Socrates is Alive and Well!
The Case for Dialogue and Critical Thinking
In Values and Ethics Education

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Education

By

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Abstract

This paper underlines the need for teaching morals and values through critical reflection and active genuine dialogue. It promotes the pedagogy of dialogue within educational institutions, the creation of multi-dimensional learning environments for the cultivation and dissemination of intersubjective understandings of diverse moral world views, the use of critical thinking skills and intellectual traits of mind for ethical decision making, and the communication of values and morals through dialogue. An argument is advanced to show how reflective dialogue lays the groundwork for the creation of initial objective relations in the classroom and forms the basis for the pragmatic implementation of an interpersonal connection characterized by feelings of tolerance, empathy, and respect for the dignity of human beings and their way of life.

Socrates is Alive and Well!
The Case for Dialogue and Critical Thinking
In Values and Ethics Education

Issues concerning the pedagogy of values and morals attract considerable attention and substantial debate amongst scholars and practitioners in the field of moral education (see L.E. Raths, M. Harmin, S.B. Simon 1978, M. Bottary 1990, T. Lickoma 1991, J.P. Wheeler 1993, E.A. Wynne & K. Ryan 1997, K. Ryan & K.E. Bohlin 1999). For the most part the controversy revolves around problems and issues of morality and ethics in general, the teaching of values, the cultivation of virtues, and the pursuit of character development.

Though theories advocating either some version of moral relativism or moral objectivism recognize critical thinking and dialogue as crucial to understanding morality and to processes of valuing, little is said about the intricate and complex interrelationships between critical thinking, dialogue, and morality. Moreover, both sides of the debate fail to incorporate any real sense of critical thinking and dialogue in their recommendations for practice. Almost entirely absent is a reliable way of making and evaluating value claims in the context within which such claims are formulated and within which they are open to evaluation and assessment by others. In most cases dialogue and critical thinking are pushed aside in favor of less rigorous approaches to problems of moral education.

As an alternative, this paper presents an argument for the dissemination of moral education through critical thinking and within the context of reflective dialogue on morals and values. The argument is presented in three parts. The first part points out the lack of adequate conceptions of dialogue and critical thinking amongst theories of practical moral education. Here also an emphasis is placed on the significance of reason and rational justification in the domain of the moral. Part two shows that a rigorous interchange of values and morals requires first the adoption of a dialogical attitude as a prerequisite step towards a mutually sympathetic understanding of diverse moral views and ways of life. The third and final part introduces a concept of dialogue along with a dynamic dialogical view of critical thinking as a way of assessing value claims,

Socrates is Alive and Well!
The Case for Dialogue and Critical Thinking
In Values and Ethics Education

moral judgments, and alternative actions when confronted with moral conflicts and dilemmas.

Values Education and Reason

There is a lack of adequate explanation amongst most pedagogical theories of values and morals of the relation between critical thinking and the practical activities and processes prescribed by the theories. For instance, in their popular and widely applied 'theory of values clarification' Raths et al (1978) prescribe a process of valuing as a method for assisting learners to chose, clarify, and act in accordance with their own values, beliefs, goals, and interests. They recommend the following seven valuing processes for teachers and learners.

Free choice – Teacher-- encourage students to make choices about values through value indicators (i.e., students' goals, aspirations, attitudes). Student--make free choices whenever possible.

Searching for alternatives – Teacher--assist students to discover alternatives when confronted with a variety of choices. Student--search for alternatives in choice- making situations.

Anticipating consequences – Teacher--help students weigh alternative choices in a thoughtful manner and by reflecting on the consequences of each. Student--weigh the consequences of each available alternative.

Prizing and Cherishing – Teacher--encourage students to think about what they consider valuable. Student- -consider what you prize and cherish.

Affirming choice – Teacher- -give students opportunities to declare their choices in a positive manner. Student--state or assert positively the things that you value.

Taking action – Teacher-- encourage students to act in accordance with their value choices. Student--do something about your choices.

Building patterns in life – Teacher--assist students to be aware of certain repeated patterns in their life. Student--consider and strengthen pattern in your life. (Raths et al 1978, p. 176)

The strength of this approach lies in its emphasis on fostering classroom environments that encourage and stimulate learners to think about

Socrates is Alive and Well!
The Case for Dialogue and Critical Thinking
In Values and Ethics Education

their own values by personally selecting and deliberately reflecting upon their choices. There is nothing really wrong in asking students to become more vital, purposeful, decisive, and active in recognizing and selecting their own values. Values should be neither impersonal nor inconsistent. It would a mistake to think, however, that processes of values selection and realization must remain solely within the limits and boundaries of an inner and highly personable world. In other words, choosing, stating, asserting values is only one part of the process of valuing. The other part is being able to justify one's moral choices, preferences, and moral judgments when confronted with moral conflicts and dilemmas. Choice of values, moral preferences, as well as value judgements bring forth certain claims as to what is valuable through appeal to reason and within the context of social existence. Only upon satisfaction of the conditions entailed by processes of justification and explanation can we claim that personal value choices and judgments are thoughtful, reflective,

open-minded, and deliberate. This is to say that, though values may be a product of personal experiences, "values are normally thought to be grounded in reasons, reasons which are accessible to others" (Boyd & Bogdan 1983, p.12).

