Critical moral thinking or refinement of disposition?
What is the aim of moral education?*

Raisonnement moral critique ou raffinement de la disposition?
Qui est le but de l'éducation morale?

Eleni Kalokairinou
Department of Philosophy and Education
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

In the present paper I examine the possibility of moral education. It is pointed out that, even though religion is officially taught in primary and secondary education, this is not the case with ethics and moral education. I then explore the kind of moral education we should offer the youth in the likely event that ethics is officially introduced in primary and secondary education. We examine R.M. Hare’s claim that moral education involves teaching the young men the moral language and moral thinking and reasoning, and we find his suggestion lacking in certain important respects. On the contrary, we come up with the suggestion that Aristotle and Kant hold that moral education consists in both: making young students more competent to think and reason morally and at the same time cultivating their feelings and dispositions and refining their characters in such a way as to sympathize compassionately with the others' misfortunes.

Keywords: Moral, universal prescriptivism, utilitarianism, act, agent, virtue, Aristotle, Kant.

Dans cet article, J'examine la possibilité de l'éducation morale. Je souligne que, quoique la religion est officiellement enseignée à l'éducation primaire et secondaire, la situation est complètement différente avec l'éthique et l'éducation morale. Le but de mon article est d'explorer le genre de l'éducation morale que nous devrions offrir aux jeunes personnes dans le cas où l'éthique est officiellement introduite à l'éducation primaire et secondaire. J'examine la thèse que R. M. Hare soutient que l'éducation morale contient l'enseignement de la langue morale et du raisonnement moral. Nous considérons que cette thèse est faible. Au contraire, notre proposition suit la thèse d'Aristote et de Kant que l'éducation morale comprend à moins deux choses: enseigner les jeunes étudiants à raisonner moralement d'une manière critique, mais aussi les enseigner à adoucir leurs moeurs et leurs dispositions de façon qu'ils puissent sympathiser compassionnellement avec les misères des autres.

Mots-clés: éthique, éducation morale, prescriptivisme universel, utilitarisme, action, vertu, Aristote, Kant.
Even though religious education, mainly in primary and secondary education, has engaged the Greek thinkers and politicians quite a lot, however, moral education, and by and large aesthetic education, seems not to have engaged them or bothered them at all. Having said that, we must underline that we notice nowadays phenomena or incidents of violence and barbarism among the young people, students or non-students, and quite often actions of indecency. However, contemporary researchers and philosophers of education acknowledge the imperative need for moral education of young people and for the cultivation of a sense of beauty in them. Vassiliki Karavakou, for example, in one of her articles recognizes that «the established education seems to remain indifferent as to how we educate young people in human rights, disregarding to a great extent the importance of moral education».

Certainly, academic courses which aim at the moral education of students would raise a lot of questions and cause a lot of irony and laughter nowadays, in the era of liberalism and democracy. We should emphasize that in the contemporary liberal democracies moral education cannot promote certain values rather others nor a certain notion of good rather another. And this is because in this way it would violate the principle of neutrality, which is the only one which is accepted by liberal democracies, or it would violate the equal respect which we should attribute to different moral principles. As a consequence, the question with which we will deal in the present article is, of what kind the moral education of young people should be, or how, in what way do we educate young students, when we claim that we educate them morally?

As we argued on another occasion, we must emphasize that when we educate morally young people, we must be careful not to slip into any kind of dogmatism or propaganda. Following in this the British philosopher of the 20th century R.M. Hare, we contend that moral dogmatism has nothing to do with either the method or the content of education. On the contrary, it has to do rather with the aim of education (and in particular of moral education). Whereas the teacher aims with his teaching to teach the youth to think critically whether about issues of science, or about topics of religion, morals or politics, and to reach the conclusions to which his reasoning leads him, the person who thinks in a dogmatic manner, the propagandist, aims to teach the young man his own views, whether scientific, religious, moral or political, and to make him adopt the very same beliefs that he supports. In this way, as Hare

---

1 I have in mind the instance of the student who, according to the news, ejaculated at the back of the female student who was studying at the University library.


