parents, religious institutions, educators are also controlled by the pronouncements of the state. Even a part of universal general view of education now goes down to the boundary of the particular school and state,

where school and state now compete with each other regarding education to show their own merits, and only gives priority to the brightest students to uphold their credit. So now, education becomes a challenge or a competition in any school and even in a state also. The professional parents take the advantage of the policies and enrol their children in the renowned institutes so that in future they attain a good job and achieve more success. So their enthusiasm for their children depict their farsightedness for gaining well establishment, reputed job etc. Now parents, schoolteachers, educators and even the states teach the children to compete with the world and serve for the national agendas. Education here is an emblem for the social and political problems, where neither knowledge nor happiness gets a prominent stand, rather worldly success and competence rule over the all-educational policies. This type of education policies snatches the freedom of the children to ask the question ‘why’, rather compel them to follow the rules and instructions given by the authority. A child has no right to learn what he wishes to learn. Educators and the institutions wish to teach the lesson according to their own profits.

Way Out

Modern education must be concerned about promoting human benefits. The believers of the opinion conserve a utilitarian entreaty and invoke the hypothesis of *the principle of utility*, which indicates the morality of an action in regards to the more usefulness of the action for the societal benefits, and more pleasure and happiness of the majority people in our society. For them, the linguistic meaning of the term *moral* means social welfare. In the same way, modern education and moral education together have to be specified for human welfare. Even the content of moral education needs to enhance the universalistic progress of humanity. Phillips and Mounce point out in their well-known paper:

There is no common agreement on what constitutes human good and harm...
[for] human good is not independent of the moral beliefs people hold, but is
determined by them.’ (Phillips, Mounce, 1969, 234)

Modern education and its scope bound in a considerate determination of lives, where the conception of rigidity and compulsion do not overrule. The form and the content of moral education should not be directed by hegemony or authoritativeness of the society, states, institutions, parents, etc. The necessary part of moral education is to teach the child that education has its own worthy and means. In addition, the knowledge we have achieved through education provides a practical effect not only for the learner but also for the social

benefits. Education needs to escape from the dictatorship of the pedagogue. We should encourage the learner to ask the question ‘why’ by not to teaching them to follow mere rules and principles instructed by the institutions. Russell beautifully says:

Freedom in education has many aspects. There is first of all freedom to learn and not to learn. Then there is freedom as to what to learn. And in later education there is freedom of opinion. (Russell, 1966, 134)

Educators should love teaching and the learner must aspire to love knowledge. Open mindedness is one the best qualities of education that comes up when we look for knowledge, since it becomes authentic by engaging with truth. Modern education achieves its zenith only by keeping up the content of morality ensues by love, encouragement, freedom and welfare for the humanity. Hegemony should look after for the safety of the unquiet souls and a genuine veneration for the individual personalities and their thoughts is the best way to secure modern education. Russell believes:

Throughout education, from the first day to the last, there should be a sense of intellectual adventure. The world is full of puzzling things which can be understood by the sufficient effort. The sense of understanding what had been puzzling is exhilarating and delightful; every good teacher should be able to give it. (Russell, 1960, 140)

The value of moral education and ethical awareness in school to university levels prop up a thoughtful consideration of the ethical issues in our lives and world. Our lives are full of information and moral ethics teach us what sort of information and decision one has to take in their lives independently (not feared or motivated by others). The sense of understanding and the sense of taking right decision of one’s own is an art that can grow in our lives. Moral dilemma shows that moral decision is an independent quest for an individual being. Actually moral education offers us a greater quality of clarity and insight, which persuade us how to apply for moral concepts in our day-to-day lives. It is certainly not that moral education can make all of us moral persons, but it is true that moral education teaches the learner to respect for his/her individual rights, the welfare of society and the deeper understanding to uphold a healthy and sophisticated relation between individual and society. Ethical education is not an indoctrination that relies on some core beliefs without questioning its benefit or precision. Liberal neutrality is another efficient side of moral education that teaches the students to challenge the divergence mode of foundational ethical theories that hold rigidly and pursues

hegemony or authoritativeness. Moral education stimulates the learner to justify the moral concepts and its efficacy in our world and lives. The principle shows that we should give precedence to moral opinions of every agent so that it may stimulate moral growth of modern education and our society. We need to make our society more comfortable and liberal for the students and for all persons who can express their own moral beliefs without being affected by fear of any kind. Value of authority and independent thought of an agent equipped with the necessary implementation is called moral decision. Now-a-days, service learning, a very provocative part of moral education inspires the learners or children to engage themselves in social service and be aware of their unity with human, non-human and nature overall. We must realize that human happiness is not the happiness of the individual human being, but happiness ensues through 'habits of the heart' to care for humanity. Moreover, this type of greater degree of development in our human history is instigated for the sake of moral education in schools and universities that not only makes our education system more modernized and universalized, but more successful and generous for humans and non-humans. Engaging with ethics is not a kind of indoctrination that promotes people to preserve the elemental beliefs without doubting on its justification. Of course, it is a continual scrutiny of the ethical dilemmas by undergirding service learning that keeps ethical issues more alive and value for the society and education.

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