

Education in the Moral Domain

Education in the Moral Domain brings together the results of twenty-five years of research on the domain theory of social cognitive development. On the basis of that research – which shows that morality is a domain distinct from other social values – the author provides concrete suggestions for creating a moral classroom climate, dealing with student discipline and integrating moral values within the curriculum.

Among questions addressed are the following: Is morality a set of rules we acquire like any other? Are there universal aspects to morality, or is it culture specific? Is there such a thing as moral character? How best can teachers make use of our knowledge about children’s moral and social growth in their everyday classroom practices?

Integrated answers to these questions result in a comprehensive approach that does not reduce moral education to a process of induction or inculcation, but rather harnesses children’s intrinsic motivation to comprehend and master their social worlds.

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*In loving memory of my father,
Salvatore Nucci*

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Foreword

Engaging in education in the moral domain is hard to fault. Almost everyone agrees that it should be done, that it must be done. Most everyone wants the children of their society to be, at least, guided in the process of becoming less aggressive, less violent, more altruistic, more fair, more charitable, more civil, and much more. To be sure, some have argued that education in the moral domain is not appropriate for schools because it should be left to the family and/or religious training. Regardless of where it occurs, educating children morally is generally considered good, virtuous, and a necessity.

Beyond the general agreement that children should be educated morally, there has been, and continues to be, a great deal of controversy and debate over how it should be conducted. These debates are often intense and emotional, to the point that it is argued that certain types of moral education should not occur at all because, it is thought, they can do more harm than good. In the early part of the twentieth century, the debate included two very influential social-scientific thinkers, Emile Durkheim and Jean Piaget. Each presented elaborate and well-articulated views representing two sides of the issue.

For Durkheim, an eminent sociologist, moral education occurs most effectively in schools where children can participate in groups more formal and less flexible than the family. Through participation in group life, children form an emotional attachment to society, coming to respect its rules, norms, and authority. Children also form what Durkheim referred to as a spirit of discipline, needed to control behavior and channel it into societal expectations.

For Piaget, an eminent psychologist, Durkheim's approach was lacking in two key ways. One was that he failed to recognize that morality involves respect for persons and judgments of justice and equality. The sec-

ond was that Durkheim failed to recognize that development involves, through children's social interactions, a progressive construction of ways of understanding the world, and not solely an accommodation to the social environment. The development of morality is best facilitated if children participate in cooperative relationships, especially with their equals (their peers). The educational implications of these approaches were articulated by Piaget (1932, p. 342) in the following way:

Durkheim regards all morality as imposed by the group upon the individual and by the adult upon the child. Consequently, from the pedagogic point of view, whereas we would be inclined to see in the "Activity" School, "self-government," and in the autonomy of the child the only form of education likely to produce a rational morality, Durkheim upholds a system of education which is based on the traditional model and relies on methods that are fundamentally those of authority, in spite of the tempering features he introduced into it in order to allow for inner liberty of conscience.

This debate, which has been played out through the twentieth century, put briefly and in rather simple terms, is between the idea that the acquisition of morality involves an acceptance of societal standards and norms and the idea that it involves the development of ways of thinking about right and wrong or good and bad. In the latter part of the century, the debate included somewhat different terms and concepts. On the side of the incorporation of societal values are proponents of character development and character education. In that view, moral conduct comes about through the formation of traits of character valued by the society and within its long-standing traditions. Education involves firmly transmitting these virtues and traits through discipline, examples of good acts, and the telling of stories exemplifying traditional values.

One of the best-known and most vocal proponents of the character-education approach is William Bennett, who has compiled stories for the public to narrate for purposes of moral education (Bennett 1993). Bennett also stridently criticizes those who would educate children to judge, examine, and critically evaluate moral matters. In particular, Bennett considers moral-education programs based on the theories and research of Lawrence Kohlberg, who followed and extended Piaget's work, as entailing miseducation because of the emphasis on children's choices, decisions, deliberations, and judgments. Here, too, the debate has been over whether the acquisition of morality involves the transmission of traditions, rooted in society, or the development of ways of relating to others,

rooted in understandings of justice, rights, equal consideration of persons, and the welfare of people.

