

A New Framework For Moral Education: A Discussion Of Guiding Principles

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Education is defined in many ways, each representing some aspect of what happens, or is intended to happen, in the process of the growth and development and up-bringing of human beings. This process may be focused on various dimensions of human development, namely physical, intellectual and spiritual. With some degree of indulgence, we shall refer to the spiritual dimension as “moral development.”

The term “moral,” is derived from a Latin word, *moris*, which means “manner.” “Moral behaviour” is the manner in which we all conduct our life. It is based on the value judgements of what is right and what is wrong. Such judgements establish standards or codes of conduct. This shows the relativity of the basis of what is referred to as “morality” or “moral practices.” There are a variety of factors that affect the formation of such “values.” Culture, tradition, ideologies and religious belief systems are among the major factors forming the body of ethics in a society. This body of ethics generates a normative process which controls the development and conduct of behaviour.

Moral education, therefore, is aimed at the development of moral behaviour. Such an educational process emanates from and is guided by a set of norms or principles. The vitality, the permanency, and the power of moral behaviour depend on the strength, justification and dynamism of these guiding principles.

Two Approaches to Leading a Moral Life

Generally, there are two main approaches to the development and monitoring of moral behaviour. One approach is to develop a code of conduct that will present rules of action for every situation. Such a code needs a mechanism of enforcement. Since the code is “given” to the individual, it needs a standard-setting authority. And because it is “externally imposed,” its enforcement needs control agents and systems that are external to the individuals who are expected to follow those rules. Furthermore, those who are subjected to such a code, continuously seek more detailed norms or rules for each and every specific case they encounter in daily life. Also, such codes are subject to the conditions of time and environment, and need to be constantly modified to meet the changing conditions.

The need for continuous and external standard-setting, rule-making and control, dichotomizes society into two classes of people; those who legislate and enforce the rules of conduct and those whose responsibility it is to blindly follow the rules. Strangely enough, the natural increase of the body of rules, the difficulty of adjusting them to specific cases, and the rigidity that such a procedure imposes upon the people and society, usually generates practices that are contrary to the moral way of life. On the one hand, those who are in control positions for moral conduct will be led to develop a kind of “professionalism.” This will become their vocation. Therefore, they will be induced to elaborate on it, protect and perpetuate their profession and its prerogatives, instead of attending to the original objective, which is the improvement of the way of life.

On the other hand, the generality of the members of society, who have to blindly practice the prescribed code of conduct, become more apprehensive and try to find ways and means of observing the formalities,

in order to avoid the punishments envisaged in the control system, rather than actually live a life as presented by the spirit and meaning of the code. Therefore, this process of norm-setting and norm-enforcing becomes a self-defeating way of moral development and of securing moral behaviour.

The other approach is to enable and empower individuals to personally make the “right” decision and follow the “right” way of life, even at the price of sacrificing their immediate interests. Such an approach calls for a different frame of reference for moral education. Under this alternative, each person will have to develop an “inner” agent or a mechanism of self-control, which is usually called moral conscience. This process requires that everyone be equipped with a conviction of heart or a strong sense of commitment to a supreme origin that is the source of all good that will guide his/her conscience. As will be elaborated later, such a belief system or faith prevents the individual from disregarding the principles of morality in the face of adverse conditions. In this way, the individual will develop an ability of discernment that is spiritual in nature. This ability of discernment and self-monitoring liberates the individual from following the dictates of an externally imposed, detailed code of norms. This, however, necessitates commitment to a set of basic guidelines or principles and an understanding and vision of life that can assist the individual or the community to make behavioural decisions that are supportive of a healthy and progressive way of life. In other words, instead of dictating a code of universal rules to control every judgemental act, the ability will be developed in the individual to handle each case in a way that could be considered “moral.”

Contrary to the former approach, in this new framework there is no need for having a dominant class of “moral leaders” and a subordinate mass of blind followers. Every individual will have the responsibility, freedom and capacity to find and follow a “moral” way of life. There will be no need for imposing external control, no need for cheating, no need for dividing and disintegrating society into two or more camps. Everyone will be guided and propelled by his/her inner convictions and a set of very basic and universal principles of a healthy way of life. That is the sign of arriving at the age of maturity for mankind.

