
THE PROBLEM OF CHARACTER EDUCATION AND
KOHLEBERG'S MORAL EDUCATION: CRITIQUE
FROM DEWEY'S MORAL DELIBERATION

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In his book, *Theory of Valuation*, Dewey wrote that norms “are in no way confined to activities to which the name ‘moral’ is applied.”¹ In other words, there is not a specific set of activities that can be considered as moral activity. For Dewey, there is no particular “moral realm”: moral study is the same as intelligent inquiry. According to Kestenbaum, “There is scarcely a chapter or a page that Dewey ever wrote that does not subsume itself under the heading of moral (‘practical’) philosophy in some more or less extended use of the phrase.”² Moral philosophy is a fundamental part of Dewey’s theory of education. Dewey, like Peirce and James, held that creative imagination, reflective thought, and action experimentation should be central features in education. In fact, the process of moral deliberation or judgment of practice is a core concept for Dewey’s moral education.

In this article, I shall examine Dewey’s moral deliberation. I will argue that Dewey’s work will enrich both character education and Kohlberg’s moral education. I focus on character education and on Kohlberg’s moral education because these are the two dominant approaches.³ Character education seeks to cultivate good character as the true aim of education. Kohlberg’s moral education focuses on promoting the development of children’s moral judgment. Character education has been criticized for didacticism and for its de-emphasizing of reflection and moral judgment. In contrast, Kohlberg’s moral education has been criticized for its inability to cultivate the content of morality and for ignoring moral sentiment. Both approaches have their strengths and weaknesses. A close look into these two approaches using Dewey’s concept of moral deliberation is an effective way to bridge the divide.

¹ John Dewey, *Theory of Valuation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939), 84.

² Victor Kestenbaum, forward to *Theory of the Moral Life*, by John Dewey (New York: Irvington Publishers, 1996), xxi.

³ See James Arthur, “Traditional Approaches to Character Education in Britain and America,” in *Handbook of Moral and Character Education*, ed. Larry P. Nucci and Darcia Narvaez, 80–98 (New York: Routledge, 2008); and John Snarey and Peter Samuelson, “Moral Education in the Cognitive Developmental Tradition: Lawrence Kohlberg’s Revolutionary idea,” in *Handbook of Moral and Character Education*, ed. Larry P. Nucci and Darcia Narvaez, 61–83 (New York: Routledge, 2008).

CHARACTER EDUCATION

Character education has deep roots in the American public school system. However, the empirical research of Hartshorne and Mark in 1928–1939 has shown that children’s morality might be discordant and children’s moral behavior is more situation dependent.⁴ Following these results, character education has been deemphasized in American schools. In the 1990s, some educators prescribed character education once again as a response to a list of youth problems in society. Lickona provides a good description of contemporary character education: cultivate core ethical values; define character to include thinking, feeling and behavior; promote school as a caring community; provide students with opportunities to practice morality; involve parent and community members in building character; evaluate character education based on the school, teacher and student’s performance.⁵ Berkowitz and Bier reviewed 108 research studies concerning character education outcomes and identified the common features of effective character education programs: the design of the social-emotional curriculum; professional development for the implementation of character education; and the encouragement of individual practice (e.g., through a service learning component).⁶ They also found that character education comes in a variety of forms and that it does work if effectively designed and implemented.

WHAT WOULD DEWEY SAY ABOUT CHARACTER EDUCATION?

First, character education focuses on teaching core ethical values. However, Dewey believed that valuing and evaluation are two different things. Valuing could be a personal attitude toward a thing, for example, people could esteem something with an uncritical attitude. In contrast, evaluation is a process to critically appraise a value within a specific situation. People could value many things, but the important thing is to decide which value to follow in a particular situation. According to Dewey, core ethical values need to be judged in a pragmatic sense. Virtues are habitual behaviors which show high moral standards; virtue of character is a habit of behaving in a certain way. Dewey did not object to teaching certain virtues. Dewey believed that humans could accomplish more “impossible” things if they developed certain virtues. But for Dewey, valuation, the process of estimating each value within a specific situation with a critical perspective, was more important because we cannot solve problems with the same familiar patterns of thought. A new problem might require us to deliberate about what action should be taken to accomplish

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Thomas Lickona, “Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education,” *Journal of Moral Education* 25, no. 1 (1996): 93–100.