One main strategy of the values clarification approach is to avoid teacher responses that engage in moralizing, criticizing, or giving values. Instead, a great deal of emphasis is placed on motivating students to chose personal values and morals by considering the consequences of each alternative. Whenever decisions of this sort are made, however, value judgments are always involved. Conspicuously absent from the VC approach are also any criteria or principles of reason that students may appeal to when making value decisions, claims, and judgments. Without any intersubjectively shared standards one would have no way of knowing the relative worth of one's choice i.e., whether one's choice is morally good or bad, better or worse. As such, one's value claims and judgments would fail short in support of reasons convincing to

Socrates is Alive and Well!
The Case for Dialogue and Critical Thinking
In Values and Ethics Education

others or even to oneself. We tend to make judgments by discerning and disclosing certain reasons which may be evaluated by consequences of potential actions and performances. Consequently, in order for students to transcend personal confusion and ambiguity, they need to understand the kinds of relations that exist between decisions and judgments, and that judgment of values is an inescapable activity "because not judging is a form of judgement itself" (Ruggiero 1988, p. 61).

Human Rationality and Judgment

Competence in evaluating and judging is essentially thought to be the cumulative result of learning and following principles that regulate judgement, and the result of practice as it relates to objects of personal experience through which a gradual improvement of the quality of judgments is attained over the course of a lifetime. The assumption here is that human beings posses the capacity for rational reflective thought.

According to Baier (1984), this general ascription of rationality to human beings involves Four different but interconnected capacities. First, we ascribe to ourselves a capacity for being rational and for acting rationally. Second, we ascribe to ourselves an acquired ability to perform the various activities of reason, such as explaining, arguing, proving, deliberating, choosing and so on. Third, the ascription of reason to human beings involves reference to a standard of competence, otherwise known as a minimal standard of acceptability, for evaluating and appraising processes of rationality. This type of activity of human reason requires the use of criteria and standards. Such criteria are the extent to which rational persons make use of available guidelines and of reasons made relevant by these guidelines. In this evaluative sense, rationality is a person's measuring up to at least a minimal standard of acceptability in the way that person acts in accordance with reasons in some problematic activity of reason, such as, overcoming ambiguity and

Socrates is Alive and Well!
The Case for Dialogue and Critical Thinking
In Values and Ethics Education

confusion when choosing values and making moral judgments in situations involving moral conflict. Beyond the rationality version of conformity with reason, there is a pragmatic but, nonetheless, equally acceptable level of compliance with reason. Certain aspects of human interaction, particularly relations that pertain to moral disputes, are not always amenable to analysis through precise criteria and rational standards. Baier uses the following examples to show the fundamental difference between pragmatic compliance with reason and conformity to reason in terms of rationality. He says, "for me to demand of you that you get out of my house by the date on which your lease expires may be quite (that is, minimally) rational but it is also quite unreasonable if you have just had a heart attack and it is dangerous for you to move. Conversely, it may be reasonable of me to expect you to pay the rent on time, but irrational of me to expect you (in a different sense) to pay the rent if I know your desperate financial situation" (Baier 1984, p. 198). The foregoing examples suggest that approximations may be employed for initiating an appropriate and sensible pragmatic compliance with reason, even if it is not strictly speaking a compliance that is motivated by the ideal of rationality. Lastly, rationality involves a dispositional tendency to conform human actions and performances to what is in accordance with the best available reasons.

These ascriptions to rationality show rational reflection to be an intrinsic cognitive function of human decision making capacities as these are implicated in processes of values clarification and justification. To act rationally is to reason in an impartial way for oneself, while at the same time, to acknowledge the reasons presented for the values and moral beliefs of others. Such rational personal judgments have contributed significantly to the evolution and growth of moral world views.

