



Can Moral Psychology Inform Moral Education? Some Critical Perspectives

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Abstract

As teachers we frequently face situations where we are expected to make moral judgements and act upon them as a part of our pedagogical practices. This is one reason why practitioners and researchers tend to agree on that teaching is an essentially moral practice. However, according to recent development within moral psychology, we often make judgements based on emotionally driven intuitions and afterwards make up reasons to explain them. This provides a challenge for the traditional views of moral education. Thus, the overall aim of this paper is to present and critically discuss what the new findings of moral psychology can contribute to moral education. Initially we will present the theory and argue why it seems to provide an important contribution to our understanding of the normative dimension of education. Finally, however, we will use philosophical method in order to critically examine some of the core features of the model and discuss which consequences it has to, for instance, aspects of care which is inherent in an educational context.

Keywords: *Moral education, Moral psychology, Care ethics*

1. Introduction

As teachers we frequently face situations where we are expected to make moral judgements and act upon them as a part of our pedagogical practices. This is one reason why practitioners and researchers tend to agree on that teaching is an essentially moral practice [1] [2]. However, they often seem to disagree on how teachers *ought* to treat ideals, norms and values in their pedagogical practices. Hence, a division is regularly made between *character-based* and *reason-based approaches* to moral education [3] [4] [5]. Some researchers have argued that teachers should lead by example and thereby help their pupils to form good habits and develop desirable character traits such as integrity and tolerance. This is often combined with an emphasis on the ability to respond emotionally to others as a part of a social group which is characteristic of a character-based approach [5] [6]. Other researchers have argued that teachers should challenge their pupils with moral dilemmas and thereby contribute to their ability to reason and develop cognitively. This is often combined with an emphasis on the ability to think rationally as individuals which is characteristic of a reason-based approach [3].

According to the recent development within moral psychology, however, we often make judgements based on emotionally driven intuitions and afterwards make up reasons to explain them. In other words, moral judgements involve both emotional responses and rational thinking, where the importance of the latter often has been overestimated [7] [8]. Thus, the overall aim of this paper is to present and critically discuss what the theory can contribute to moral education. Initially we will present the theory and argue why it seems to provide an important contribution to our understanding of the normative dimension of education. Finally, however, we will use philosophical method in order to critically examine some of the core features of the model and discuss which consequences it has to, for instance, aspects of care, which is inherent in an educational context. This is, of course, a challenge for the traditional views of moral education.

2. Moral psychology

Jonathan Haidt has conducted studies where respondents are given an opportunity to review a number of stories, that do not involve any harmful intentions or consequences, but violates different cultural taboos. The stories involve, for instance, someone who has the family's departed dog for dinner or become involved in an intimate relationship with a sibling. A conclusion of the studies is that the majority of our moral judgements are made automatically based of how we react emotionally in different situations. In retrospect (*post hoc*) we try to find rational justifications for the judgements, for instance, with reference to that someone could come to harm. The reasons are often given without regard to anything that speaks against the immediate reaction and are intended to justify our



judgement to others in a social context. Because of our sensitivity to group norms the judgements tend to affect people in our social setting regardless of the strength of the arguments put forward [9]. Thus, Haidt presents a model where moral judgements involve two cognitive processes, emotional responses and rational thinking, where the significance of the latter traditionally has been overemphasized (cf. [7]; [10]). The awareness of that emotional judgements precede their rational justification is important for teachers in order to be able to contribute to improve the quality of their pupils' moral judgements and behaviour. It is, for instance, possible to develop a more nuanced thinking by engaging in discussion with others. Even if each of the participants in a discussion would be inclined to seek confirmation for their beliefs, they would be challenged by others, making the outcome of such a procedure easier to justify [10].