⁶ Marvin W. Berkowitz and Melinda C. Bier, *What Works in Character Education: A Research-Driven Guide for Educators* (Washington, DC: Character Education Partnership, 2005), 4.

a specific goal. Therefore, character education should provide students opportunities to deliberate about core ethical values and apply the virtue of critical evaluation to a specific situation.

Second, character education tends to define each virtue in a traditional way. However, Dewey held that each virtue “cannot be given a fixed meaning, because each expresses an interest in objects and institutions which are changing.”⁷ For Dewey, virtue depended on the influence of the social and the physical environments. Each virtue may show different moral effects according to different social environments. We cannot separate the concept of each virtue from the concrete situation. In addition, virtues are not isolated from each other. Instead, different virtues work together in each situation. Sometimes we emphasize one of the virtues, but we cannot teach that virtue separately.

Third, character education assumes students can learn moral knowledge through example, reward, or punishment. Character education usually teaches character through literature. However, for Dewey, the definition of moral knowledge depended on whether something had a bearing on the common good. Dewey wrote that “When knowledge of bacteria and germs and their relation to the spread of disease was achieved, sanitation, public and private, took on a moral significance it did not have before.”⁸ In Dewey’s view, moral knowledge was not primarily learning what the main moral principles were. Our problem is to decide which moral principle is truly relevant to our particular social situation. In addition, Dewey believed that knowledge is a product of scientific inquiry, and that this is also the case with moral knowledge. The better and more reliable the process of moral inquiry, the better the moral knowledge that is produced. To Dewey, moral knowledge depended on the process of moral inquiry. Therefore, character education should add more moral problem solving in their practice.

THE RECONSTRUCTION OF CHARACTER EDUCATION

First, according to Dewey, character education should change its teaching methods. Character education favors didacticism. According to Dewey, didacticism might be useful for customary morality, but has no use in reflective morality. Through didactic methods, a child might learn what the conventions of morality are, but the person cannot develop an adequate capacity to make a critical moral judgment in a specific problematic situation. Character education holds that certain core values should be taught in school. But Dewey rejects the idea that core values are fixed and unchangeable, and he believed certain values might change as the interests of a person or society change. Dewey emphasizes that value judgment is a practical judgment, that we should encourage student to consider the particular situation and their ability to

⁷ John Dewey, *Theory of the Moral Life* (1932; repr., New York: Irvington Publishers, 1996), 113.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 144.

practice the process of value judgment. Following Dewey, what we should really focus on in character education is the continual investigation in evaluating each value and the ability to relate each value to specific situation.

Second, according to Dewey, character education should change its approach. Character education tends to use special “moral education” courses to cultivate character. We should not separate character education from “regular courses.” What we ought to do is to reflect the moral significance of all the knowledge which is relevant to the common good. The teacher should focus on the subject itself instead of trying to teach a specific moral lesson through the subject. In addition, character education emphasizes the importance of the moral environment, such as community, or family, or museums. To Dewey, moral education should utilize the indirect approach to cultivate character. In *Moral Principles in Education*, Dewey holds that moral education requires “the development of character through all the agencies, instrumentalities, and materials of school life.”⁹

Third, according to Dewey, character education should contribute to a new social order. Dewey holds that “the school has power to modify the social order.”¹⁰ According to Pietig, character education intends to provide a traditional and fixed definition to each virtue, which would tend to maintain the traditional social order.¹¹ Dewey criticizes this approach, pointing out that “our conceptions of moral education have been too narrow, too formal, and too pathological.”¹² Following Dewey, Bohman noted that we should not primarily concern ourselves with the “control of human nature”; instead, we should participate in “an active response” to the various traditional ideals and norms.¹³ The knowledge of traditional moral principles does not help a person deal with assessment of those moral principles. We should facilitate the students’ reflection on the settled social order and encourage them to develop a new and modern social order. In traditional society, males have authority in leadership, females usually have the virtue of obedience. When we realize that value is unfair for the female, we critique the settled social order and begin to a new social order.

⁹ John Dewey, *Moral Principles in Education* (Chicago: Houghton Mifflin, 1909), 4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹¹ Jeanne Pietig, “John Dewey and Character Education,” *Journal of Moral Education* 6, no. 3 (1977): 170–180.