Objectivity as Method of Understanding in Morality

As a common starting ground, human rationality is an inter-subjectively shared belief in the

Socrates is Alive and Well!
The Case for Dialogue and Critical Thinking
In Values and Ethics Education

practical efficacy and effectiveness of reason. Reason guides one's perceptions and understandings in deciding what is morally right or wrong, good or bad, morally worthwhile, obligatory or blameworthy. It is not uncommon, however, for certain situations and contexts to involve eminently reasonable and rational individuals who hold morally conflicting positions or even entirely different moral world views. The reason for moral conflicts and differences amongst human beings is that people do not share, everywhere and at all times, a common way of experiencing and thinking about culture and morality. We do not always and in the same manner acquire the same moral values and beliefs. Conversely, for most people, the acquisition of values and morals appears to be depended, to a large extent, on habits of experiencing and thinking customary to one's social group or society as a whole. This is a way of saying that one's values, moral judgments and actions are considerably determined by societal socialization and the language of one's social group or culture. As

such and under most circumstances it is difficult for persons, in spite of their desire and ability to act rationally, to overcome the powerful forces of cultural enculturation. Problems and obstacles emerging due to variation in cultural and moral beliefs are not always insurmountable, however. Individuals, or entire social groups, who truthfully aim for understanding of different moral views can achieve consensus on such matters through processes of critical discussion and reasoned dialogue.

Moral consensus requires the adoption of certain moral dispositions and tendencies as necessary preconditions of the interpersonal phase of dialogue. Such dispositional tendencies of human consciousness entail a particular view of objectivity as method of understanding in morality. The initial phase of dialogue involves the attitude of respect for other persons and their views as a necessary precondition for initiating a mutually empathetic understanding of diverse moral views. This dialogic attitude is also required for initiating a mutual,

Socrates is Alive and Well!
The Case for Dialogue and Critical Thinking
In Values and Ethics Education

open-ended confirmation of one individual or group by another. It is a way of connecting with other peoples' moral views in order to understand their overall orientation and to appreciate, to some extent, the feelings, experiences, and assumptions behind them. As Boyd (1988) points out, the dialogical/dispositional form of human interaction entails a specific mode of objectivity as a methodological process of understanding. He says, "objectivity in morality is a method of understanding that…entails two people (or more) aiming at reflective detaching or decentering together, with respect to each other and self, often at the same time" (Boyd 1988, p. 117).

Feelings of moral empathy emerge through decentering, a process of trying to understand as others understand within their own lived context and understanding of that context (Boyd 1989). Empathetic relations emerge when open-minded subjects receive each other in their present and particular being, a way of turning toward others with the intention of establishing a mutual relation based on respect for persons and

their moral views. Activities of decentering and reaching out in an open-minded way produce a kind of mutual reflexivity on moral understandings and claims. Dialogue is also a way of reaching out for a moral, mutually inclusive understanding of other people. Through dialogue one is able to understand others within their particular worldview so that one's values, moral claims, and judgments are also apprehended inter-subjectively, that is, from the perspectival orientation of another's personal moral experience.

Reasoned Dialogue and Intellectual Traits of Mind

The interpersonal preconditions of dialogue are necessary for the creation of an initial, mutually empathetic understanding of moral perspectives and views. They are essential preconditions for sympathetically entering into the moral thinking of others. Moral understanding presupposes a sense of personal responsibility for initiating dialogue through which performative engagement can function. Dialogic inquiry into moral values, claims, and

Socrates is Alive and Well!
The Case for Dialogue and Critical Thinking
In Values and Ethics Education

judgments is the means for engaging in the identification and understanding of the moral views and concerns of others. Dialogue between human beings with diverse natures and beliefs contributes toward the development of our shared humanity.

But what exactly is dialogue? What is it that we do when we engage in dialogue? What kind of intellectual, as opposed to interpersonal, traits of mind are needed to productively and constructively engage in dialogue about morally conflicting issues and concerns? Once the essential interpersonal conditions of the initial phase of dialogue are satisfied, than, what criteria or standards can be applied to assess different value claims, moral judgments, actions, and consequences? How can dialogue, as pedagogical activity, enable the teaching and learning of values and morals in the classroom? Finally, how can dialogue assist and guide us in the resolution of moral conflicts and disputes? In this final part of the paper I point out a path as well as

provide some answers to these questions.

There is a variety of forms and approaches to educational dialogue (see Burbules, 1990). I recommend the following definition of 'reasoned dialogue' as a methodological form of dialogical interaction that is contextually relevant to the moral education approach suggested here. Reasoned dialogue is defined as honest; saying what is one is really thinking, reasonable; being agreeable to or acting in accord with reason and sound judgment, and logically acute; that is penetrating in intellect and insight, interaction between human beings which are unconstrained by the emotions of anger, arrogance, and laziness. This form of dialogue enables persons to construct their own moral position vis-à-vis a decentered and detached processual inquiry into other people's moral views. Individuals engaged in this form of dialogue, however, must recognize that it is a critical process that relies heavily on the importance and force of giving and accepting sound, impartial, and consistent reasons for one's moral

Socrates is Alive and Well!
The Case for Dialogue and Critical Thinking
In Values and Ethics Education

beliefs and views. Reasoned dialogue is therefore consistent with rational modes of human thought and understanding. As such, competence in its use in relation to matters of morality and values education presupposes the acquisition and utilization of certain critical thinking skills and traits of mind.