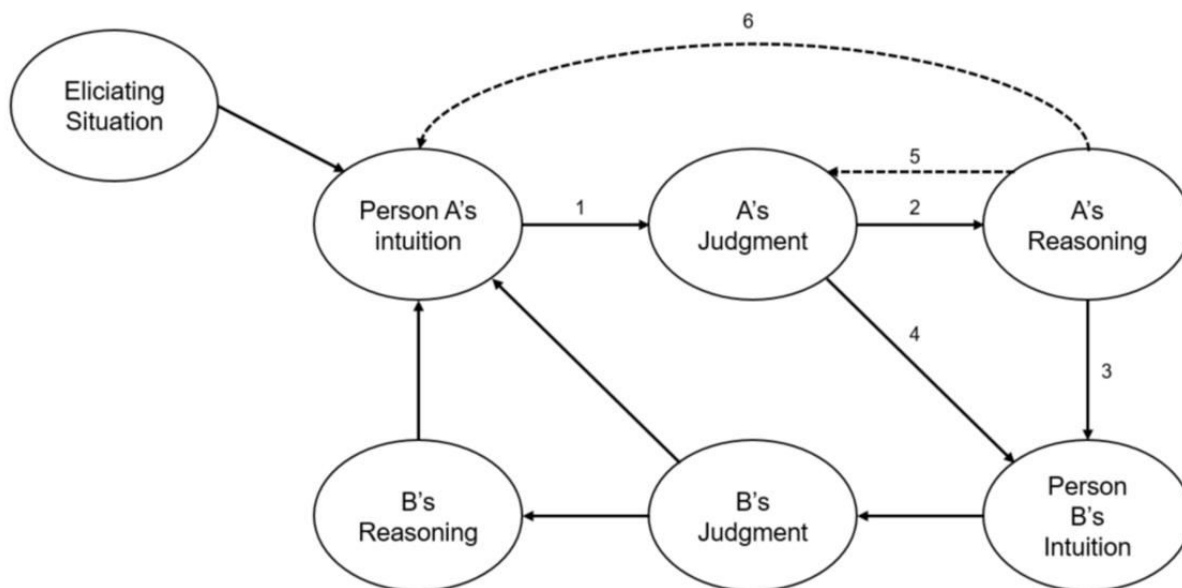


Figure 1: Haidt's social intuitionist model of moral judgment, (1) the intuitive link, (2) the post hoc reasoning link, (3) the reasoned persuasion link, and (4) the social persuasion link. Following links occur less frequently: (5) the reasoned judgment link and (6) the private reflection link [7].

The reason why people react intuitively is, according to Haidt, that we have an innate preparedness for things that can appear threatening in social life (cf. [9]; [10]). The moral consciousness is compared to a tongue, with different types of taste buds, which together can cause a variety of sensations. Haidt has described these receptors as pairs, for example: care/harm, justice/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, holiness/degradation, liberty/oppression [10]. Which of these the individual develops a taste for depend, to a large extent, on the social and cultural context.

The background to the disagreement between proponents of character-based and reason-based moral education is, from this perspective, that they emphasize different parts of our ethical thinking. The character-based model stress the ability to feel empathy, solidarity and group affiliation, while the reason-based model stress the ability to think rationally, consider consequences and universalize judgments (cf. [4];[10]). Haidt and his collaborators have suggested that the debate between different moral pedagogical perspectives should be integrated as a part of how norms, ideals and values are dealt with in education [4]. In this way, Haidt's solution to the conflict between character-based and reason-based perspectives on moral education, is to raise the level of abstraction.

A reason why these psychological studies are relevant for moral education is because if people, for example, were found to be psychologically incapable of acting in accordance with virtues or normative principles, they would risk losing their significance altogether. This would, of course, call for considerable changes in the way the subject is taught. Yet, the model has, with few exceptions [cf. 12-14], not been subject to much discussion within the educational field.



3. Informing moral education

In this section, we will critically examine Haidt and his collaborators' proposal of moral education, and provide a contribution to the discussion. As we have seen, Haidt is arguing that emotions have crucial significance for moral judgments, and criticize traditional moral psychologists for overemphasizing reason [7] [9].

Haidt and his collaborators propose that their psychological findings have broad implications on the subject of moral education [4]. They attempt to solve the ideological dispute between character-based and reasoning-based approaches by raising the level of abstraction. The proposal amounts to a meta-perspective on moral education in which teachers should make use of the ideological division, engaging children in debating which virtues to promote and confront moral disagreements [4]. Haidt's contribution within moral psychology, we argue is somewhat contradictory to the proposed raise of abstraction within moral education. Considering that the psychological findings stress the importance of emotion and social context, it is unfortunate to disregard this in relation to moral education. For this reason, a relational approach to moral education we believe is a promising perspective in order to utilize Haidt's psychological findings within the educational field.

