

Kant's contribution to moral education: the relevance of catechistics

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Kant's deontological ethics, along with Aristotle's virtue ethics and Mill's utilitarian ethics, is often identified as one of the three primary moral options between which individuals can choose. Given the importance of Kant's moral philosophy, it is surprising and disappointing how little has been written on his important contributions to moral education. Kant argues for a catechistic approach to moral education. By memorising a series of moral questions and answers, an individual learns the basic principles of morality in the same way that Martin Luther believed an individual should learn the tenets of Christianity. The difficulty, however, is that this approach appears to violate a central tenet of Kantian morality: virtuous acts must be performed out of respect for the moral law itself, not due to habituation. This paper demonstrates Kant's significant contribution to moral education by showing how a catechistic moral education establishes the foundation necessary for autonomous action.

Introduction

Kant's deontological ethics, along with Aristotle's virtue ethics and Mill's utilitarian ethics, is often identified as one of the three primary moral options between which individuals can choose. It is surprising, therefore, that little has been written on Kant's important contributions to moral education—moral instruction through catechism. Kant thought that by memorising a series of moral questions and answers, an individual can acquire knowledge of basic moral principles in the same way that Martin Luther believed an individual should be habituated to the tenets of Christianity. The difficulty with this position, however, is that a catechistic approach to moral education appears to violate a central tenet of Kantian morality: an individual is morally praiseworthy only if she performs virtuous acts out of a recognition that those acts are required of her (i.e., out of respect for the moral law itself), not because she has been habituated to act in that manner. The project of this paper is to demonstrate why Kant's contribution to the field of moral education is significant by showing how

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a catechistic moral education establishes the foundation necessary for autonomous, moral action.

Any discussion of moral education must begin with a brief examination of its object—morality or virtue—and, for Kant, becoming virtuous requires an individual not only to adopt the correct principles or maxims, but also to adopt those maxims for the correct reasons. It is for this reason that he divides his discussion of moral education in the ‘Doctrine of the method of ethics’ (Kant, 1797/1999, MM: pp. 477–491) into two parts corresponding with these two components of virtue. The first, ‘Teaching ethics’ (MM: pp. 477–484) outlines why virtue must be taught and the process by which individuals come to adopt virtuous maxims. Although this section contains Kant’s discussion of moral education, the second section, ‘Ethical ascetics’ (MM: pp. 484–485), is critical to understanding his position on this topic because it outlines the components of virtue that cannot be taught. For example, virtue requires an individual to develop ‘a frame of mind that is both *valiant* and *cheerful* in fulfilling its duties...[because] what is not done with pleasure but merely as compulsory service has no inner worth for one who attends to his duty in this way’ (MM: p. 484). Although one can be taught the basic principles of virtue, one cannot be taught how to acquire this disposition. Instead, it is acquired through what Kant calls ‘ethical gymnastics’, or through the repetitive practice of combating natural impulses when those impulses conflict with virtue. ‘Hence’, Kant concludes, ‘[the process of performing ethical gymnastics] makes one valiant and cheerful in the consciousness of one’s restored freedom’ (MM: p. 485), allowing an individual to overcome the forces of heteronomy which provide a barrier to moral action.

Keeping in mind that the focus of moral education must be on assisting an individual in adopting moral maxims (the first component of virtue), rather than on the disposition with which those maxims are adopted (the second component of virtue), let us turn our attention towards Kant’s discussion of ethical instruction in the ‘Doctrine of the method of ethics’. Kant begins by examining why virtue must be acquired and why it must be taught. He writes:

The very concept of virtue already implies that virtue must be acquired (that it is not innate); one need not appeal to anthropological knowledge based on experience to see this. For a human being’s moral capacity would not be virtue were it not produced by the *strength* of his resolution in conflict with powerful opposing inclinations. Virtue is the product of pure practical reason insofar as it gains ascendancy over such inclinations with consciousness of its supremacy (based on freedom). (MM: p. 477)

