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The Dimension of Seriousness in Moral Education

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Publication date:
2007

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Wiberg, M. (2007). The Dimension of Seriousness in Moral Education. Paper presented at Association for Moral Education (AME), .

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The Dimension of Seriousness in Moral Education, Paper Presentation/ Association for Moral Education, New York University, 2007

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Abstract:

The Dimension of Seriousness in Moral Education

Seriously to mean what you are saying and doing is a dimension of being a moral person due to the establishment of a relationship between the person who acts and the moral action. Therefore, seriousness as a kind of unfolding of freedom is an important value of moral education. In the paper I will, inspired by Dewey, Gadamer and Lovibond define and discuss seriousness as a value of practice in moral education while focusing on the relationship between seriousness and freedom as moral values which constitute what it means to be a moral person

The Dimension of Seriousness in Moral Education

In this paper seriousness as a dimension in moral education and as a kind of unfolding of freedom will be discussed. The concept 'value of practice' will be introduced as a tool to analyse seriousness as an active, working and applied value in educational practice.

Furthermore, the limits of seriousness as a moral value in the context of moral education will be discussed.

This paper is a working paper. In the process of writing this paper I found some problems concerning the concept of seriousness as a moral value. On the other hand I found, that seriousness is needed as a moral value in moral education. The problem is to find out how and to find the limits of the concept of seriousness as a moral value.

Firstly I will argue for why seriousness is or should be a dimension in moral education.

Why should seriousness be a dimension in moral education and moral learning? The answer is: seriousness is included in the description of what it means to be a moral person because it can be argued that seriously to mean what you are saying and doing is a dimension of being a moral person due to the establishment of a relationship between the person who acts and the moral action.

Sabina Lovibond writes:

“...we can think of moral upbringing as seeking to establish a particular relationship between the learner and the words or gestures with which she is becoming conversant. The relationship to be established is one that seems to create an opening for the language of seriousness...”¹

Why is it so? In order to answer the question the concept of freedom is needed because being serious in an authentic sense means to act according to personal moral choices. And to act according to personal moral choices is a way to practice freedom in terms of self-determination. Seriousness is one dimension among others which constitutes what it is to be a moral person because seriousness is a dimension of being a free person. The argument is: Seriousness is a dimension of being a free person and being a free person constitutes what it means to be a moral person. According to Kant freedom in terms of being an autonomous person constitutes what it is to be a moral person. Therefore, seriousness is a moral content and a content of moral learning because the person who is in the process of becoming a moral person has to learn how to practice serious meaning and acting.

A certain understanding of what it means to be a moral person is presupposed in the former argument. Therefore, I will very briefly outline this presupposed view of what it means to be a moral person. Following Kant the moral person is a free person in terms of being autonomous and in terms of acting according to a good will. Kant established the relationship between the moral person and the moral act by claiming that the moral person should act according to a good will and according to his own (autonomous) practical reason.

When a person makes a moral choice freedom is involved due to an understanding of the moral person as a person who can judge, deliberate, perform and reflect. Seriousness unfolds freedom in a different way. Seriousness is an existential dimension due to an understanding of the moral choice as playing a role for the self-understanding and self-definition of a person. Being serious constitutes the moral choice as a personal one. Seriousness can be understood as the dimension which gives the person an awareness of herself as a moral agent. It is important to say that the feeling of seriousness isn't necessary a criterion of whether the action is right or wrong. Therefore, seriousness is in another category than judging, deliberating and reflecting. But still seriousness is a criterion of being a moral person, because a moral person is expected to be serious. A moral choice has to mean something for the person who chooses.

¹ Sabina Lovibond (2002) *Ethical Formation*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, p.72

To sum up: Seriousness unfolds freedom in a certain way in relation to moral learning because it establishes a certain relationship between an acting person and the moral action. If a person is considered a moral person we don't expect the person to act out of instrumental reasons but out of reasons which are constituted by seriousness. In this context seriousness will be seen as a moral value and as a dimension of freedom due to its relatedness to what it means to be a moral person.

The concept of seriousness is to be understood on two levels: A personal level and a general or 'common good' level. On a personal level seriousness should guaranty the relationship between the person and the moral action. On a general level seriousness as a moral value should be a dimension which mediates between individuality and the common good (Allgemeinheit). The learning person is to understand the need of a correspondence between seriousness as a kind of moral valuation from the perspective of the individual and from the perspective of the common good. Seriousness constitutes the individual moral person as mediating between individuality and the common good. In this sense seriousness as a moral value has a function of bridging between the individual and the individual as belonging to the whole of community. The need of mediating shows that seriousness as a dimension in moral learning cannot stand alone. It cannot be the only criterion for a moral action that a person seriously means it.

Seriousness as a dimension in moral learning must be unfolded together with the ability to judge, deliberate and reflect.

I have talked about seriousness as if we all know what it means. But what does it mean to be serious? Does it mean to be an authentic person, or does it mean to be a very idealist person, or does it mean to be a person without sense of humour. Does it mean that a person is accountable for her actions?

Inspired by Dewey I will look at concepts and ideas as active and applied tools. Therefore, I will look at how the concept of seriousness can be seen as a working and applied value in educational practice.