5 Ibid., pp. 174-175.

6 Ibid., p. 176.
points out, whereas the teacher withdraws from the scene, as soon as the young man has been taught to think critically and to decide for himself, the propagandist does not leave the scene as long as the young man has difficulties in obeying and following his views7.

Consequently, Hare in his work has made it a point to bring out the importance of moral language and to develop a theory of moral thinking. According to his view, moral education includes precisely this: the learning of moral language. As he contends, nowadays we are quite often led to the acts of violence and to the atrocities we are led, because we have not learnt to employ the moral language properly, because we have not assimilated moral thinking. We often reason on the basis of «of what we want to do» and not on the basis of «what we ought to do». This means that we think in an egoistic manner, in a way which is pre-rational and pre-moral.

In the British philosopher’s opinion, moral thinking is not something innate but it is being learnt within society. If this did not happen, then we would have remained wild beasts, and the establishment of human societies would have been impossible8.

This is precisely what happened during the Second World War. Human beings turned into beasts and started killing and effacing one another. As there were no values to retain them, human societies lost their cohesion and were gradually destroyed. Hare himself, who was a prisoner of war in 1942, after the fall of Singapore, sensed all the atrocities that took place during the war. And he concluded that it was a period during which all human values had lost their meaning. Morality, the cohesive web of societies, was lost. And he realized that if we wanted to reverse the situation, we had to create the values right from the beginning. Of course, the question that arose then was: on what did we have to base our values if we wanted them to be objective and universal? As a consequence, Hare had to try hard to find the answer to this question even from the days he was a prisoner of war and was sent to compulsory work on the Burma railway9.

While a prisoner of war, during his free time he did quite a lot of thinking. And he concluded that values can be based on language, that language was the common feature shared by all men. He also claimed that if we wanted to base human values on something objective, that was shared by all men, this had to be language. Consequently, he proceeded to analyze moral language and to offer a logical account of it. His aim was to show that by starting from the logical analysis of moral language, we can work out and develop a moral account which would help us in answering the questions and in solving the problems we face in our everyday life.

He therefore argues that the two logical features of moral language are prescriptivity and universalizability. According to the first logical feature, when I utter the moral judgement, «I ought

---


8 Ibid., p. 174. And Hare, R., M., «Adolescents into Adults», op. cit., p. 130.

to help the needy», this implies logically the imperative, «Help the needy». In other words, if I honestly and sincerely support the judgement, «I ought to help the needy», then this implies that, whenever the appropriate circumstances arise, I go and help them. To do the contrary, not to help them or be indifferent towards them, when now is the right moment to do it, this would be contradictory. By virtue of the logical feature of prescriptivity Hare wished to claim that moral language is practically relevant, that there is a logical connection between moral language and practice.

According to the second feature of moral language, the kind of behaviour I prescribe is not only right for somebody who finds himself under these particular circumstances. It must also be right for anyone who finds himself under these circumstances, including me if I ever find myself in these very same circumstances. Universalizability, therefore, is the second logical feature of moral language that controls formally and limits the kind of actions I can perform: I cannot prescribe and therefore I cannot perform anything I like, but I can only perform anything that can be universalized, anything that is universalizable. At this point, we must be careful and notice the distinction between «universal» and «universalizable». That an action or a kind of behaviour is universal means that it is universally accepted. The problem with this claim is that we can never know whether a kind of behaviour is universally accepted nor can we know how we can go about proving such a thing. However, Hare contends that the suggested moral judgement must be «universalizable», and by this he means that we have to check whether a kind of behaviour could be universally accepted by present and even by future people. This implies that I have to check and make sure that with the action I intend to perform I do not harm the interests of the present and future people that will be affected by my action. As we realize, the notion of «universalizability» is applied in such a way as to include the interests of both, the present and the future generations, something which has also further implications for environmental ethics.