Since individuals are not born with the ability to resist heteronomous impulses, one must cultivate this ability and, thus, cultivate a propensity for virtue. According to Kant, a propensity for virtue ‘can and must be taught already follows from its not being innate’ (MM: p. 477). His reasoning can be explained as follows: (1) because virtue is not innate, it must be acquired; (2) applying Kant’s ‘ought implies can’ principle, because individuals have a moral duty to become virtuous, it is possible for them to acquire virtue; (3) that which is not innate but can be acquired must be learned; (4) thus, it follows that virtue must be taught.

Dialectic and dogmatism: Plato and Aristotle on moral education

There has been significant discussion on whether human morality is an innate characteristic (e.g. Wilson, 1995; Joyce, 2006; Miller, 2008). I do not wish to engage with that discussion here. Let us assume Kant is correct in concluding that virtue is not innate and must be taught. Historically, others arriving at this same conclusion about virtue have argued that it must be taught either through a dialectic or dogmatic approach. One of the first formal theories of moral education can be found in the Platonic dialogues where Socrates elicits moral principles from his students through continuous questioning and refinement of ideas. Central to this process of dialectical education is that the questions do not come from the teacher alone, but rather all of the participants are able to question the reasonableness of the ideas that have been proposed. To participate in the dialogue, however, an individual must enter the discussion with some pre-existing knowledge of the issue being discussed—in this case, the principles of virtue. In the Platonic dialogues, this pre-existing understanding of virtue can be traced to the Socratic belief that individuals are born with complete, theoretical knowledge, including knowledge of moral principles (Plato, 1997 edn, *Meno*: 81c–d).

Individuals are not taught the principles of virtue through the dialectical process. Instead, by participating in the dialogue individuals are able to refine their understanding of how these principles should be applied (Gordon, 1999, p. 34). Therefore, as Kant observes correctly, the foundation of an individual's moral education cannot be established through dialogue alone (MM: p. 479). Individuals participating in the dialogue enter this discussion either with or without pre-existing knowledge of moral principles. If an individual enters the dialogue already possessing this knowledge, then he may learn how best to apply these principles through the dialectic. However, if one does not have a pre-existing understanding of moral principles when he enters the dialogue, then the dialectic is unable to function in the appropriate manner. Kant writes, 'The formal principle of such instruction does not...permit Socratic *dialogue* as the way of teaching for this purpose, since the pupil has no idea what questions to ask; and so the teacher alone does the questioning' (MM: p. 479). Without the ability of all participants to take part in the questioning process, moral discussions that resemble dialogues become nothing more than instances of dogmatic instruction.

Kant's rejection of the dialectic method as the starting point for one's moral education follows from the previous point that individuals are not born with an innate understanding of moral principles. If it were the case that individuals were born with some innate understanding of these principles, then it could be argued that the dialectical structure is more appropriate to serve as the basis for one's moral education. By arguing against dialectic teaching as the basis for moral education, Kant aligns himself more closely with Aristotle. In contrast to Plato, Aristotle emphasises the importance of the state and family in implementing laws that compel individuals to act in a manner consistent with virtue. He writes:

We acquire [virtues] by first exercising them. The same is true with skills, since what we need to learn before doing, we learn by doing....So too we become just by doing just

actions, temperate by temperate actions, and courageous by courageous actions. What happens in cities bears this out as well, because legislators make the citizens good by habituating them [through the laws], and this is what every legislator intends....If one has not been reared under the right laws it is difficult to obtain from one's earliest years the correct upbringing for virtue, because the masses...do not find it pleasant to live temperately and with endurance....[Therefore,] the person who is to be good must be nobly brought up and habituated, and then spend his life engaged in good pursuits....And this would happen when people lived in accordance with a kind of intellect and a correct system with power over them. (Aristotle, 2000 edn, NE: 1103a27–1103b6; 1179b28–1180a15)

While the laws compel an individual to perform acts consistent with those performed by the virtuous man, Aristotle asserts that a person is not virtuous unless he performs those actions from the appropriate state: 'first, with knowledge, secondly, from rational choice, and rational choice of the actions for their own sake, and, thirdly, from a firm and unshakable character' (NE: 1105a31).