¹² Dewey, *Moral Principles*, 42.

¹³ James Bohman, “Ethics as Moral Inquiry: Dewey on the Moral Psychology of Social Reform,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Dewey*, ed. Molly Cochran, 187–207 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

KOHLEBERG'S APPROACH TO MORAL EDUCATION

In *Moral Education in the School: A Developmental View*, Lawrence Kohlberg mainly discussed his approach to moral education.¹⁴ Kohlberg's research was influenced by the study of Hartshorne and Mark. Kohlberg agreed with the finding that the conventional formal moral education has little effect, but he interpreted Hartshorne and Mark's study in a different way. Kohlberg believed that moral education brings little effect because of ignorance of the students' moral development stage. Following Jean Piaget's cognitive development approach, Kohlberg believed that the aim of moral education was to stimulate students' development of moral judgment. Kohlberg defined six moral development stages based on his empirical research. Kohlberg criticized traditional character education, which only focused on training of good "habits" of honesty, responsibility, etc., through example, reward, or punishment.

Consistent with his moral philosophy, Kohlberg proposed dilemma discussion and the Just Community School as an effective approach to moral education. Kohlberg's dilemma discussion encouraged students toward a higher stage of moral reasoning through peer discussion and the interactive exchange of ideas. Kohlberg's Just Community Schools aimed to create a moral atmosphere through the practice of democratic governance, and the building of community solidarity. In a meta-analysis of 55 studies conducted by Schlafli, Rest, and Thomas, the researchers found that Kohlberg's dilemma discussion approach had a moderate to significant effect on moral education.¹⁵ Moreover, the analysis also found that the Just Community School provided students with a moral culture of communities.

WHAT WOULD DEWEY SAY ABOUT KOHLBERG'S
MORAL EDUCATION?

First, Kohlberg defined moral development in six stages; the higher moral stage was better than the lower stage. Teachers should encourage students to make moral judgment according to a higher moral stage. Kohlberg was a moral psychologist: he held that moral development follows a sequence of stages. However, Dewey disagreed with Kohlberg's idea. Dewey was a moral philosopher: he held that moral inquiry happens only in a problematic situation where no single action seemed to be morally justified. Dewey noted that "moral theory cannot emerge when there is positive belief as to what is right and what is wrong, for then there is no occasion for reflection."¹⁶ Moreover, Dewey considered moral inquiry in its context, and held that values

¹⁴ Lawrence Kohlberg, "Moral Education in the School: A Developmental View," *School Review* 74, no. 1 (1966): 1–30

¹⁵ Cited in Snarey and Samuelson, "Moral Education," 70.

¹⁶ Dewey, *Moral Life*, 5.

could not be obtained at once. Moral inquiry “needs to be done over and over again, in terms of the conditions of concrete situations as they arise.”¹⁷

Second, following Piaget, Kohlberg held that moral development was concerned with the movement from heteronomous morality to autonomous morality. This is in agreement with Dewey who insisted that moral responsibility was the product of the autonomous moral self. However, Dewey opposed the idea that moral responsibility was subject to an external power. For Dewey, this would make moral responsibility and consequences indifferent to the person. Following Dewey, Mitias noted that moral responsibility without autonomy tended to split a person into two disconnected parts.¹⁸ Moreover, Kohlberg’s highest moral stage, the sixth stage focused on the dignity of human beings and treatment of persons as ends rather than means. However, for Dewey, moral responsibility should be subjected to a higher principle—the common good. Human beings’ moral responsibility should aim to form a new society. For Dewey, moral responsibility was not an abstract concept; instead, it could be related to a concrete situation. Moral responsibility could only exist when a present moral situation required a certain action. In addition, to Dewey, moral responsibility was connected with the possibility of growth and modification of character. A child should come to understand that moral responsibility required not only an account of what he or she had done, but also learning from the consequences of what was done, so that “in the future, he [or she] may take into account bearings, and consequences which he has failed to consider in what he has done.”¹⁹

Third, Kohlberg insisted that moral education needed to be based on some concept that developed from moral philosophy and moral psychology. This is in agreement with Dewey’s emphasis on the importance of psychology. However, Dewey focused more on the importance of social psychology. Dewey held that the desires of human beings were determined by the social environment. Kohlberg’s dilemma discussion and his Just Community Schools is in agreement with Dewey’s emphasis on moral inquiry. However, Dewey’s moral deliberation was not based on a set of moral stages. Moral deliberation is more situation based, emphasizing the practice of the process of moral inquiry.