Individual Empowerment Through Moral Education

How can each person become so equipped and empowered? The answer is through “moral education.” A moral education that is based on two pillars of a healthy, progressive and firm inner conviction and a body of guiding principles as part of that inner commitment. Such conviction, self-confidence and sense of “safe” freedom, cannot be injected into people. It requires a developmental and an educational process. The earlier in life this process starts, the more successful it will become. This conviction actually leads to the act of entering into a covenant with our Creator, a covenant that is based on mutual love and trust, not feelings of guilt and fear. Its purpose is to free individuals from fear of guilt, fear of others constantly watching over them and directing them and of the inability to find their own way. At the same time, the individual needs to have a satisfying and encouraging understanding of the meaning of his life, his destiny, and his relations with others. Individuals need to have a clear understanding of their responsibilities, prerogatives and powers. Individuals need to be able to plan their way of life and feel confident that the way they live the life will not undermine their own as well as others’ best interests.

Principles Of Moral Education

1. Duality of the Nature of Man

The subject of moral education is the human being. Thus, it is essential to clarify our image and our understanding of the “human being” who is meant to receive moral education or be morally equipped. Generally speaking, there are two concepts or two interpretations of the “human being.”

According to one concept, subscribing to which is, nowadays, a sign of intellectualism, and being objective and free from superstition, is to consider the human being as a kind of animal subordinated to nature. That is to deny existence of the soul, and a non-material aspect of life that will not be ended by death and the decomposition of the body. The other concept of the human being, which is generally the basis of religious belief systems, maintains that the human being is endowed with a gift that animals do

not possess. In other words, although the human being possesses common features with the animal, it also has capabilities that are not the extensions and refinement of the qualities possessed by the animal. That is to say, the human being has a dual nature; the material side of the animal life, and a spiritual side that makes it possible for humans to ascend beyond the limits of the animal kingdom.

Therefore, if we treat human beings as if they are animals, we are leading them to behave as animals, of which we see many examples. Human beings in our society today will thus downgrade themselves to a state lower than any animal. It is also possible to free ourselves from the bondage of such animalistic instincts and tendencies and aspire to lofty goals. "The love of exaltation is one of the characteristics of man." Such a way of life is conducive to an "ever-advancing civilization." This is the very basic principle of moral education.

2. Priority of Moral Education

Another very basic consideration is the principle of priority of moral education over physical and intellectual education. The moral development of individuals equips them with a sense of mission, a hope, a vision and a firm basis in order to appreciate, be eager to acquire and be able to use knowledge, skills and physical capabilities in a way that will be most helpful to themselves and to others. The educational process should start from the very early years of life, by building a firm moral foundation and moral commitment. This is like a source of light helping the individual to find the healthy way to pursue, to acquire, and to properly apply knowledge and skills. It will prevent the individual's misuse of capabilities and doing harm to one's self, as well as to others. What is ideal to achieve is a balance development which encompasses the proper proportion of all these aspects of education.

3. Universality

In order to be conducive to the collective good, education should be universal in its application and in its goals, aims and objectives. The unity of mankind, the emergence of a global society and permanent peace require universality in education. No-one should remain deprived of this self-empowering, self-developmental, and self-guiding opportunity. In other words, receiving education must be compulsory and not a matter of choice or chance. Education and school curricula need to follow a universal pattern conducive to building a unified global society.

4. Unity of Mankind

While achievement of unity in human society stands as a cherished goal, its fulfillment, among other measures, requires the application of moral education during the formative years of life. As is stated in the charter of UNESCO, war first starts in the minds of men, and it is in the minds of men that it should be stopped and eradicated. What we are witnessing in the world today is a transition to a kind of international union. Union is different from unity. Union is but a preliminary step towards unity. True and lasting unity will be achieved when the generality of mankind have a common understanding of the causes of disunity and a collective commitment to practicing a way of life that eradicates such causes and hindrances.

Having a balanced, objective, and enlightening knowledge of the creeds, races, and cultures of the world, appreciating each person as a dear member of the family of mankind, regardless of colour of skin, nationality, religion and language, according equal rights and privileges to both men and women (as the two wings with which humanity may ascend to higher levels of progress and welfare), self-restraint in accumulation of wealth and prevention of poverty, necessity of being engaged in productive work and avoidance of idleness or seclusion, understanding the developmental nature of the spiritual heritage of mankind that demonstrates the unity of religions and eradicates religious conflicts, and many other such provisions, are the components of a new morality that we need today. Moral education is the mechanism that makes such an ideal behaviour an actual reality.

