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MORAL EDUCATION AND LIFE-LONG LEARNING: WISDOM AS A DEVELOPMENTAL IDEAL

Article by Stephen A. Sherblom, EdD

Abstract

Moral education is a field with both formal and informal settings and approaches to cultivating, developing, and socializing the moral and ethical dimensions of being human. There is a rich debate occurring about what life-long learning in moral education is meant to produce. I argue that wisdom, as traditionally understood in the wisdom traditions, is a far more expansive and holistic conceptualization than those definitions on offer in the current psychological and social scientific literature on the subject. Traditionally understood, wisdom can help liberate us from the often too narrow constraints of current thinking, enabling an integrative and holistic approach more worthy of social science. Wisdom should be the developmental ideal of life-long learning in the moral and ethical domain.

Introduction

The field of moral education includes both formal and informal educational settings and approaches to cultivating, developing, and socializing the moral and ethical dimensions of being human (Kristjansson, 2017; Sherblom, 2012). In schools this includes explicit efforts that go by names such as Character Education, Social-Emotional Learning, soft-skills development, and other activities that may promote the expression of specific values and prosocial behavior, social justice, self-awareness, and other-person awareness and acceptance. Additionally, there are ethical intentions behind efforts to improve school climate, student sense of belonging, and address bullying, sexual-harassment, sexual violence, and racism. Celebrations of diversity campaigns, and recent discussions regarding LGBTQ rights are all part of a less formal curriculum regarding public virtues like civility, respect, equality, tolerance, access, and inclusion (Berkowitz, Sherblom, Bier, & Battistich, 2006; Sadowski, 2010; Sherblom, 2012).

In families, moral education also has explicit expression, implicit modeling, and social expectation dynamics (Rogers, 1961; Rudy, Grusec, & Wolfe, 1999). Explicit expression includes parental socialization regarding virtues, showing respect, playing

fairly, and being caring, cooperative, and honest. There are also many morally relevant norms both expressed and implicitly modeled in daily family life, such as taking turns in who goes first, waiting to eat until everyone has been served, expressing gratitude for what we have, cooperating to prepare food, assigning chores, recognizing the contributions of all family members, and caring for one another (Erikson, 1963). In addition, families typically provide ethical expectations regarding with whom to be honest, who deserves caring, and with whom to feel loyalty, comradery, and togetherness (Rogers, 1961; Rudy et al., 1999). These expectations and perspectives will likely be influenced by one's social position, and socio-cultural background. Family is also usually a child's first experience of being appreciated and known, of belonging to something beyond themselves, and being loved. These are powerful motivators for a child to attempt to stay in line with parental expectations and hence approval (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Many people are also part of a religious or spiritual community in which there is explicit moral instruction, as well as social pressure, and support, to abide by the group's values. Other people may engage with spiritual ideas through talks and sermons in print and on the Internet, religious music, or other forums for discussion of spirituality, meaning in life, life purpose, moral ideals, and how to live an ethical life. In addition, ethics is an important part of our professional lives, and many workplaces engage in professional development on this issue. How we deal with others is an ethical issue - whether those others are students and their parents, clients, or other members of the public, or colleagues. In summary, while not all contexts of moral learning are concerned with the same set of values and capacities, collectively they constitute a broad-based, on-going education. Additionally, because ethics is about fundamental questions, such as how to live, how to raise our children, and get along with our neighbors, moral contexts and challenges can be ubiquitous and come in all sizes. Because development of a broad range of abilities is applicable to moral engagement – cognition, empathy, self-awareness, self-efficacy, moral sensitivity – this development is central to who you are, morally, at any given moment. Self-cultivation of these capabilities can be seen as a vital dynamic of life-long learning in moral development (Sherblom, 2012, 2015).

Moral education can only be understood in light of moral development more broadly, and the nature of the psychological phenomena developing through moral education. In the article *What develops in moral development?* (Sherblom, 2012), I argued that there is a growing consensus and ample evidence to suggest that what develops in a person during moral development is (a) far broader than cognitive models like Kohlberg's accommodate; (b) more integrative of the many aspects of our embodied mind than previous models have incorporated (Capra & Luisi, 2015); and (c) more a matter of continuous self-cultivation than continued formal training (Eisenberg, 2000; Sherblom, 2016). Self-cultivation is the form in which most life-long learning in moral development occurs, through feedback loops shaping perceptions and subsequent behavior (Sherblom, 2015).

