

Title:

How psychologically realistic should theories of moral education be?

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Summary

In this paper, the question of how psychologically realistic approaches to moral education should be, will be addressed. What does it mean for prescriptive ideals of character to be possible for people like us? Especially Owen Flanagan's 'principle of minimal psychological realism' will be consulted in order to answer this question. From this examination, we can conclude that the kind of character that virtue ethics prescribes should not be impossible for us, members of the human species. Moreover, the prescriptions should be a 'real option' for us as mature members of particular socio-cultural communities. With these criteria, we turn to John Doris' *Lack of Character* (2002), who claims that virtue ethics should be revised since the moral psychology that it presupposes is difficult to substantiate. People typically lack character, and therefore, robust character traits cannot be the aim of moral education. His critique is based on 'scientific psychological realism', i.e. the view that systematic observation should be a powerful constraint on theory construction. However, he does not provide reasons why we would have to believe that people lack the capacity to acquire character traits. Therefore, it seems as if virtue ethics can continue to assist people in improving their dispositions and practices.

Introduction

If one poses the question 'in what way schools should contribute to the moral education of children in a pluralistic society?', like I do in my PhD thesis, one will readily recognise that this question can only be answered by defending a particular ethical theory. As I try to find out whether virtue ethics is a satisfying approach, this means that I will have to be able to convince deontologists, utilitarians and others of the incompleteness of their approach.

However, theories of moral education have other functions than to prescribe an ethical ideal; they also describe how this ideal can psychologically be achieved, and what pedagogical strategies can be used to stimulate people's moral development. Therefore, if scientific psychology and pedagogics are not taken seriously, one might end up having a philosophically very sound theory of which it is unclear whether it is psychologically or pedagogically realistic. One might object to this by saying that 'realism' is a controversial criterion to judge a theory of moral education with. This prompts me to be clear about my meta-ethical assumptions: I think that a virtue ethical approach to moral education should not prescribe a kind of character that is impossible for people like us. This assumption can be interpreted in several ways, and it will have to be elucidated what 'impossible' and 'people like us' mean.

This paper is structured in the following way. Firstly, I will claim that and justify why a theory of moral education should be psychologically realistic at all. Secondly, I will explore the meaning of 'psychologically realistic' with the help of Owen Flanagan's work *Varieties of Moral Personality* (1991). Thirdly, I will have a closer look at John Doris' *Lack of Character* (2002), who has criticized contemporary Aristotelian virtue ethics with the help of social psychology. I will investigate what the relevance of his attack on the notion of 'character' is for a theory of moral education. Fourthly, I will conclude that if we take Flanagan's minimal psychological realism as a point of departure, we do not have to be scared about this attack.

Doris only shows that some people lack character – not that it is impossible for us to acquire one.

Moral education

In this section, the function of theories of moral education will be discussed in order to explain why a theory of moral education cannot remain silent on the moral psychological process that people go through as they try to live good, successful lives.

There are good reasons why moral philosophers can be justified in *not* being interested in psychology. However, I will argue later that philosophers working on moral education are an exception. Why would moral philosophers not want to get involved in psychology? They will probably subscribe to what Flanagan (1991, p. 24) calls the ‘autonomy thesis’, the idea that ethics “...provides ideals of agency but need not in any way reflect actual psychological realities or existing human practices.” From this perspective, thinking about prescriptive ‘ideals of agency’ radically differs from descriptive research into the current human state of affairs. This does not imply that there is no interaction whatsoever between philosophy and psychology. According to those who subscribe to the autonomy thesis, moral philosophy might matter for psychology, but certainly not the other way around. Philosophers will set certain standards for human character and conduct, and these standards will limit the total possible range of characters and activities. Subsequently, these moral standards will influence the way in which we organize our moral education and social practices. What is attractive about the autonomy thesis is the idea that the ideals of character and conduct need not reflect actual psychological realities. Because of the gap between real and ideal, ethics can be critical and inspiring.

In general, one could say that ethical theories address the question of what a good life or a good action is. Theories of moral education, however, address a somewhat different question: how can one best achieve a good life? Whereas an ethical theory prescribes a certain moral goal or ideal, a theory of moral education will also describe the psychological processes that an agent has to go through in order to reach this goal. Examples of twentieth-century theories that took this at heart are Kohlberg’s cognitive development (Kohlberg, 1981, 1984), character education (e.g. Lickona, 1991; Ryan & Lickona, 1992) and virtue ethics (e.g. MacIntyre, 1999; Kristjánsson, 2007). Recently, character education has been very keen on taking results of psychological research serious. Lapsley and Power (2005, p. 1) even state that “...important insights about character and character education will be forthcoming only when there are adequate advances in character psychology.”

For Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, moral education was exclusively a philosophical affair because there was no such thing as a separate science called psychology. Nevertheless, the absence of modern scientific methods did not discourage them to develop moral educational ideas. They did not only prescribe a certain way of life - the life of the virtues - but also wrote extensively on the psychological processes that people will have to go through while trying to become virtuous, and on the pedagogical strategies that should be used to stimulate this development. For example, Aristotle would probably have considered his ideas on the cultivation of habits through the emulation of role models as philosophical. Today, this is at its best a hypothesis that is open to empirical scrutiny.

If Aristotle had been born in the twentieth century, he would have been a scientist when it comes to moral psychology and moral development, because the social sciences currently possess the best means of investigating the objects he was interested in. So, the reason why a theory of moral education should take results of scientific psychological research serious is that psychology nowadays addresses a question that philosophy addressed

twenty-five centuries ago. Although philosophers still have important things to contribute to this domain, moral education has ceased to be an exclusively philosophical affair.

So far, I assumed that there is a relatively invariable set of questions about moral education that has been recurring, while the method with which these questions have been answered has changed significantly: it was first philosophical, and now it is *partly* psychological. However, this assumption hides from view the possibility that philosophical insights and results from psychological research might clash. This is the case when psychological research would show that nobody is able to develop the motivational structures required by the moral theory. Results from empirical research (i.e. that motivational structures are non-existent) can be a blow to moral philosophers advocating a moral ideal (i.e. an ideal that presupposes the existence of these motivational structures). This is a problem for a theory of moral education, since I assume that a normative conception that is psychologically impossible will ‘fail to grip us’, and it will therefore ‘fail to gain our attention, respect and effort’ (Flanagan, 1991, p. 26). It is of no educational use to formulate too ideal a moral goal, since people will not bother taking an effort. There will have to be at least a few people who have approximated or reached this goal, and who can inspire others to develop morally. If we agree about the importance of normative conceptions gripping us, then it seems that a theory of moral education should be constrained by what is psychologically possible.

Therefore, the controversial question does not seem to be whether a theory of moral education should be psychologically realistic at all, but rather *in what way* a theory of education should be psychologically realistic. When is it demanding too much, and when too little?

Minimal psychological realism

In the English-speaking world, the current interest in the relationship between psychology and moral philosophy can be traced to the article *Modern moral philosophy* by Elizabeth Anscombe (1958) in which she declared that moral philosophy, at that time largely dominated by deontologists and utilitarians, should be postponed until an adequate ‘philosophy of psychology’ had been developed. Her appeal made many philosophers, such as Bernard Williams, Philippa Foot, John McDowell and Alasdair MacIntyre return to virtue ethics, but it was less successful in convincing them to take psychology seriously. According to John Doris (2002, p. 3), it was only until the 1990s that philosophers started to take empirical psychological research into account. With regard to the depth required to see how psychology matters to ethics, Doris (2002, pp. 3-4) mentions Flanagan (1991) as a positive exception. Although his book is almost twenty years old, and new psychological research has not been accounted for, the general ideas on the relationship between ethics and psychology are still valuable.

Flanagan does not only address but he also answers the question how psychology should constrain ethics. He formulates a meta-ethical principle, which is both descriptive and prescriptive; descriptive because Flanagan claims that most ethical theories are committed to it, and prescriptive, since he presents it as a criterion for evaluating theories in terms of this aspiration. The Principle of Minimal Psychological Realism (PMPR) reads: “Make sure when constructing a moral theory or projecting a moral ideal, that the character, decision processing, and behaviour prescribed are possible, or are perceived to be possible for creatures like us.” (Flanagan, 1991, p. 34). In an endnote, he explains that PMPR is a version of the ‘ought implies can’ principle, which implies that it is irrational to morally require a particular type of individuals to do what they cannot do. ‘A particular type’ of individuals means for Flanagan first of all members of the *Homo sapiens*; it is irrational to ask members of this species to have personalities, motivational structures etc that they cannot have. Notice that this

does not imply that it is irrational to require particular (token) individuals to be or behave in a way that they cannot at a certain time.

Why does Flanagan distinguish between a *type* of individuals (we are all members of a biological species), and *tokens* of individuals (I am somebody else than you)? Why is it not irrational for a moral theory to prescribe a kind of character that is impossible for you or me? Flanagan is afraid that the PMPR will be used as a pretext by people who interpret ‘creatures like us’ in too a narrow way. If that happens, people would be justified in rejecting the demands of a moral theory if they feel like they cannot live up to the prescribed ideal. This raises the question of what the ‘psychological possibility space’ for human beings is (Flanagan, 1991, p. 38). When are people justified in using the argument that it is impossible for them to live up to moral demands?