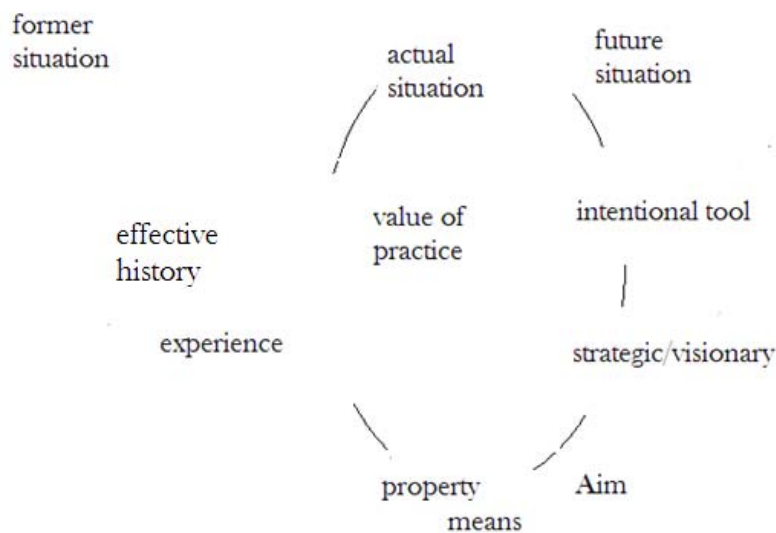
In order to analyse the concept of seriousness as an active, working and applied educational value I will introduce the concept 'value of practice'.

The concept 'value of practice' is a concept I have developed in another context². It is inspired by Dewey's general interpretation of concepts and ideas as living tools³ and the hermeneutic

² I have developed the concept in my Ph.D.thesis: Merete Wiberg (2007): Frihed som Praksisværdi I Moralsk og Etisk Læring (Freedom as a Value of Practice in Moral and Ethical Learning). Department of Education, Learning and Philosophy, Aalborg University, Denmark

philosophy of Gadamer⁴ with special regard to his concepts ‘Horizons of Meaning’ and ‘effective history’. In this context I will only give the definition of the concept ‘value of practice’.

A value of practice is an idea loaded with value, which is applied as an intentional tool in practice and is working as a constitutive value in relation to situations and actions. Due to being a constitutive value of situations and actions it can be described as a property of situations and actions. As a constitutive idea it points backwards to previous experiences and ‘effective history’ (‘Wirkungsgeschichte’) while at the same time it points forward to a given situation and action. As a value which points forward it has a strategic and visionary role.



As a moral value and a value of practice seriousness as an unfolding of freedom constitute what it means to be a moral person. If we analyse what it means to a moral person both freedom and seriousness will be constituting values. A moral person is free because the moral person acts according to her own will. A moral person can be described as a serious person because the moral person can be counted on. The moral person has a kind of policy for her way of living.

³ Dewey, J. ([1929] 1990): *The Quest for Certainty*. In: *John Dewey, The Later Works*, Vol. 4. Ed. by Jo Ann Boydston, Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.

⁴ H.G.Gadamer (1986): *Wahrheit und Methode*, J.C.B.Mohr (Paul Siebeck) Tübingen

In an educational context it might be that seriousness cannot and should not be taught but a teacher can have the intention that seriousness should constitute an educational situation.

An example will be given. A teacher could have the intention that freedom and seriousness should be working values in practice. Freedom and seriousness might be explicit or implicit values for the teacher. That is to say the teacher wants (implicit or explicit) freedom and seriousness to be properties of an educational situation. Therefore, the teacher wants freedom and seriousness to be constitutive of the educational situation. The ideas of seriousness and freedom in the context of moral education point backwards to previous experiences of the teacher. It can be experiences which connect freedom, seriousness and the moral agent and experiences which disconnect the concepts. At the same time freedom and seriousness have effective histories. That is all concepts have a history which influences how the concepts nowadays are interpreted. The teacher's way of interpreting freedom and seriousness and how she interprets the connection between freedom and seriousness is influenced by the effective history of the concepts. Freedom and seriousness are important values in the self-understanding of human beings especially in the western society. Freedom constitutes what it is to be a human being and is part of the story we tell about what it is to be human. Furthermore, freedom and seriousness constitute what it is to be a moral person. If the teacher has this kind of understanding of freedom and seriousness both values must be a content of moral education. In order not just to see freedom and seriousness as abstract values Dewey's understanding of values is needed. The values are to be understood as properties. It means that the learning persons in the educational situation are to be seen as free and serious. That is to say, the values from the perspective of the learning persons are understood as active and working. From the perspective of the teacher the values are applied values. That is to say, the teacher is trying to apply the values in order to let them work in the classroom or educational situation and hopefully to be working in the learning persons. As a strategic value seriousness can be seen as fulfilling a vision of the teacher and probably a vision of the society because the teacher is the agent of the society. To a certain point teaching is the project of forming and shaping persons. In this sense seriousness can be a quite problematic value if it is in a fundamentalistic framework. As a visionary value seriousness could be an expression of the hope that all persons should live an authentic life.

The concept of seriousness has as mentioned before some limitations and problems. Why should seriousness be a moral value if it doesn't guaranty good actions? And why should moral choices be personal in terms of being seriously meant? Can it be avoided that seriousness as a content in

moral education is not just another word for manipulation? Serious to mean something could hinder reflection. It might be that seriousness has nothing to do with being a free person.

On the other hand I have argued for that seriousness constitutes what it means to be a moral person but it cannot stand alone as a moral value. It must be connected with freedom in terms of judgment, deliberation and reflection – and perhaps blended with a bit of humour and irony.