One of the real strengths of Kohlberg's approach to moral education in the schools was that it was grounded in research on moral development and in associated philosophical analyses. In this regard, Kohlberg made a deceptively simple but, I believe, very important point about moral teaching that highlights a crucial shortcoming in most efforts at moral education, including the character-education approach. Kohlberg noted that all too often, psychology is expected to provide only knowledge about methods for moral teaching. He argued, however, that we cannot know about methods or means of teaching and learning in the absence of knowledge about the substance of that which is taught and learned. As he put it (Kohlberg 1970, pp. 57–8):

If I could not define virtue or the ends of moral education, could I really offer advice as to the means by which virtue could be taught? Could it really be argued that the means for teaching obedience to authority are the same as the means for teaching freedom of moral opinion, that the means for teaching altruism are the same as the means for teaching competitive striving, that the making of a good storm trooper involves the same procedures as the making of the philosopher-king? It appears, then, that either we must be totally silent about moral education or else speak to the nature of virtue.

What Kohlberg meant by speaking to the nature of virtue is that it is necessary to provide substantive definitions and analyses of morality. In part, this is a philosophical enterprise. The nature of morality, then, has a bearing on how it develops, which in turn has a bearing on how it might be taught. Analyses of the philosophical bases of morality also tell us about the ends to which we educate. In too many cases, I would argue, the ends or goals of moral education are to have children "become good," with only vague conceptions held as to what it means to be good. As examples, to be good involves possessing certain traits of character, or acquiring a conscience that incorporates society's standards, or behaving in particular ways, such as avoiding violence, helping, sharing, caring for others, and being unselfish. I believe that Kohlberg was correct in stating that methods of teaching the good are used in ways disconnected to what is being taught. We see, as a consequence, a number of such disembodied recommendations for teaching morality: Read children stories about people who do good, provide them with adults who model good acts, use consistent punishments, be firm in discipline, and so on. If you know the

appropriate methods and want to make a good storm trooper, then it is simply a matter of implementing the teaching methods appropriately.

Societies, cultures, social relationships, and personal lives are more complicated than that – in at least two respects. One is that people, including children, do have conceptions of the moral. Kohlberg and Piaget attempted to account for people’s conceptions of the moral (and for definitions of the substance of the domain) by basing educational methods on research informative of children’s moral judgments and changes in such judgments. However, their theories of development and the moral-educational applications did not account for a second complication in social lives – which is that people make nontrivial social and personal judgments of a nonmoral nature. These, too, must be taken into account, both in explanations of social and moral development and in viable educational applications.

To put it another way, a problem in most efforts at moral education is that the only or main concern is with morality. In this book, Larry Nucci insightfully and deeply discusses the complex and multifaceted issues that need to be taken into account in moral education. Nucci’s analyses go well beyond education in the moral domain. His analyses are centrally on moral education, but he is also concerned with education in realms that are in the purview of the personal. People the world over are deeply concerned with moral goals. They are also concerned with the interests and goals of their society. And they are concerned with personal goals and areas of personal jurisdiction. Moral decisions often require considering and coordinating each of these domains of development. Nucci connects the different domains, which are each very important in people’s lives, to the education of children.

The scope and depth of Larry Nucci’s analyses and recommendations for education make contributions that are new, that further the field significantly, and that can be effective by their very lack of simplicity. It is easier to implement educational recommendations that are simple and straightforward. It is, however, more difficult to be effective in making a difference in children’s lives when implementing simple and straightforward recommendations. The research on moral, social, and personal development tells us that the straightforward recommendations are not likely to work very well.

It is not, by the way, that I think that with this book Larry Nucci will quell the controversies and debates about moral education. This is not likely, though it is to be hoped that many will resonate to what he has to say since Nucci takes a clear point of view on morality and its develop-

ment. Nucci's point of view, in a general sense, is aligned with the side that views morality as entailing the construction of judgments about welfare, justice, and rights. In keeping with the injunction that it is necessary to ground psychological and educational methods of teaching and learning in substantive analyses of the domain of morality, Nucci carefully spells out his positions. As I already noted, an additional feature of his formulations is that it is also necessary to spell out other domains importantly related to moral lives in order to engage in moral education. Nucci carefully, insightfully, and perceptively presents two interrelated stories. One is a theory and research story. (I must note that it is a point of view I share, and about which he and I have collaborated.) The second is an educational story.

The order of presentation of the two parts of the book is not at all arbitrary. Nucci lays out the issues and research findings in great detail in the first part – which provides empirical and theoretical grounding for the second part of the book on classroom applications. As we can see just from the table of contents, the first part of the book is comprehensive. Both parts of the book are also quite comprehensible. This is a book that provides ideas for researchers and is accessible to the educated public (of course, especially teachers). In the first part of the book, Nucci makes an excellent case for the point of view on domains by articulating the theoretical position, supporting it with evidence, and considering key issues. These include the relations of morality to religion, culture, social contexts, and emotions. Moreover, he contrasts the approach with the common view of morality as character.