There is a rich debate occurring about what life-long learning in moral education is meant to produce (Sherblom, 2016, 2017). Piaget (1965) and Kohlberg (1984) argued that moral engagement is almost entirely reasoning-based, and therefore posited life-long learning as tracing a series of stages of growing cognitive sophistication in justice reasoning (Berkowitz & Sherblom, 2004; Sherblom, 2008). The fields comprising moral education have now largely moved away from such a narrow conception (Kristjansson, 2017; Sherblom, 2008, 2012) and a number of conceptual foci have emerged to render a more holistic image of moral development over the life-span (Berkowitz et al., 2006; Sherblom; 2016).

Approaches to Conceptualizing Wisdom as Ideal Moral Being

Even while the concept of Wisdom is becoming widely used as the designate for what is developing, how **wisdom** itself is conceptualized remains contentious (Sherblom, 2016). Wisdom is an ancient concept discussed in cultures and traditions all over the world from time immemorial, constituting a *folk psychology of Wisdom*. While wisdom traditions are not monolithic, it has been argued that there is a central core to most of them, which has been called “the Perennial Philosophy” (Huxley, 1948). Additionally, there are other folk sources for understanding wisdom consisting of cultural artifacts such as ‘old sayings’, aphorisms, parables, fables, and other stories handed down, especially as part of an oral tradition where authorship is more collective.

In sharp contrast to these inherited sources, there are several academic approaches to conceptualizing wisdom in the modern era. Let me briefly review several of these approaches and then argue for a different view of wisdom based in the ancient wisdom traditions. This view is, at the same time, completely in keeping with social science’s evolving view of moral engagement and development, resulting in the life-long learning that is wisdom.

Wisdom as Integrative-thinking – Labouvie-Vief (1990), coming from a cognitive developmental perspective, argued that mental life has too long been identified in western thought primarily with *objective* intellectual and cognitive functions (referred to as logos-bias), largely ignoring *subjective* emotions and interpersonal processes. Labouvie-Vief argued that it is integrative-thinking, a “smooth and relatively balanced dialogue” between objective and subjective modes of knowing that she defines as wisdom (p. 5).

Wisdom as Expertise in Life’s Pragmatics / *metaheuristics* - Paul Baltes and the Berlin Wisdom Project conceived wisdom to be an *expert knowledge system* or expertise. “Specifically, we view wisdom as a highly developed body of factual and procedural knowledge and judgment dealing with what we call the *fundamental pragmatics of life*” (Baltes & Smith, 1990, p. 87). Later, Baltes and Staudinger (2000) described wisdom as “a highly automatized and organized strategy for directing search processes or for organizing and using information in a certain class of situations” (p. 337) and as an “orchestrated system of sub-heuristics” (p. 339).

Wisdom as Balance – Sternberg (1998) argued that Wisdom is tacit knowledge, that is, experientially acquired understanding, used for balancing the various interests in any given moral context. “Wisdom is defined as the application of tacit knowledge as mediated by values toward the goal of achieving a common good (a) through a balance among multiple intrapersonal, interpersonal, and extra-personal interests and (b) in order to achieve a balance among responses to environmental contexts” (p. 353).

Wisdom as Personality – Several psychologists are associated with a constructivist view of personality development, and especially self-development. Erikson, Jung, and Kohut “each discussed self-development and self-transcendence as key attributes of the wise personality” (as cited in Orwoll & Perlmutter, 1990, p.160). Further, Erikson (1959) argued that wise people are the product of a lifetime of successful learning experiences. Allport (1955), Rogers (1961), and Fromm (1947) each articulated aspects of maturity and psychological health in personality that help illustrate the developmental conditions for wisdom and its embodied characterization. I especially appreciate the views echoed by these psychologists, that wisdom is characterized by the psychological traits of relative maturity, psychological health, and in-the-moment being. Each of these approaches to modeling wisdom highlights important aspects of wisdom, though when compared with folk psychology’s perspective they all seem limited, that is, only a partial rendering of Wisdom. In the spirit of our narrative wisdom traditions - let me tell you a story.