Flanagan makes a useful distinction between ‘natural’ (or biological) traits on the one hand and ‘narrow’ (or social) traits on the other. He admits that this distinction is not substantive, since natural traits are the raw material on which the social traits are constructed, but the distinction is still useful for analytic purposes. Natural traits are “...features which turn up in some recognizable form regardless of cultural context and historical time, and therefore are taken to lie closer to our basic biological and cognitive architecture than certain other traits” (Flanagan, 1991, p. 41). Examples of these natural traits are the six basic emotions (anger, fear, disgust, happiness, sadness and surprise), the perceptual input system, propositional attitudes, biological sex, sexual desire, hunger, thirst, linguistic capacity, and the capacities to be classically and operantly conditioned, to reason, and to remember. These emotions, attitudes, desires and capacities are shared by all normal members of the species *Homo sapiens*.

Considering this, what would be impossible for members of this species? Flanagan discusses the example of an ethical theory that would require people to become completely self-disinterested and altruistic. If there would be enough evidence to conclude that humans possess some kind of instrumental rationality, a theory of moral education that would profess altruism to such an extent that our self-interested nature is ignored would not make sense. In that case, complete altruism is not a real option for any human being. We will only be left frustrated if we did try to rid ourselves from our self-interested nature. I doubt whether any stark opposition between altruism and self-interest is very informative, since it is not impossible to conceive of people who would say that acting out of altruism is their *raison d’être*. However, as a hypothetical example, Flanagan’s example suffices. Just like it is foolish of parents to require their 1-year-old toddler to be toilet-trained, it would be foolish of philosophers to prescribe people courses of actions that their constitution doesn’t allow for.

At first sight, it seems as if the psychological possibility space is larger if we turn to cultural traits. Whereas a human being cannot become not-human during his life, it is not impossible for a member of a cultural unit to become a member of another cultural unit. Or is this just as difficult? Flanagan (1991, p. 43) gives the example of polyandrous marriages in Tibet, where a group of brothers can marry a single female and all have intercourse with her. Flanagan finds this practice not very appealing (however, he doesn’t see any wrong in it), but he admits that it might have been appealing were he not a US but a Tibetan citizen. The fact that somebody doesn’t like the idea of having sex with a woman his brothers are also sleeping with, can be explained by reference to Flanagan’s narrow psychological traits. He approvingly paraphrases John Kekes (1989), who argues that socially constructed traits can also constrain our ability to realize a particular psychology once we are mature members of some community. Some deep-seated, socially specific traits *have become* extremely difficult or even impossible for us to achieve, given the particular psychology we have developed as a member of a particular (sub) culture. Flanagan admits that narrow traits can be very much like

natural traits, in the sense that they limit our possibilities, but he insists that narrow traits can always be adjusted, albeit over generations, whereas natural traits cannot. If moral education becomes less effective once people have already developed a kind of character; or, to put it differently, if moral education will have to become more intrusive to change a character that has already been formed, it can better aim at a new generation.

Flanagan emphasizes that accepting the PMPR does not imply that moral theories should accommodate our narrow psychological traits. In fact, the reason why his book is called *Varieties of Moral Personality*, is that he wants to stress the possibility of moral diversity and moral change. The reason why we have narrow traits is sociological, and these cannot be considered good reasons for restraining moral theories, since we will end up being too hesitant about the possibility of moral development. Flanagan (1991, p. 34): “We could seek to change the practices and the attitudes of subsequent generations, even if it were very difficult to purify completely our own entrenched attitudes and dispositions.” But why is the possibility of moral change so important? Unfortunately, Flanagan does not give a positive argument why we should not be too hesitant. He only rebuts arguments put forward against moral change, claiming that moral theories are only too demanding if they are no ‘real option’, that is if people can no longer live ‘inside their actual historical circumstances’, could not ‘retain their hold on reality’ and would ‘engage in extensive self-deception’ (Flanagan cites Bernard Williams, 1985, p. 160).

Lack of character

We saw that a theory of moral education can be supported or criticized by appealing to results from psychological research, since such theories make assumptions about the psychological capacities that people need while they attempt to reach a prescribed goal. If it is impossible for them to acquire these psychological traits, this can be considered an objection to a moral theory. But the question remained what is and what isn’t impossible. Flanagan’s principle of minimal psychological realism enabled us to separate between ‘natural’ and ‘narrow’ psychological traits. From this, we can conclude that it will be a serious blow to a theory of moral education if it prescribes people to develop a kind of character that is impossible given the species we are a member of. In addition, as long as a theory or moral education does not cause people to ‘engage in extensive self-deception’, its prescriptions are fine and the argument that a goal of moral education is impossible or unrealistic, is invalid.