5. Preferential Education for Girls

For moral education to be effective and lasting, it has to begin with the life of each individual. The

formation of character and the ability of discernment of good and bad, or right and wrong, start to take root and crystallize from the early days of life. Parents, particularly mothers, are necessarily the first educators and best models for their children for many years. Educating parents, especially mothers, as primary agents of moral education, is an essential factor. Moral education has to be family-based. We need to build a moral environment at home. Therefore, from the point of view of moral education, education of girls takes precedence over the education of boys. Recent studies have proved that there is a positive correlation between the education of mothers and character development of their offspring. Unfortunately, the current situation reflects the opposite approach; namely, whenever it is not possible to give equal education to both sexes, education of boys receives first priority. There are even societies in which education of girls is severely limited or even shunned.

6. Religion and Moral Education

A question often posed is the role and function of religion in moral education. In one sense, moral education and religion are the same, and prophets are spiritual or moral educators of mankind. What is meant by both religion and education is to bring out the best in human beings. Each person is indeed like a mine of precious stones of sterling qualities, which are hidden in his nature. Moral or spiritual education empowers the individual to bring forth those jewels and to master brilliant characters. The function and the impact of religion on moral education largely depends on what is meant by religion. The old religious streams, practiced today and characterized by many sects and sub-sects, are composed of two parts. The original teachings of the prophet-founder and what has later on been added by the leaders and innovators in each religion.

The original teachings are what is referred to as "divine revelation." The additional elements are the body of dogmas, rituals, traditions, and normative requirements that are man-made. What has been added in this way has been the cause of division and difference. Such practices of formalism cannot be conducive to unity and fellowship of mankind. Furthermore, dogmatism, fundamentalism, bigotry and attachment to various prejudices exercise a negative impact on human behaviour.

Therefore, religion can be both a negative as well as a positive factor. As a negative factor, it may be a source for disunity within human society. Religion may also play a positive role by internalizing a belief system that induces the "right" behaviour and impedes or prevents "wrong" behaviour. Thus, it could be the strongest source of unity and solidarity in society. In other words, it develops an inner agent in the heart and mind of each individual which equips him/her with the power of discernment and will to act correctly. In this way, religion is a very fundamental factor in moral education.

7. Science and Reason

To purify the religious belief system from what may have a negative impact on the moral development of the individual, religion should be in harmony with and be supported by scientific facts and reason. The complementary aspect of religion, science and reason is another basic principle to be observed in curriculum development for moral education. That which is not supported by reason and scientific fact is superstition and not religion.

When moral values have such a firm basis, they stand the test of adverse circumstances. One reason why intellectuals shun and avoid religion is that they cannot reconcile what is presented as religion with what seems acceptable to reason and what is discovered by science. The individual feels more confident in making self-sacrifices in order to uphold moral principles, when his belief system is reasonable and does not negate scientific findings.

8. The Teacher as Living Example

The younger the children, the more they look up to their parents and to their teachers as examples to emulate. The behaviour and character of the teacher, i.e. deeds, teach more than lessons, i.e. words. It is

therefore a fundamental principle in moral education that teachers and educators set the example of the behaviour that they want to instill in their pupils. We may therefore conclude that moral education starts with teacher education, and teacher education starts with teachers morally educating themselves.

Teachers need to be convinced and sincerely committed to the way of life that they want to recommend and to teach their students. This will prove that what is being taught is feasible and can be practiced. Parents and teachers are the agents or role models for the renewal and improvement of moral behaviour.

When a community is undergoing fundamental social changes, people are looking for new standards of behaviour. There is a need for examples to follow. Acting as such examples requires both a clear understanding of the role to be played and the willingness to exercise self-sacrifice, if and when necessary, to set such living examples. Moral education needs community support and an overall moral environment.

9. Integration of Academic and Vocational Education

Vocational education is usually employed as a link between education and employment. It is usually treated as an alternative to academic education. This approach has created a dichotomy in education and a clear struggle in society. It has led the educational institutions to produce two types of graduates; those who are supposed to work with their brain and those who are expected to work with their hands.

Needless to go into details of the unhappy and harmful consequences of this dichotomous approach. What has been neglected is the psychological and moral impact of vocational education. Vocational education, if conducted properly, makes the individual useful to society, self-reliant, positive and productive. Limiting education to the academically gifted produces individuals who are dependent on others to earn their living; they lack self-confidence, and often develop pessimistic attitudes. The balanced individual is one who can use both his head and his hands. Academic and vocational education have to be integrated into one unified curriculum for the universal compulsory education.