In the work on domains of development, Larry Nucci has been instrumental in providing rich formulations of the place of the personal – how people think about issues of autonomy, privacy, and choice. These ideas contribute to our knowledge about children's development and add greatly to our thinking about moral education. In his early work, Nucci conducted precise and innovative research showing that children make judgments about areas of activity they consider out of the realm of moral or conventional regulation and within the jurisdiction of individual choice. Children's judgments about the personal realm do not preclude moral judgments. Morality, as well as convention, are domains that coexist in children's thinking.

In later work, including this book, he has extended this line of work to include analyses of the role of the personal in the context of children's interactions and negotiations with parents. He has also provided elaborate formulations of the significance of the personal in psychological devel-

opment. An arena of personal jurisdiction is part of an individual's social identity and is necessary for adequate psychological development – along with connections to others through participation in the social system and consideration of their welfare and rights. Moreover, the inclusion of the personal domain in people's psyches, in conjunction with their societal and moral attachments, provides a richer and more accurate account of the place of individuals in culture than do stereotypical characterizations of people and cultures as individualistic or collectivistic.

The importance of the idea of a personal domain to our thinking about moral education is that it separates selfishness from the personal and forces us to include personal considerations in the context of teaching about morality. I (or Nucci) do not mean to say that people never act selfishly. Rather, this is to say that there is a legitimate realm of personal jurisdiction that must be taken into account in communicating with young people. It will not do simply to implore them to give up their personal interests for the good of others or society. Perhaps even more importantly, personal freedom is not in opposition to morality. A sense of identity and personal agency contributes to the nature of social relationships, including those of reciprocity and cooperation.

All of this makes for not-so-easy tasks for educators concerned with the welfare of children and their moral development. Larry Nucci, I believe, is well aware that he makes life a little more difficult for the moral educator. Those who are persuaded by his point of view will find the difficulties intellectually enriching and pedagogically informative. In this book, Larry Nucci has combined a rigorous approach to theory and research on social and moral development with great sensitivity to practices in classrooms and schools. This is one of those rare works that intelligently moves between the worlds of research and educational practice.

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Introduction

Few areas of education are as central to the purposes of public schooling as the formation of children's social values. For members of the multicultural democracies, none is more controversial. At the core of current controversies is how we are going to define what we mean by morality. Among the questions we need to answer are the following: Is morality a set of rules we acquire like any other, or does morality constitute a set of understandings that are in some way distinct from other areas of social knowledge? Does morality involve or even rely on cognition, or is it simply an emotion like empathy or guilt that guides our conduct? Are there universal or transcultural aspects to morality, or is morality culture specific? If there are universals in morality, does this mean there are moral absolutes? Does morality rest on religious norms, or are moral and religious concepts distinct from one another? Do moral understandings change over the course of history, or is morality ahistorical and transcendent? Can morality be taught, or does it have to be "caught"? Is there such a thing as moral character? If not, how do we account for and foster the development of people who act in accordance with a set of moral principles? Finally, how best can teachers make use of our knowledge about children's moral and social growth in their everyday classroom practices?

This two-part book addresses those questions by bringing together the basic findings from what has been referred to as the "domain theory" of social development, and the related work that has been done on classroom practice. The discoveries that have emerged from domain theory permit us to do several things essential to moral education within a pluralist democracy. First, as the title of this book suggests, it allows us to define what is meant by the moral domain in a manner that transcends cultural and religious boundaries. The book opens with a discussion of the basic scope and definition of the moral domain. The initial chapter pro-

vides an overview of the research evidence gathered within the United States and across the globe that accounts for the emergence of morality in early childhood as a domain distinct from matters of social convention or personal preference. With the discussion of the moral domain as a backdrop, the focus moves to research involving devout religious children and adolescents that examines whether their views of moral issues are determined by religious rules or the word of God.

Domain theory also permits us to understand cultural and contextual variations in people's social values. Although the basic underpinnings of all human morality have a common conceptual core, most "real life" social judgments are complex and involve the use of knowledge from more than one conceptual framework. As a result, one cannot reduce contextualized moral issues to a simple formula or set of absolute norms. The paradox, then, is that morality is both based on a set of nonrelative universals and yet ultimately plural in its application.