It is not clear, however, how habituation through compulsory action, what Kant refers to as Aristotle's dogmatic approach to moral education, is able to accomplish the goal of making individuals better in the way that he suggests. If one must be compelled or coerced to perform acts consistent with virtue, we would not consider that individual to be virtuous. Rather, that individual is said to have performed acts consistent with those of a virtuous man, but not from the appropriate state of character (Aristotle, 2000, NE: 1144a15; Kant 1788/1999, CPr: p. 152). Such a result appears unavoidable if dogmatic instruction lies at the foundation of one's moral education, especially in situations where this instruction is reinforced by threats of punishment or promises of reward.

This problem that Kant identifies in his critique of Aristotle is the same problem identified by R.S. Peters' 'paradox of moral education' (1981, pp. 45–60). As explained by Kristján Kristjánsson (2006), this paradox contains two distinct, but interrelated, paradoxes: a psychological paradox and a moral/political paradox:

The *psychological paradox* is this: How can it be true at the same time that it is the aim of moral education to develop persons who conduct themselves by their intellects...and that can best be achieved through inculcating in them from an early age certain ready-made habits of action and feeling?...The *moral/political paradox*, on the other hand, is this: How can it be true at the same time that the aim of moral education is to create individuals who, moved by their own conception of the good, cherish and assiduously apply their own unencumbered autonomy and that this can best be achieved through means that necessarily involve an extrinsic motivation? (p. 103)

If the role of moral education is to provide individuals with the principles underlying right and wrong action and to develop their character in such a way so that they are able to learn how these principles should be applied (CPr: p. 159), then neither Socratic dialectic nor Aristotelian dogmatism alone can provide a complete moral education. The dialectic approach fails due to its content—it assumes that one has already acquired a basic understanding of moral principles. Likewise, the dogmatic approach fails due to its form—it trains an individual to perform actions consistent

with virtue, but these actions are not performed from the correct moral disposition. In the words of Otfried Höffe (1994):

[The] criterion for morality is met only if one does what is morally correct for no other reason than because it is morally correct. An action is good without qualification only if it fulfils duty for the sake of duty. Only in such cases does Kant speak of morality. (p. 143)

Kant's moral catechism

Kant's solution to the paradox of moral education is the introduction of a moral catechism. He writes:

For the beginning pupil the first and most essential instrument for *teaching* the doctrine of virtue is a moral *catechism*....A pure *moral* catechism, as the basic teachings of duties of virtue, involves no such scruple or difficulty since (as far as its content is concerned) it can be developed from ordinary human reason, and (as far as its form is concerned) it needs only to be adapted to the rules of teaching suited for the earliest instruction....So the way of teaching by catechism differs from both the dogmatic way (in which only the teacher speaks) and the way of dialogue (in which both the teacher and pupil question and answer each other). (MM: p. 479)

By moral catechism, Kant has in mind something similar to Luther's long and short religious catechisms—both of which played an integral role in Kant's early religious education (Kuehn, 2001, p. 47). The function of Luther's catechisms was to teach individuals the fundamental doctrines and prayers of the church through a series of questions and memorised answers. Unlike a religious catechism, which is developed to instil within individuals particular tenets of a pre-existing religious doctrine, Kant believes that a moral catechism 'can be developed from ordinary human reason (as far as its content is concerned)' (MM: p. 479). That is, a student educated via a moral catechism is not memorising answers that they could not, or did not, generate themselves. For Kant, virtue requires an individual to use his reason freely to determine and adopt moral maxims and then act on these maxims out of respect for the moral law itself (CPr: pp. 29–30). Therefore, the question arises as to whether or not it is possible for an individual, initially educated via a moral catechism, to go beyond the first stage of repetition, ultimately arriving at these moral judgements through the use of reason and not memory. Simply put, does Kant provide a resolution to the paradox of moral education?