THE RECONSTRUCTION OF KOHLBERG’S MORAL EDUCATION

First, for Dewey, Kohlberg’s moral education should integrate reason and feeling. Kohlberg’s moral education emphasizes the importance of moral cognition, used as the sole standard for moral development. Even Dewey believes that moral knowledge depends on the process of moral reasoning, but he held that there is the element of truth in theory, which insists that “in their

¹⁷ Ibid., 62.

¹⁸ Michael H. Mitias, “Dewey on Moral Obligation,” *Southwestern Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 1 (1976): 75–82.

¹⁹ Dewey, *Moral Life*, 169.

root and essence moral judgments are emotional rather than intellectual.²⁰ Dewey held that moral judgment need to be colored with feeling if it wanted to influence behavior. Dewey also insists that moral reasoning is guided by “human goals and interests.” Following Dewey, Giarelli and Chambliss noted that the process of moral inquiry includes not only cognition, but also sentiments, socialization, and developing habits of conduct—it is more than moral thinking.²¹

Second, for Dewey, Kohlberg’s moral education should integrate self and relationship. Kohlberg’s moral education uses justice as the sole standard for moral judgment. Dewey rejects this idea of justice and says such a principle cannot exist before we make a decision; we have to discover which moral principle is suitable in a specific situation through continual moral inquiry. In her work, Gilligan uses care as a standard for moral judgment.²² The different standards used by Kohlberg and Gilligan might be a good example to demonstrate that we cannot set up a fixed moral principle prior to the problematic situation. However, for Dewey taking the process of moral deliberation as a general moral principle might be the only exception.

Third, according to Dewey, Kohlberg’s moral education should deal with real problem situations instead of hypothetical dilemmas. Kohlberg’s moral education tends to use moral dilemma stories. For Dewey, moral deliberation involves preparation toward dealing with future problematic situations, but hypothetical dilemmas are of little help in achieving this goal. Caspary offers a good example of the process of Dewey’s moral deliberation through Sartre’s dilemma. In the story, the young Frenchman is struggling with two decisions: to stay and take care of his sick mother or to join the Free French Force. Caspary explains that the young man is expected to use his intelligence and wisdom to evaluate all the possible lines of action. His final decision depends on his evaluation of all these possible factors; he also has to realize his role as a social being.²³

Fourth, for Dewey, Kohlberg’s moral education should integrate concept and context. Kohlberg’s moral education tends to emphasize moral concepts and moral structure. Following Dewey, Bohman (2010) held that moral concepts and processes are closely related to the specific conditions of human life. Therefore, moral thinking and moral judgment should always take into account the present situation and the social environment.²⁴ While Kohlberg creates a “just community” in school, Dewey wants to facilitate democracy.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 128.

²¹ James M. Giarelli and J. J. Chambliss, “John Dewey on Moral Development and Education: Conception and Legacy,” *Discourse* 9, no. 2 (1989): 82–103.

²² See Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

²³ William R. Caspary, “Ethical Deliberation as Dramatic Rehearsal: John Dewey's Theory,” *Educational Theory* 41, no. 2 (1991): 175–190

²⁴ Bohman, “Ethics as Moral Inquiry,” 205.

Dewey insists that if we facilitate democracy in a small social circle, this will later influence the whole society. In this way, moral deliberation aims at a newly forming society.

DEWEY'S MORAL DELIBERATION AND MORAL EDUCATION

Dewey encourages reflective morality. The process of moral deliberation is the core concept for Dewey's moral education. I will introduce the main idea of Dewey's moral deliberation and provide some suggestions for how to apply moral deliberation in moral education. The moral deliberation approach is defined by Dewey as one that is used in dealing with a moral problem. Moral deliberation was first introduced by Dewey in 1932. In the *Theory of Moral Life*, Dewey defined moral deliberation as "a dramatic rehearsal of various competing possible action."²⁵ Traditional moral education focuses on teaching certain virtues to students. However, according to Dewey, we could not solve the new problems with the same or familiar solutions. New problems or situations require us to deliberate upon what action can achieve the desired goal. Caspary summarizes three characteristics of moral deliberation from this definition: First, moral deliberation focuses on possible lines of action. This means that, in each problematic situation, we should clarify the relationship and imagine the possible lines of action. Second, with each possible line of action, we should also predict the possible responses and consequences. Third, we should know that moral deliberation is inter-personal and sensitive; it takes into account emotional feeling and intuition. Moral deliberation could help students evaluate each value within a specific situation critically.²⁶