It follows, therefore, that Hare puts human interests at the center of his theory of moral thinking. This is why he further claims that the logical features of prescriptivity and universalizability on their own do not suffice us for deciding when a judgement is moral, and whether or not we should accept it. This is why apart from the logical features of moral language, he contends that certain other ingredients are required for the moral argument to get started and proceed. The second element of moral reasoning is appeal to facts. This means that in reasoning morally we have to take into account the actual or supposed facts in which the moral problem under discussion arises10. The third ingredient of moral argument is appeal to inclinations or, as we just said, to interests. It goes without saying that people have different inclinations and interests, and quite often the interests of one man conflict with the interests of another. As Hare puts it, if a person was indifferent or apathetic and did not mind what happened to him or to others, then moral conflicts or problems would not arise and the moral argument would be pointless11.

---


11 Ibid.
We do mind therefore what inclinations and interests we and other people have. The fourth and final necessary ingredient of moral argument is appeal to imagination. It is through and by virtue of our imagination that moral reasoning takes place. Hare is keen to point out that moral reasoning proceeds by appeal to our imagination in an analogous manner that scientific reasoning does.

In the following example, let us explain the way Hare’s moral argument operates, especially in cases in which we have conflicts of interests. Let us suppose that A owes money to B, and that B owes money to C. And let us also suppose that there is a law that allows «the creditors to exact their money back by putting their debtors to prison»13. B therefore wonders «whether he (B) ought to put A (his debtor) to prison because he owes him money». Hare argues that B could certainly do such a thing, if he treated his moral judgement, «I (B) ought to put A to prison» as a singular prescription. In this case, the above judgement would have entailed the imperative, «Put him (A, the debtor) to prison». However, as Hare points out, moral judgements are not only singular prescriptions, but also universalizable prescriptions. This means that moral judgements are universalizable, they have, as we have seen, the logical feature of universalizability. Let us see the difference that the logical feature of universalizability makes in the example we are discussing. B now is not treating his initial moral judgement as a singular prescription but as a universalizable prescription. This implies that when B wonders «Whether he (B) ought to put A (his debtor) to prison», he means whether he is prepared to see his moral judgement being universalized and still assent to it. In other words, is B willing to argue that he ought to put A (his debtor) to prison not only in this particular case, but also in all similar cases, and also in the case in which their roles have been reversed, and now he (B) is a debtor, and A is a creditor? Is B still willing to adhere to his initial moral judgement and send A to prison? Or does he (B) now perhaps realize that if he were to turn into a debtor himself one day, he would not like to be sent to prison by his creditor (A)? And this, because such a thing would go against his inclinations. But if this is the case, then this implies that his initial moral judgement cannot be universally upheld, and he cannot therefore assent to it.

Hare further claims that the agent who argues in accordance with the kind of moral reasoning he suggests, i.e. in accordance with the logical framework which is defined by the features of prescriptivity and universalizability, by appealing to the relevant facts of the situation, by virtue of his imagination, and who aims, by this kind of reasoning, at the preference maximization of all the parties affected by the suggested action, the agent’s preference maximization included, then this man ends up with a kind of reasoning which is not different from the kind of reasoning a Utilitarian would accept. For, as Hare argues, as in his own Universal Prescriptivist account we are concerned with the way our proposed action is likely to affect the persons who are at the receiving end, and so we

12 This is Hare’s own example. See Ibid., p. 90 ff., § 6.3.

13 Ibid., p. 90 ff., § 6.3. In this part of the article I follow closely Hare’s own analysis of his example.
have to put ourselves into those people's shoes and imagine in a sympathetic way how they will feel if the action we wish to perform was actually performed, in the same way proceeds the utilitarian kind of argument. Both accounts put at the center of their reasoning two things: (a) The preference maximization of all the people affected by the action, the agent’s own included. And (b) the sympathetic imagination or empathy by virtue of which I put myself in a sympathetic manner in the shoes of the person(s) who will be affected by my action and test whether I am happy to accept that the very same thing should be done to me that I claim that should be done to the other person(s). These two things indeed, the preference maximization and the sympathetic imagination with which I consider the situation in which the other finds himself are the common core between Hare’s Universal Prescriptivist moral account and a certain form of Utilitarianism. And this is why Hare quite often claims in his books that the kind of moral reasoning he puts forward is a kind of Utilitarianism.