This potential problem becomes clearer once we turn to Kant's remark after §52 in the 'Doctrine of the method of ethics', the 'Fragment of a moral catechism' (MM: pp. 480–482). Although the portion of the catechism presented here is abbreviated, it illustrates clearly the first two steps an individual must take in order to become capable of attaining virtue. First, he must progress from his original state, one in which he is ignorant of moral principles (MM: p. 477), to one in which he possesses basic knowledge of these principles. Second, he must progress from this intermediate state, one where he can make moral determinations because he has learned moral principles and when they should be applied, to the point where he is able to generate and apply moral principles on his own through the development and use of his

reason. If individuals educated under the catechism are unable to progress to this latter stage, their actions would be consistent with the letter of the law (i.e., legally praiseworthy), but not performed with the correct disposition (i.e., morally praiseworthy). Since the role of moral education is to assist an individual's progress toward becoming morally praiseworthy, for Kant's catechistic method to be successful it must allow for an individual to progress in this manner.

Catechistic education begins with the teacher eliciting an initial response from the student, or, 'should the pupil not know how to answer the question, the teacher, guiding his reason, suggests the answer to him' (MM: p. 480). Then, this answer 'must be written down and preserved in definite words that cannot easily be altered, and so be committed to the pupil's *memory*' (MM: p. 479). In the fragment of catechism that Kant provides, the teacher begins by asking the student a question that appears only tangentially related to morality: 'Teacher: What is your greatest, in fact your whole, desire in life?' (MM: p. 480). To this question, Kant's student is silent, although it is unclear why anyone, even a child who possesses no understanding of moral principles, would be unable or unwilling to answer this question. One suggestion, offered by Thomas Fuhr (2000), is that Kant's student is quiet because the question is too complex (p. 104). However, even if one could not answer the question with an intelligent, well thought-out reply, it is not unreasonable to expect a shallow reply relevant to the age and interests of that particular student. Through the silence of the student, Kant implies either that a shallow response is the equivalent of silence where moral development is concerned, or that the catechistic education can be successful even if the student cannot answer even the most basic questions concerning the principles that underlie his particular desires. The goal of the first few questions is to arrive at the conclusion that the student's greatest desire in life is to be happy, which Kant defines as 'continuous well-being, enjoyment of life, [and] complete satisfaction with one's condition' (MM: p. 480). Although an individual may be silent and initially not recognise that this principle is the determining ground of all of his desires, Kant believes it to be a fact of human nature (CPr: p. 25).

Through the next series of questions in the moral catechism, a process which Kant describes as preparatory guidance, the student is guided towards recognising the problems that result when happiness or desire is the determining ground of his will. This guidance is tailored to the student once the teacher is able to understand the student's character (i.e., whether he possesses natural kindness towards others), whether the student is able to temper these natural feelings towards others through the use of his reason and if the student is able to apply these same reason-tempered feelings when considering what he deserves himself (MM: pp. 480–481). Additionally, the teacher also guides the student towards understanding the principles that underlie his replies. For example, when given the power to make everyone and anyone happy, the student responds that he would not 'give a lazy fellow soft cushions so that he could pass his life away in sweet idleness' or 'give a violent man audacity and strong fists so that he could crush other people', even though both of these would allow someone else 'to be happy in his own way'. The teacher, guiding the student's reason through the phrasing of the question, follows up on this response

by explaining the principle from which he is acting: 'Teacher: You see, then, that even if you had all happiness in your hands and, along with it, the best will, you would still not give it without consideration to anyone who put out his hand for it; instead you would first try to find out to what extent each was worthy of happiness' (MM: p. 481).