Wisdom as a holistic conception of moral development - Imagine, if you will, that you are high up in the air over a beautiful country called Wisdom. There are high mountains, and valleys with rivers crashing through them down to fertile plains and forests thick with animal and plant life, the proverbial birds and bees.

And you look in the guide books for visitors to the country of Wisdom.

One guidebook describes how the mountains are the important part of Wisdom, with their soaring peaks, the difficult journey to ascend their heights, their lofty vantage points allowing far-sightedness; and the rarified air of that peak experience. Another guidebook emphasizes the water as the essential feature of Wisdom; life-giving, fluid, and ubiquitous; tying together the living and the non-living. Another guidebook says to understand Wisdom you have to focus on the *processes* – like the water-cycle of evaporation, rainfall, and plant uptake; photosynthesis; soil replenishment; pollination; ecological balance; and the circle of life. Another Guidebook describes Wisdom in terms of the animals in the context of their ecological niches, in symbiotic relationship with the biome, including plants and other life – a system of systems from microbial to ecological.

The country of Wisdom is all these things and more. So, if the questions before us are: Is wisdom expressed in developing expertise? Yes. Is wisdom expressed in developing personality? Yes. Is wisdom expressed in developing balance? Yes. Is wisdom expressed in developing integrated thinking? Yes. Is wisdom expressed in developing spiritual or existential awareness? Yes to all of these characterizations, according to

folk psychology's conception of wisdom, except for the exclusivity – wisdom is not one of these, it is all of these, and more (Huxley, 1948).

Additionally, if I may express it simply – one central problem with these approaches is that they are focusing more on what a wise person is DOING in being wise (balancing, integrating, figuring heuristics) rather than what it takes to BE a wise person or more precisely, simply to BE-WISE in a given moment. We need to focus more on that process. If the above points about wisdom are true, focusing on one of these capacities at the expense of another may be not only disappointing, but self-defeating.

I suggested these academic approaches to wisdom are fragmentary, but even if you add them all up they do not comprise wisdom as it has traditionally been understood. The wisdom traditions and folk-psychology point to several things that are not adequately addressed in most academic accounts of wisdom, having to do with the transformation of the person becoming wise (Huxley, 1948). The humanist, third-stream psychologists –Maslow (1968), Rogers (1961), Allport (1955), and personality psychologists Erikson (1963) and Fromm (1947) speak most directly to the changing self, and I see my work building on theirs. The perennial philosophy also emphasizes as part of life-long learning the following developments and dynamics (Huxley, 1948):

- A recognition of the importance of compassion & caring as ways of inter-personal knowing that are necessary to wisdom;
- The vital need for a development of self-awareness as an antidote to self-deception;
- The presence of ego diminishment as a mark of maturity in getting beyond oneself and developing appropriate humility;
- An awareness of a greater sense of connection to humankind;
- A greater sense of transcending the world;
- Valuing and demonstrating 'awakeness' and conscientiousness;
- A growing peace with oneself resulting in genuineness and spontaneity;
- Knowing with all your heart that wise-being requires ethical sensitivity.

In keeping with the above critique of the limited nature of current academic approaches to conceptualizing wisdom, and in contrast to them, I argue that life-long learning in the moral domain can be pictured as a triple-helix process of (1) **developing maturity** in capacity (reasoning, self-awareness, other-awareness, integration), (2) **continuous healing** in coping (letting-go appropriately; rising above, forming connections, unblocking impairments), and (3) **being in-the-moment** (being reality-based, present, unbiased, engaging with attention, mindfulness, and an embodied mind).

The first of these three, the process of *developing maturity*, has been the focus of much developmental psychology (Erikson, 1963; Kohlberg, 1984; Piaget, 1965). Self-awareness and other-awareness are important features of growing maturity, as is the integration of all one's competing concerns, values, emotions, and capacities (Sherblom, 2012). The second of the three dynamics, *continuous healing*, grows out of clinical psychology and the recognition that unresolved issues will often get in the way of our functioning effectively (Rogers, 1961). Coping and resilience have become widely accepted psychological necessities for managing the more difficult parts of life and loss. Forming connections with other people has been shown to be a protective factor (Berkowitz et al., 2006; Cohen, 2001). Likewise, learning to work through and let go of fears, self-doubts, misplaced blame, and experiences of shaming are necessary to be able to engage fully in an ethical fashion, uncompromised by hidden agendas and debilitating emotions. Impairments of all kinds, by definition, keep one from perceiving, seeing, and understanding accurately, completely, and in an unbiased fashion (Ariely, 2012; Niemiec, 2014). These are important dynamics relevant to moral education and development, and collectively they provide the dynamic necessary for wisdom to emerge as an *emergent property* (Capra & Louisi, 2014; Sherblom, 2017).