To take, therefore, the thread from where we have left it above, Hare argues that we have to teach the young people how to employ language morally and how to think morally\(^\text{14}\). What he seems to imply is that people, and in particular young people, quite often do not have or do not understand the moral categories. They lack completely the notion of universalizability and the idea of preference satisfaction of all the people concerned that goes with it, as they also lack what we have called “sympathetic imagination” that is they do not view the other’s situation as if it were their own. In different terms, in the way they act and behave they do not take into account the other person’s interests at all.

No doubt, Hare is absolutely right in what he contends. Most people lack the sympathetic imagination to view the other’s situation as if it were their own. But does this mean necessarily that if we think morally, we unavoidably think and reason in the same way as a Universal Prescriptivist Utilitarian would think? Even though Hare at some stage of his career seems to have thought precisely this, nevertheless, more recently, in the years of his philosophical maturity, he revises his initial contention. He now claims that, as we cannot teach the youth the logical form of scientific reasoning without teaching them at the same time some content, i.e. without teaching them some scientific theory, in the same way we cannot teach the young person how to reason morally, that is the form of moral reasoning, without teaching him at the same time some moral account\(^\text{15}\). It may turn out that this particular scientific theory we have taught the young man is false and has to be rejected or revised. In either case, we have done our job as good educators because we have taught the young man the form of scientific reasoning. In a similar manner, it may be the case that the moral theory one employs in order to teach the youth how to reason morally is not sufficient. And for this reason it will have to be revised, completed or replaced. However, we will also have done our job as educators well, because we will

---

\(^{14}\) See above, footnote 9.

\(^{15}\) Hare, R., M., « Adolescents into Adults», op.cit., pp. 124, 125.
have taught him how to reason morally, i.e. the form of moral reasoning.

Of course, when Hare puts forward his own version of moral account, i.e. his Universal Prescriptivist type of Utilitarianism, he means that this is the right moral theory. That if we reason in accordance with his Universal Prescriptivist account of reasoning, we are bound to end up with a kind of moral theory which a Utilitarian would accept. It is beyond the scope of the present paper to discuss whether or not Hare’s above claim is valid. This is a matter of theoretical ethics and I have dealt with it extensively on another occasion. However, what I wish to examine in the present case is whether teaching the kind of moral reasoning Hare puts forward is sufficient for turning the young men into moral agents and into good men. In other words, is teaching the kind of moral reasoning Hare propounds sufficient for educating morally young men and, by and large, is teaching the form of moral thinking on its own enough for educating the young people morally?

My impression is that Hare thinks that it is. And, certainly, in his writings on moral education he supports that teaching young men how to think and reason morally is all that is required for educating them morally. Of course, even though he teaches just the form of moral reasoning, as he admits, we have to appeal to the relevant facts, taking into account the interests of the others as if they were our own, through our imagination. By making these additions into the formal account of his moral reasoning, and especially by emphasizing that we have to put ourselves into the other parties’ shoes with sympathy, -he quite often talks about «sympathetic imagination» or «empathy»-, Hare seems to imply that moral education must involve something more than simply teaching the young man to reason morally correctly. Viewing the other party’s situation with «empathy» or «sympathetic imagination» means that I see it in a certain (sympathetic) light and that I adopt a certain disposition towards the person who is in this problematic situation. I do not laugh at what he is going through, I do not make fun of him; on the contrary, I fully sympathize with him.