Without providing the student with some degree of preparatory guidance, Kant believes that an individual could never cultivate his reason to the fullest extent required for virtue. He writes, 'It certainly cannot be denied that in order to bring either a mind that is still uncultivated or one that is degraded onto the track of the morally good in the first place, some preparatory guidance is needed to attract it by means of its own advantage or alarm it by fear of harm' (MM: p. 152). In other words, the role of the teacher in the initial stages of the moral catechism is to coerce the student into recognising which responses are consistent with the demands of the moral law. Since the student at this stage of his training still acts according to his desires and from the maxim of attaining personal happiness, one must appeal to the student on this level in order for him to become legally praiseworthy.

This view concerning the appropriate role of the teacher is expressed by Kant throughout his writings, dating as far back as an announcement for his lecture program for the 1765–1766 winter semester. In this announcement, he writes:

First of all, the understanding develops by using experience to arrive at intuitive judgments, and by their means to attain to concepts. After that, and employing reason, these concepts come to be known in relation to their grounds and consequences. Finally, by means of science, these concepts come to be known as part of a well-ordered whole. This being the case, teaching must follow exactly the same path. The teacher is, therefore, expected to develop his pupil firstly the man of *understanding*, then the man of *reason*, and finally the man of *learning*. Such a procedure has this advantage: even if, as usually happens, the pupil should never reach the final phase, he will still have benefited from his instruction. (Kant, 1765/1982, An: pp. 305–306)

Although this passage is directed at education in general, it can be applied to his comments on moral education. Through the moral catechism, an individual develops into the man of moral understanding. That is, the teacher is able to guide the student towards an understanding of virtue through the use of familiar examples, with the ultimate goal of instilling the rules of what constitutes right and wrong behaviour. 'In formative training,' Kant observes, 'we should try to ensure that it is merely negative and that we exclude everything contrary to nature....The negative aspect, in both instruction and training of the child, is discipline; the positive aspect, in instruction, is doctrine.' He concludes, 'Discipline must precede doctrine. By discipline the heart and temperament can be trained, but character is shaped more by doctrine' (Kant, 1902/2001, LE: 27, p. 467).

Resolving the paradox of moral education

For Aristotle, the first step in moral education is to compel an individual to perform acts that are consistent with acquiring certain virtues. By acting in this manner, an

individual is not thought to be virtuous, but rather is acting how the virtuous person would act. To become virtuous, an individual must perform these actions from the correct character state. That is, he acts in a particular manner because he recognises that performing that act is the right thing to do, not because he has been compelled to do so by a force external to himself. Aristotle, however, never explains how this transition occurs and it is unclear how it would occur. While Aristotle's approach to moral education trains an individual to perform actions consistent with virtue, these actions are never performed from the correct moral disposition. Instead of training an individual to perform virtuous acts, Kant's catechistic approach to moral education aims to cultivate virtuous persons by developing the students' understanding of not only what principles are consistent with virtue, but also why those principles are consistent with virtue.

By developing a student's understanding of moral principles, the teacher is training his heart and temperament. Although this training is the primary goal of the moral catechism, it is only the intermediate goal of moral education. The ultimate goal, becoming morally praiseworthy, requires the student first to use his reason to determine the principles that he should adopt and then adopt these principles. Unlike the transition from the student's original condition to this intermediate stage, the teacher cannot make the student morally praiseworthy by means of instruction. Given that an essential component of virtue is that an individual has chosen the appropriate ends freely, it would be impossible for a teacher to compel or coerce the student into becoming morally praiseworthy. This point is echoed by Christine Korsgaard (1999). She writes, 'Choosing ends on another's behalf is as impossible as it would be disrespectful, but putting others in a good position to choose ends for themselves, and to choose them well, is the proper work of parents, teachers, friends, and politicians' (p. 220, Note 36).