One issue that seems to divide the world's cultures is the relative degree to which people are accorded personal freedom and privacy. This set of concerns is addressed through a discussion of the personal domain of social values. Evidence is presented that human beings strive to maintain a zone of privacy and personal choice around issues that pertain to their sense of self and unique personal identity. This striving for a personal domain comprises a fundamental element in establishing the dynamic relation between the individual and society. For educators and parents, the issues dealt with touch on central themes of the limits of legitimate social authority, and the interplay between development and parental control over their children. The discussion also begins the analysis of cross-domain interactions through a consideration of how the interplay among morality, societal convention, and the personal result in cultural differences in the definition of personal rights and freedoms. This marks the beginning of an ongoing discussion throughout the book regarding the sources of tension between morality and the normative structures of social systems.

This discussion opens by focusing on the age-related shifts in the structure of knowledge within each domain, and the features of age-typical cross-domain interactions. Teachers are provided with a framework for understanding how to match the level of complexity of sociomoral issues with the developmental levels of their students. The examination of age-related cross-domain interactions also provides for an account of the contradictions that have arisen as a result of research on traditional developmental (i.e., Kohlbergian) accounts of moral psychology. This last

contribution provides a new way to look at the developmental aims of moral education so that we can meaningfully engage children at all grade levels in the act of principled moral reflection.

We then move to an examination of the ways in which interactions among morality, the conventions of society, and peoples' culturally based assumptions about the nature of the world generate cultural and historical variations in values. This discussion provides insights into how seemingly incommensurate cultural worldviews can share the same universal moral core. It also provides a basis for understanding how members within a culture can be impervious to the moral contradictions within their own existing social system, and how ethnocentric interpretations of cultural values can mask the principled moral perspectives of other cultural groups. Finally, the resulting analysis provides a basis from which individuals can engage in moral reflection and moral critique of their own cultural practices and social structure.

A comprehensive account of moral psychology entails more than an explanation of the emergence of sociomoral knowledge and reasoning. It must also connect with the affective and motivational bases for moral action. Consequently, we next address the motivational and characterological elements that enter into a person's moral actions. We begin by looking at the role of emotion in selecting and energizing one's actions. The rich emerging literature on children's emotional development eliminates the false dichotomy between emotion and cognition in moral experience. Moral experience is not a matter of either cognition or emotion, but rather an inevitable integration between thought and feelings. This work helps us to understand the nature of moral motivation and some of the sources of moral pathology.

Finally, we take up the issue of moral character. This entails a critique of traditional notions of character currently in vogue in certain educational programs. The argument moves toward a contemporary reconceptualization of the issue in terms of self-construction and self-consistency. The work addressed here draws from narrative views of self that recognize people as multifaceted rather than defined in terms of traits or virtues.

The overview of domain theory and research presented in Part One of the book provides the foundation for Part Two, which offers concrete illustrations of how one might use domain theory as a guide to educational practice. This section deals with three interrelated aspects of sociomoral education: establishing a moral climate or atmosphere (issues of classroom management and structure), integrating values education into the curriculum, and fostering the moral self (personal character).

The educational practices introduced are designed to stimulate students' development into socially competent adults who are able to fit into their sociomoral worlds, but who also take a critical moral perspective toward themselves and the social worlds they inherit. As outlined in Part One of the book, the moral domain forms a universal core set of values around issues of human welfare and justice. It is the development of these moral concepts that anchors sociomoral education. The social world, however, is multifaceted. Issues of right and wrong are determined not only by morality but also by the conventions and factual assumptions shared by the larger society. Enabling students to negotiate the sociomoral world, and to arrive at moral positions in complex situations, involves not only stimulating their moral reasoning but also developing their concepts of convention and personal rights.

The second section of the book provides teachers with tools for how to stimulate conceptual development within the moral, conventional, and personal domains and for how to engage students in critical moral reflection on issues involving overlap between morality and nonmoral social values or norms. Teachers are shown how to analyze the domain-related features of school norms, practices, and curricula. Through the use of actual classroom examples, teachers are provided with suggestions for how to integrate attention to domain into classroom management, classroom climate, student discipline, and uses of the academic curriculum.

Running throughout is the unifying theme that education in the moral domain should challenge the student's sense of what is right and fair, and ask that the student apply those understandings to his or her everyday life. On this account, moral education is not a matter of induction or inculcation, but a process that harnesses children's intrinsic motivation to comprehend and master their social worlds.