The objective interpersonal level of dialogical interaction must therefore be supplemented by a dynamic, dialogical definition of critical thinking that allows for a more rigorous phase of interaction and exchange while at the same time enables the use of critical human sensibilities. Richard Paul defines critical thinking as fair-minded thinking "which meets epistemological demands irrespective of the vested interests or ideological commitments of the thinker, that is characterized by empathy into diverse opposing points of view and devotion to truth as against self-interest, that is consistent in the application of intellectual standards holding one's self to the same rigorous standards of evidence and proof one holds one's

antagonists, that demonstrates the commitment to entertain all viewpoints sympathetically and to asses them with the same intellectual standards" (Paul 1989, pp. 213-14).

The teaching and learning of values and morals in a dialogical and reciprocal way requires first and foremost the ability to clearly distinguish between understanding a particular value, moral belief, or claim from assessing and judging the objective truth and validity of that belief or claim. The discussion so far shows how one can go about to achieve a sufficient understanding of the moral beliefs and views of others within the framework of the initial phase of dialogical interaction. We need to understand further how the internalization and development of a set of critical thinking skills and traits of mind considerably increase human capacity and ability to assess the truth and validity of moral claims and views. The concept of the educated person as critical thinker becomes relevant to this task. Critical thinkers should strive to acquaint themselves with: (a) the

Socrates is Alive and Well!
The Case for Dialogue and Critical Thinking
In Values and Ethics Education

necessary skills for formulating, analyzing, and assessing moral problems, issues, and questions when more than one moral view is involved as in the case of moral conflict and dispute, (b) the frame of reference or points of view involved when one is assessing a moral belief or when one is making a moral claim, (c) the assumptions made behind moral views or ways of life, (d) the central moral concepts and ideas involved in different moral world-views, (e) the moral principles used and the evidence or reasons advanced in support of moral claims, (f) the inferences and line of formulated thought in moral thinking, and (g) the moral implications and consequences involved in moral claims and views.

The fair-minded, dialogical critical thinker strives to be clear, precise, logical, consistent and accurate when assessing moral views and perspectives. Fair-minded teachers and learners critically propose ideas, probe roots, bring subject-matter insights and evidence to bear, test ideas, and move between various points of view (Paul 1989). Dialogue must therefore be objective and

that learner, as well as teacher, should make substantial contributions to the discussion at hand. Critical thinking and dialogue enable us to see ourselves, others, and the world consistently, realistically, and pragmatically thereby avoiding, in the process, a variety of cumbersome and unnecessary barriers to communication associated with misrepresentation, distortion, prejudice, and false accusation.

Beyond critical thinking skills we need to develop in ourselves a number of important interdependent intellectual traits of mind. Such traits are defined by Richard Paul of the National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking Instruction as intellectual humility; sensitivity to bias and prejudice in and limitations of one's viewpoint, intellectual courage; willingness to face and assess fairly different ideas, beliefs, and viewpoints, intellectual empathy; putting oneself in the place of others in order to understand them, intellectual integrity; holding one's self to the same rigorous standards of evidence and proof to which

Socrates is Alive and Well!
The Case for Dialogue and Critical Thinking
In Values and Ethics Education

one holds one's antagonists, intellectual perseverance; willingness and awareness of the need to pursue intellectual insights and truths in spite of difficulties, obstacles, and frustrations, faith in reason; being confident that in time one's higher interests and those of humanity at large will be served best by giving the freest play of reason, and intellectual sense of justice; adhering to intellectual standards without reference to one's interests and advantage (Paul 1989, pp. 219-220).

Dialogue and critical thinking skills and dispositions are necessary ingredients for developing a responsible attitude amongst learners and a sense of personal judgment toward questions, issues, and problems of ethics and values. Learners and teachers ought to engage in critical and skeptical scrutiny of their moral attitudes, orientation, and expectations. Values education should therefore be a critical, dialogical encounter in which no one individual can be regarded as having a monopoly on moral insight. We need to encourage students to think critically about matters of morality and ethics, to develop a high degree of moral awareness and ethical responsibility, to imagine speculatively and to be able to take on the moral perspectives of others. If we are to follow Socrates' example of the self-examined life, than this kind of moral education should be an essential component of every human being's self-realization.

Socrates is Alive and Well!
The Case for Dialogue and Critical Thinking
In Values and Ethics Education

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Socrates is Alive and Well!
The Case for Dialogue and Critical Thinking
In Values and Ethics Education

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