Let’s now move on to John Doris, a philosopher who claims that virtue ethics in general and a virtue ethical approach to moral education in particular should be revised since the moral psychology that they presuppose is difficult or even impossible to substantiate. Since I committed myself to taking the results of psychological research seriously, if Doris is right, I will have to revise what I consider an Aristotelian theory on moral education. For the last decade, John Doris (1998, p. 506; 2002, pp. 16-20) has undermined claims made by virtue ethicists (he mentions Aristotle, McDowell and Dent) that their ethical theory has an advantage over other ethical theories, such as Kantianism or utilitarianism, because of its realistic moral psychology. Doris doubts whether this alleged advantage really exists, and has looked into some important psychological evidence¹ that might shed light on this matter. He concludes that empirical evidence in favour of the existence of character traits is very limited: people typically lack character. And Gilbert Harman (2000), who has undertaken a similar

¹ Such as the Good Samaritan Experiment (Darley & Batson, 1973), the Millgram experiments (Millgram, 1974) and the Stanford Prison experiment (Haney & Zimbardo, 1977).

project, arrives at the conclusion that most people do not just lack character, but that character traits do not exist at all.

These situationists recommend virtue ethicists and laymen to ‘revise’ (Doris) or ‘abandon’ (Harman) talk about robust character traits. This has implications for moral education: it should not be aimed at cultivating a virtuous character, but at reflecting on the results of psychological research - which has shown that that moral behaviour can more reliably be explained and predicted by situational factors. For example, if a colleague, who has been flirting with you for some time, invites you over for dinner, Doris (1998, pp. 516-517) recommends you not to trust your morally upright character, and rather take the lessons of situationism to heart. They may teach you that your character may not be a reliable predictor of your behavior as soon as the candles are lit and the wine begins to flow. Doris (2002, p. 109): “Reflection on situationist moral psychology can help us to judge and act better in ethically trying circumstances...”. Doing so can result in what Doris calls ‘local traits’, that explain how a person might respond in trials of the same situation.

Unfortunately, this summary is far too brief to do justice to Doris’ work. Even if one does not agree with his main theses, it forces virtue ethicists to be more clear on what virtue ethics does and does not comprise. In fact, there is a lot in *Lack of Character* to disagree with: we can question whether the experiments Doris refers to were designed to show that people do or don’t have character traits in the first place, whether Doris interprets these experiments correctly, and whether he is justified to claim what he claims on the basis of this evidence. We will have to save all this for another occasion. In this paper, the question will be addressed whether Doris’ critique shows that virtue ethics violates Flanagan’s principle of minimal psychological realism. If it turns out that people typically lack character, as Doris argues, does this imply that the kind of character prescribed by virtue ethicists is/seems to be impossible?

In order to answer this question, we should be a bit more explicit about Doris’ claims. He assumes that virtue ethicists believe that virtuous people have a ‘steady’, ‘dependable’, ‘steadfast’, ‘unwavering’ and ‘unflinching’ character (Doris, 2002, p. 1). More precisely, Doris attacks what he calls a ‘globalist’ interpretation of character, which can be divided in three sub theses: (1) consistency, i.e. character traits will be manifested in different trait-relevant situations; (2) stability, i.e. character traits will be manifested in iterated trials of similar trait-relevant situations; and (3) evaluative integration, i.e. the possession of a certain trait increases the chance of having other traits. Doris (2002, p. 23) endorses the stability thesis, but rejects the other two.

What is interesting here, is Doris’ emphasis on the role that ‘systematic observation’ should play in scrutinizing virtue ethicists’ claims about character. In the opening chapter of *Lack of Character*, Doris (2002, p. 14) states his philosophical assumptions on this point: “I think that systematic observation should be a powerful constraint on theory construction...”. What kind of restraint? If we asked Doris to reformulate Flanagan’s PMPR, he would probably come up with something like this: “Make sure when constructing a moral theory or projecting a moral ideal, that systematic observation has demonstrated that the character, decision processing, and behaviour prescribed have been realized by creatures like us.” Although Doris does not explicitly formulate such a principle, while discussing Flanagan’s work, Doris (2002, pp. 112-113) calls his own approach ‘scientific psychological realism’. We could call his principle the ‘Principle of Scientific Psychological Realism’ (PSPR).