Skills and Dispositions Developed in Life-long Learning in Moral Education

There are a number of skills associated with wisdom development and moral education more broadly. In the language of Character Education, each of the virtues can be said to demand a skill, often another of the virtues. For example, self-awareness requires honesty and the courage to face unflattering things about oneself (Ariely, 2012). Patience requires self-control, and is greatly aided by compassion and empathy. Further, the higher phases of life-long learning in this domain require an integration of all one's competing values and emotions. The work of integration is needed for integrity, the ability to embody one's values gracefully in the face of conflict, including internal conflict (Sherblom, 2016).

There are several skills that contribute to *other-understanding*; that is, understanding other people's perspectives, feelings, and behavior (Berkowitz et al., 2006; Cohen, 2001). Active listening is a demanding skill, and not one taught widely enough. Empathy and compassionate caring are sources of sensitivity and attentiveness to other people that glean insight from social interactions and observations that would be missed without that emotive aspect (Sherblom, 2012). Likewise, there are several skills involved with *self-understanding* and on-going *self-awareness*, including courage, honesty, and perseverance in one's self-cultivation.

Reasoning ability is a central skill in moral education, increasing in scope and depth with development. Additionally, open-mindedness and humility are needed in the form of not getting stuck on your last insight, or an understanding you cobbled together years ago. It is a skill to keep an open mind, readily entertaining the idea that you might be inadequately informed about something vital, that you have unconscious bias, or simply

that the thing you are looking at so intently, may in fact, be upside down. Persons developing in wisdom are considered to have a disposition characterized by ethical attentiveness in the moment, personal commitment to embodying one's values over time, and an on-going striving for growth in personal integrity and consistency.

Assessment of Lifelong Learning

There are measures that purport to reveal one's stage of moral reasoning, such as Kohlberg's 6 stages of justice reasoning (Kohlberg, 1984). This construct is still being used in the form of the Defining Issues Test (DIT), a simpler version of measuring this cognitive stage development (Thoma, Barnett, & Rest, 1999). There are assessments of various constructs, such as a person's development of social-emotional learning, pro-social disposition, or empathy (Berkowitz et al., 2006; Eisenberg, 2000). I have already reviewed the models in moral education of wisdom as a developmental ideal, and would only add that any assessments offered of wisdom would be a measure of one of these more limited conceptions of wisdom. There are no measures of a more complex, robust, integrated moral sensibility (Sherblom, 2012). As the field has only recently come to accept widely that a more holistic conception is needed, and is still debating what should make up that conception, we are not yet at a point of developing adequate assessment tools. It is hoped that one contribution of this paper is to highlight the comprehensive and holistic qualities that have historically been associated with wisdom, which are in line with modern thinking in terms of complex systems (Sherblom, 2012, 2017).

Discussion

Two aspects of life-long learning in moral education should be emphasized – the first is a need for all people to develop an active self-cultivation. This is a self-directed and internally motivated continual self-improvement process central to who we are as persons. This does not imply a monastic, solitary struggle with one's shortcomings. Self-direction may well lead one to a group of whatever sort – yoga, dance, counseling, spiritual, drama, music – in which one can pursue some aspect of one's journey toward wisdom. Second, there is a need for the various fields involved in understanding moral development and Ethics, broadly conceived, to come to a better understanding and articulation of the end goal of moral education and ethical growth over a lifetime. I have argued that Wisdom is the best model for understanding that life development, as long as our conception of wisdom is holistic and developmental.

In this article I have laid out the centrality of life-long learning to moral education, and argued that a comprehensive wisdom development is the ideal process and goal of moral education. This central understanding of what develops in moral development remains controversial, but we cannot assess whether people are making progress in their life-long learning if we cannot agree on what should be changing as a result of this development; or what our end goal should be in the ethical development of persons.

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