10. Beneficial Knowledge

What the person learns should be of some use and advantage to society and to his own development. Such applicability and practical usefulness of acquired knowledge has a positive and constructive impact on character building and formation of moral behaviour. When the learner, the investigator, the student finds his achievements of value to humanity and appreciated by others, he/she develops a supportive, positive and productive attitude and will live a happier and more useful life. Pursuing studies that start with words and end in words has a negative moral impact.

11. Taking Pride in Uprightness and Excellence

It is through moral education that members of society develop respect and supportive attitude for those who show uprightiness in their behaviour and for those who master arts and sciences. It is necessary to bring up the pupils to feel proud of living a life in accordance with the values and standards that are considered positive and "right," and feel ashamed and uncomfortable when they disregard moral principles.

Furthermore, students should be encouraged to be interested in self-development, continuous learning and advancement, and seeking excellence in their life, in their studies and in their profession. They should not be satisfied with relative advancement, they should seek highest excellence in behaviour, in acquiring knowledge and skills and in serving humanity. As soon as one is satisfied with one's self, one will start a regressive and backward movement, as far as moral development is concerned.

12. Sense of Service

The human being is like a tree. A tree has to bear fruit and give some advantage. A useless tree has no value and will not be appreciated. The fruit of human life is what each person offers as service to others. That is the meaning of service. If one cannot do good to others, if one cannot give the benefit of one's life in the form of something beneficial to others, it is as if one is a fruitless or useless tree.

Thus, the function of moral education is to bring up individuals to understand their status and their role in society and feel that they are actually serving society. It is a process of give and take. People enjoy what society makes available to them and in exchange give back their useful contribution to society. Education is both an individual as well as a collective and social responsibility.

13. Love of Nature

It is not only society towards which one should have such reciprocal relations. The individual needs to have the same relationship with nature; with plants and animals and with the environment as a whole. Everyone benefits from the environment in which we live, and we have to learn how to live in order to be able to protect and perpetuate a healthy environment. This is the second dimension of the give-and-take relationship between the individual and his surroundings and it is an integral part of moral education.

14. Power of Discernment

In short, what we would like to develop is the power of discernment. Instead of blindly following a course of life, which is dictated in every detail and closely controlled, we should acquire the power of discernment and develop a sense of compassion and understanding, as well as power of evaluation, and zeal for an independent search for truth. In this way, instead of being told what has to be done in each instance, one can, on one's own initiative, make the right decision and take the right course of action. This is the main function and main goal of moral education: the empowerment of the individual to direct his/her own way of life to benefit him/herself, society, the environment, mankind and future generations.

15. Individual Liberty

Freedom is what everyone wants to enjoy. In the pursuit of freedom, very often we are victimized by habits and behaviours that are restrictive and lead to actual slavery. When we indiscriminately follow our passions and our lower instincts, we become so enslaved by undesirable habits and addictions that we cannot get rid of them.

One of the main functions of religion is to liberate people from the slavery of their own passions and animalistic tendencies and from the limitations of material life, taking them to the limitless worlds of spiritual enhancement. This emancipation can only be realized through moral education and moral development of behaviour. That is another interrelationship between religion and moral education. In following a way of life that is prescribed by a religious practice and is appropriate for the needs, aspirations, and conditions of the present day, one can make one's self free from the doubts, uncertainties, indignities and harmful habits that the present confusing circumstances are imposing upon us, and enjoy the freedom, the confidence, and positive attitude that everyone wishes to possess.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we may summarize what was said earlier in the following words. The formal education usually given today does not provide a sense of faith and commitment and does not equip the individual with sufficient guidelines to ensure moral conduct of everyday life. The external system of control cannot guarantee correct behaviour due to the innate weaknesses and shortcomings of such an approach. Everyone needs to receive guidance and training that enables the individual to acquire the ability of discernment and to be responsible for one's behaviour. Everyone needs also to be brought up in a way that one can learn the guiding principles for making the "right" decision and taking the "right" action. This

is what is meant by moral education.

Thus, moral education must be an integral part of every educational activity. That calls for a new framework to be adopted for moral education and a new comprehensive educational programme to be devised.