Dewey's conception of moral deliberation is consistent with his pragmatism. First, Dewey believes that moral inquiry is the same as intelligent inquiry; both are meant to serve human interests. Second, Dewey believes that there is no single universal principle that could apply in every moral problem; the general principle only exists in the continual investigation. Third, Dewey insists that moral judgment depends on the problematic situation. We have to understand the situation in order to decide among the many possible actions.

Moral deliberation brings much insight into moral education in general. On the one hand, moral deliberation focuses on the important process of moral inquiry. It helps students develop ability to relate each virtue to a specific situation. On the other hand, moral deliberation allows students to reflect on the established social order and encourages them to develop a new social order. There are also other implications as follows.

Dewey's moral deliberation is centered on context or on a problematic situation. Dewey mentioned that "Moral conceptions and processes grow naturally out of the very conditions of human life."²³ Following his pragmatic morality, Dewey insists that there are no universal moral standards or rules; we

²⁵ Dewey, *Moral Life*, 135.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 175.

have to discover the moral principle in the specific situation through continual moral inquiry. Dewey's moral deliberation does not involve judging what is right or wrong in a current problematic situation. What Dewey cares about most is what happens in the future when a similar situation arises. Can the person decide how to deal with the problem through moral deliberation? Dewey mentions that "we cannot undo the past; we can affect the future."²⁷ In addition, Dewey rejects the traditional moral approach which aims to give moral justification to each problematic situation, but each problematic situation can be given only limited possible moral understanding and moral interpretations.

Dewey's moral deliberation allows that not all individuals and groups will agree on the same right action in each situation. Dewey believes that what is the right action in a problematic situation may vary from person to person and society to society. Based on this interpretation, people may understand Dewey's ideas as ethical relativism. However, I argue that Dewey's moral deliberation is quite different from ethical relativism due to the following reasons. To begin with, Dewey insists on the possibility of moral progress. In *Human Nature and Conduct*, Dewey states that "every situation has its own measure and quality of progress, and the need for progress is recurrent, constant."²⁸ Moreover, to Dewey, moral deliberation prepares one to deal with similar problematic situations in the future. If a similar situation is encountered, one could apply moral deliberation in a similar way. In this way, moral deliberation is working as a general moral principle. This general moral principle distinguishes Dewey's view from radical ethical relativism, which held that there are no absolute truths. In addition, Dewey insists that when evaluating a problematic situation, we are not only depending on the cultural standards, we are mainly taking into account the universal standards and how to apply those in the situation.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I believe character education and Kohlberg's moral development are valuable theories which enhance moral education in school. Character education focuses on teaching core values, while Kohlberg's moral development emphasizes moral cognition development through moral dilemma discussion. Those two approaches have their own merits and defects. Given my argument, I hold that Dewey's concept of moral inquiry and moral deliberation could help those two approaches become more effective. Following Dewey's concept of moral inquiry, character education programs would realize that each value needs to be evaluated in a specific situation and that teachers could not simply teach certain core values. They also need to teach students the process

²⁷ Ibid., 170.

²⁸ John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt, 1922), 282.

of moral inquiry and to assess each value in a particular situation. Following Dewey's concept of moral deliberation, Kohlberg's moral development needs to realize that the process of moral judgment involves reason and feeling, self and relationship, concept and context. According to Dewey, moral deliberation is not tied to a sequence of moral stages, the deliberation process leads to a moral wisdom which could help students to deal with a moral conflict in a specific situation.

Dewey's concept of moral inquiry and moral deliberation is not as easy to teach as the six moral stages of Kohlberg's or the guide book of character education. However, Dewey's idea of moral deliberation provides a fundamental foundation for Kohlberg's moral development and for character education. Moral education in schools should aim not only to develop a morally good person, a high moral "stage" person, but a person who pursues a new and modern social order through moral inquiry and moral deliberation.