Hare seems to admit that disposition plays an important role in educating morally the youth, because as he writes:

«Children must learn to think about what it is like to be the other person. They must cultivate their sympathetic imaginations. And this is not easy. It will not be brought about without effort on the part of parents and schoolteachers. And it will not be brought about by rational discussion alone».

In the above quotation Hare admits that parents and teachers need to cultivate their children’s dispositions. And he further admits that this cultivation of dispositions cannot be brought about only by rational discussion and argument.

We could not agree more with Hare’s above two claims. To start with the second one, moral discussion and reasoning on its own does not contribute to the

---


17 Hare, R., M., «Adolescents into Adults», op.cit., p. 125.
cultivation of people’s dispositions. We may have a criminal, for instance, who knows how to reason morally correctly, and who argues in accordance with Hare’s Universal Prescriptivist account. However, to the extent that he is an ill-disposed person and has bad or negative dispositions, he is going to apply his moral reasoning in the wrong way and for the wrong reason. It follows, therefore, that in educating morally the youth, we have to do two things: (a) to teach the moral language and how to reason morally; and (b) to cultivate their dispositions.

As we have seen, Hare says nothing as to how we can go about cultivating morally young person’s dispositions. Indeed, moral argument may guide our reason but does not actually refine our dispositions. Certain other means are required in order to achieve this. Traditionally the two philosophers that have particularly dealt with the cultivation of dispositions are Aristotle and Kant. Aristotle is not only concerned with the theoretical acquisition of moral language but also with the practical wisdom, the actual performing of the right act. His conception of ethics involves equally orexis and deliberation, desire and reasoning. The object of our choice, of our «proairesis» is something within our power which we desire after we have deliberated on it. Desiring and deliberating are the two main aspects of man, according to Aristotle’s conception of morality. However, unlike Hare who pays no or very little attention to desires and inclinations, in one word in the person’s disposition, Aristotle pays quite a lot. As he writes in the Nicomachean Ethics: «In fact pleasures and pains are the things with which moral virtue is concerned. For pleasure causes us to do base actions and pain causes us to abstain from doing noble actions».

And he goes on: «Hence the importance, as Plato points out, of having been definitely trained from childhood to like and dislike the proper things; this is what good education means».

According to Aristotle, it is because of pleasure that we often do what we ought not to do, in the same way that because of pain we do not perform what we ought to perform. In this Aristotle follows his teacher Plato who claims that moral education consists precisely in this: in training the young men from early childhood to like and dislike the proper things. As Aristotle has pointed out on another occasion:

«As then our present study, unlike the other branches of philosophy, has a practical aim (for we are not investigating the nature of virtue for the sake of knowing what it is, but in order that we may become good, without which result our investigation would be of no use), we have consequently to carry our enquiry into the region of conduct, and ask how we are to act morally».

According to Aristotle, therefore, we study the virtues and the nature of virtue not in order to acquire theoretical knowledge as it happens with the other branches of philosophy, but in order to become virtuous characters. And because the kind of

---

19 Ibid., II, 1104 b 9 – 12.
20 Ibid., II, 1104 b 12 – 14.
21 Ibid., II, 1103 b 26 – 31.
character we are is directly connected with the way we behave, the relation between character and action is close, we have to investigate how one becomes virtuous, and therefore how one behaves morally.

Consequently, Aristotle argues that we become virtuous by performing virtuous acts, and the more virtuous acts we perform the more virtuous characters we become. We become brave, temperate and just men by performing brave, temperate and just acts. However, he is quick to clarify that that these acts cannot be brave, temperate or just, unless the agent who performs them is in a certain disposition. He writes in the Nicomachean Ethics: According to Aristotle, therefore, we must perform the temperate and just acts while being in the right mental state: that is we perform them consciously, being aware that we perform temperate and just acts, we have chosen to perform these acts, and we perform them out of a permanent disposition, i.e. steadily and often.