What is the difference between Doris’ scientific psychological realism and Flanagan’s minimal psychological realism? Flanagan would want the kind of character that is projected by virtue ethics to be possible for ‘people like us’ - first of all interpreted as members of the human race. For Flanagan, this does not entail that it is irrational to ask of particular individuals to change their lives or behaviour. They might not have developed a particular

kind of character yet, but that does not mean that they do not possess the underlying capacity to develop one. Doris, however, is not so much interested in whether people have the capacity to acquire another kind of character. He uses a likelihood argument: if most people do not possess the character traits that are prescribed by a moral theory, then they are not likely to have the capacity to develop these traits, and therefore, it is not realistic to ask of them to develop these traits. The problem with a probability argument is that one counter example suffices to show that people do not lack the capacity to develop a moral character. These are not too difficult to find. Although the Millgram experiments, for example, make clear that 65 percent of the subjects obeyed the experimenter's instructions, 35 percent refused to obey the experimenter in one stage or another.

Doris (2002, p. 112) admits that he has given "...no reason for thinking that the realization of virtue is strictly impossible" and he adds that virtue ethicists who take his work seriously can still propagate ideals of virtue - even if nobody or hardly anybody can live up to these ideals. Doris admits that these ideals can inspire people to behave better, even if virtue itself is unattainable. According to Doris, being virtuous is impossible, *striving for* virtue is not. Harman (2000, p. 224) dismisses Doris' attempt to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds: "...if we know that there is no such thing as a character trait and we know that virtue would require having character traits, how can we *aim* at becoming a virtuous agent?". The difference between Doris and Harman on this point seems to be that Doris believes that a revised virtue ethics and situationism are compatible, while Harman thinks situationism rules out virtue ethics altogether. Still, compared to Flanagan, Doris is rather conservative, since he regards the fact that subjects, like in Millgram's experiments, do not manifest character traits as an argument to criticize a moral theory's demands. Flanagan (1991, p 46) is less conservative, since he would say that a moral theory only becomes unrealistic if trying to acquire a kind of character would be biologically impossible or would not be real option for the members of a specific culture, as these people would then lose their hold on reality, would engage in extensive self-deception etc.

Doris' or Harman's position in this debate would be considerably stronger if they could show that the underlying capacities that are needed to develop a character are non-existent, or that people who strive for or aim at becoming virtuous necessarily engage in self-deception. As long as this has not been demonstrated, Flanagan's interpretation of psychological realism wins the argument. We can conclude that Doris' critique on virtue ethics does not show that virtue ethics violates Flanagan's principle of minimal psychological realism. One might object by saying that this was never Doris' intention; he never wanted to show that one cannot become virtuous, only that hardly anybody is virtuous under the present circumstances. That modest interpretation of Doris' claims certainly makes sense, but it leaves him powerless, because it makes clear that Doris has not given us any reason to believe why we, as biologically and culturally-formed people, would be unable to acquire character traits. Unless he provides us with such an argument, there seems no reason *not* to try to help people become more virtuous. On the contrary, the experiments to which Doris refers only show that people lack character – so there is a lot that needs to be done.

Conclusion

Let us return to the question that propelled this paper: how psychologically realistic should theories of moral education be? John Doris and Owen Flanagan answer this question differently. According to Doris, systematic observation would have to show that a significant number of people actually have the psychologies that are prescribed by a moral theory. If it turns out that this is not the case, the theory will have to make its prescriptions less demanding. According to Flanagan, the kind of character that a moral theory prescribes

should be ‘real option’ for us, as individuals who are biologically and psychologically formed in a particular way. That leaves us with the question of what interpretation of a ‘psychologically realistic’ ethics is better. Although I have not had time to give this thought a more thorough examination, Flanagan’s answer intuitively appeals more to me. A justification for this intuition might start explaining why it is an ethical theory’s task to criticize people’s actual behaviour and character, and inspire them to become better – even if it runs the risk of being incongruous with results of some social psychological research. In order to back up this intuition, something more should be said about the lack of and need for people with character.

Finally, we can reflect on the consequences of all of this for a virtue ethical approach to moral education. What should philosophers who work in this field do with the results from psychological research? The autonomy thesis is definitely too strong: moral philosophers should not only limit the number of possible characters by normative considerations; if they really want people to become better, they should take seriously empirical research into what is and what is not possible for us, as members of a particular species and culture. Doris’ work has made a valuable contribution to debates within virtue ethics, since he has urged advocates of his theory to be more clear on what it is precisely that they claim. What we have learned, is that a virtue ethical approach to moral education cannot assume that everyone *is* virtuous, nor that everyone *can become* fully virtuous, but that we should not be discouraged by narrow psychological considerations either. We have not come across a convincing reason why dispositions and practices of subsequent generations could not be changed.

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