Although ends cannot be chosen for other individuals, more can be done than simply putting others in a good position to be virtuous. On this point, Kant adds:

A human being's moral education must begin not with an improvement of *mores*, but with the transformation of his attitude of mind and the establishment of a character.... This predisposition to the good is cultivated in no better way than by just adducing the *example* of good people (as regards their conformity to law), and by allowing our apprentices in morality to judge the impurity of certain maxims on the basis of the incentives actually behind their actions. And so the predisposition gradually becomes an attitude of mind, so that duty merely for itself begins to acquire in the apprentice's heart a noticeable importance. (1792/1996, Rel: p. 48)

The predisposition for morality that Kant refers to at the end of this passage is provided by catechistic education, but it is unclear from this passage alone how this predisposition for the good becomes an attitude of mind solely through the introduction of examples of good people. His explanation for how this process occurs is provided in the second *Critique* and *Metaphysics of morals*. Through the adduction of examples and discussion of hypothetical moral scenarios, a process that Kant refers to as 'ethical gymnastics', an individual learns that he is cultivating his reason through these exercises. This process, Kant argues, 'gradually produce[s] a certain interest in

reason's law itself and hence in morally good actions. For, we finally come to like something the contemplation of which lets us feel a more extended use of our cognitive powers' (CPr: p. 159). The advantage of ethical gymnastics 'lies especially in the fact that it is natural for a human being to *love* a subject which he has, by his own handling, brought to a science (in which he is now proficient); and so, by this sort of practice, the pupil is drawn without noticing it to an *interest* in morality' (MM: pp. 483–484).

Acquiring an interest in morality itself is a two-step process. By participating in ethical gymnastics, an individual recognises her/his own cognitive powers and their ability to help master natural impulses (MM: p. 485). Being able to perfect this aspect of character provides the individual with satisfaction. Thus, one's initial interest in morality is not an interest in morality itself, but rather morality 'is viewed only as the occasion for our becoming aware of the tendency of talents in us which are elevated above animality' (CPr: p. 160). Simply put, one's interest in morality is actually an interest in obtaining the satisfaction received after recognising that one has strengthened one's own cognitive powers. Through the further development of these cognitive powers, however, an individual comes to recognise the connection between morality and freedom (CPr: p. 160). He understands that he is free only when he adopts moral maxims. In this way his interest shifts. No longer is his interest in morality secondary to his interest in receiving the satisfaction that he once associated with moral action. Instead, he becomes interested in morality for its own sake—for the sake of his freedom and personal development.

In this way, Kant provides a solution to the two-fold paradox of moral education. Concerning the psychological paradox, Kant rejects the claim that the development of moral persons is achieved by inculcating within individuals certain ready-made habits of action. Instead of repeating actions that are consistent with the actions of a virtuous person, the moral catechism guides individuals towards understanding the principles central to virtue. This guidance takes place not through dogmatic instruction, but through directing a student's reason to arrive at the desired conclusions through a series of questions and answers. The student then commits these questions and answers to memory so that he may reflect upon the chain of reasoning that led him to these conclusions. In this way, the student's understanding is developed in a manner that is consistent with developing persons who conduct themselves by their intellects. As for the moral/political paradox, extrinsic factors never motivate an individual's moral development in Kant's system of moral education, be it within the catechistic stage or once catechistic instruction has ceased. All motivation is internal. While being motivated by internal forces is a necessary condition for becoming morally praiseworthy, it is insufficient. What Kant does not explain is how an individual develops his cognitive powers to move from the second to the third (and final) stage of moral development. That is, developing from the man of reason (who is motivated by satisfaction) into the man of learning (who is motivated by duty). By this point, however, the individual has moved well beyond the foundation established through the moral catechism, a foundation that made possible the first stages of development. Kant's resolution to the paradox may be incomplete, but his move away from

Aristotle's coercive, action-based approach is significant as it demonstrates how individuals can be instilled with a basic foundation of moral principles without restricting their autonomy.

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