Acting after deliberation, which means consciously and mainly out of a steady disposition is what precisely defines moral virtue, according to Aristotle. He writes:

«Virtue then is a settled disposition of the mind determining the choice of actions and emotions, consisting essentially in the observance of the mean relative to us, this being determined by principle, that is, as the prudent man would determine it. And it is a mean state between two vices, one of excess and one of defect»22.

It follows, therefore, that, according to Aristotle, what counts more in moral education is this settled disposition of the mind out of which we perform the actions we perform. Actions by themselves cannot be considered moral or virtuous, unless the agent performs them with a virtuous disposition. Aristotle's question, therefore, in the Nicomachian Ethics is: how do we cultivate man's disposition as to make it virtuous? And his answer is, as we have seen, that we cultivate it or, in more contemporary terms, we refine it through «hexis», through habitual action23. As I understand it, Aristotle in the Nicomachian Ethics offers us not so much his account of ethical theory as his account of ethical education. For in his opinion, we have to cultivate the young men's feelings, emotions and dispositions, we have to make them more malleable and sensitive, so that they act virtuously most of the time.

Alasdair MacIntyre, a British philosopher of the 20th century who has studied Aristotle's philosophy exhaustively and attempted to revive his ethical and political ideas, presents us with a schematic way in which Aristotle's procedure of ethical education takes place. He writes in his book After Virtue:

«We thus have a threefold scheme in which human-nature-as-it-happens-to-be (human nature in its untutored state) is initially discrepant and discordant with the precepts of ethics and needs to be transformed by the instruction of practical reason and experience into human-nature-as-it-could-be-if-it-realized-its-telos»24.

22 Ibid., II, 1106 b 36 – 1107 a 2.

23 See above, previous page.

Ethical education precisely includes the transition from the state of human-nature-as-it-happens-to-be, the untutored nature, to human-nature-as-it-could-be-if-it-realized-its-telos. This transition or transformation of human nature, as MacIntyre calls it, is possible through the instruction of practical reason and the sensitisation of character through experience. Both these two means, instruction of practical reason and sensitisation or refinement of character are necessary for educating morally human nature.

The second philosopher, apart from Aristotle, who also claims that moral education of the youth does not only include practical reasoning, as Hare thought, is the German Immanuel Kant. Kant is the philosopher of the Enlightenment who has however studied Aristotle very well. So in a sense he knows equally well both worlds, the ancient and the modern. As a modern philosopher of his times, he argues that our moral actions must be in accordance with the moral law, or in conformity with duty. But this is not enough. We must not simply examine if my action was performed in conformity with duty; we must also examine whether it was done from duty. He mentions the unfortunate old man who

«Wishes for death and yet preserves his life without loving it, not from inclination or fear but from duty, then his maxim has a moral content»25.

Kant, therefore, after he has presented the way practical reasoning proceeds in the Groundwork, he goes on to analyze and present how man cultivates his character, how man acquires the virtues in his second great book, The Metaphysics of Morals. In this treatise his concern is how to bring out how man’s tendencies and desires, in one word choice, what he calls in German «Willkür», can be transformed into a will which is obedient to moral law, in German he calls it «Wille».

«Hence virtue cannot be defined as an aptitude for free actions in conformity with law unless there is added «to determine oneself to act through the thought of the law», and then this aptitude is not a property of choice but of the will, which is a faculty of desire that, in adopting a rule, also gives it as a universal law»26.

To conclude, as Aristotle, in a similar manner Kant contends that we do not educate morally the youth as long as we teach them practical reasoning, that is how to do acts in conformity with duty. Moral education includes something more: how to bring the youth to act from duty. This implies that the educators ought to teach the young men how they will transform their impure, untutored desires into a pure will which is freely and completely subjected to the moral law.


Eleni Kalokairinou:  
Critical moral thinking or refinement of disposition?  
What is the aim of moral education?

Bibliography


Eleni Kalokairinou  
ekal@edlit.auth.gr

of the University of Ioannina since February 2019, and a substitution member of the Committee of Ethics and Deontology of Research of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki since October 2018.