The relational approach, often referred to as ethics of care puts great emphasis on emotion as fundamental to moral development [15]. This prominence to emotions, along with the understanding of care as an inherent foundation makes the approach compatible with Haidt's social intuitionist perspective (figure 2). However, care is not to be considered a trait in line with the tradition of character education. It is rather from both a descriptive and normative perspective, a recognition of situated social relations as basis to human moral. According to care-ethicist Nel Noddings, care is regarded as either natural or ethical. The first is an innate disposition and revolves from an unforced will to care; the latter is instead based upon ethical considerations proceeded from previous experiences [15]. The aspect of care, we argue is inherent in an educational context since school is to be considered a living social community. Due to the understanding of care as situated and contextual, a higher level of abstraction and rational treatment of moral questions would be a contra productive method to achieve moral development. By implementing such a practice the importance of emotional response in social relations, which is to be considered an essential part of education may be seriously underestimated. Although we are critical to the methodological proposal of raising the level of abstraction, the findings within moral psychology conducted by Haidt have great potential to inform moral education. Within moral psychology, Haidt's theories dispute traditional understanding of moral judgment and unilateral focus on rationalism and moral reasoning. Hence, this displacement ought to be conceivable within moral education, recognizing the importance of emotion, relation and context in educational practice (see figure 3). Investigation of the psychological predispositions in caring relations could further result in a moral education with a collective and structural focus. This would be fruitful since it enables for interventions on various levels, between individuals, within and between groups, and perhaps most important on the level of school organisation.

4. Concluding remarks

In relation to moral education, there is reason to remain somewhat skeptical to Haidt and his collaborators' proposal. A meta-perspective on moral education we argue, is contradictory to Haidt's influential findings within moral psychology. Since Haidt emphasize the importance of situated relations and emotional effect on moral judgment, it would be beneficial to incorporate this as a vivid part of moral education. We believe this could be achieved through the relational approach of care ethics.



5. Illustrations

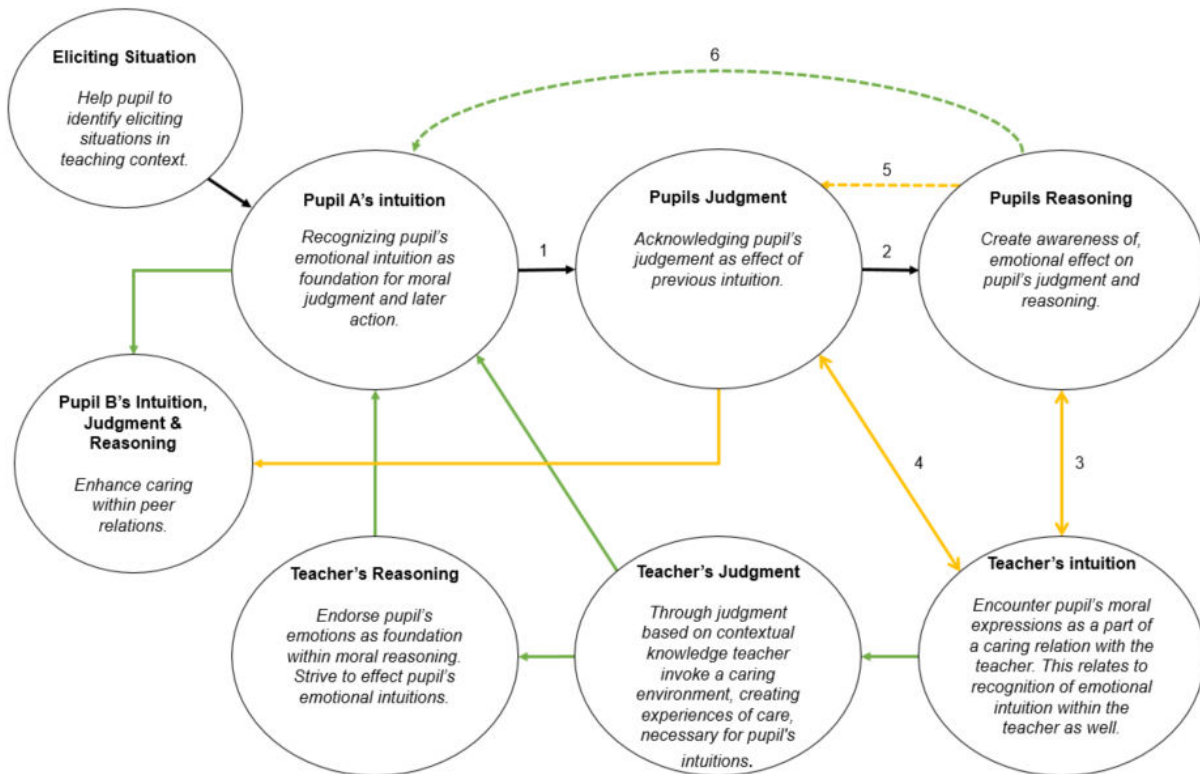


Figure 2: An example of teacher promoting caring informed by social intuitionist model (SIM) within an educational context. Natural care enhanced by green links; Ethical care enhanced by yellow links.

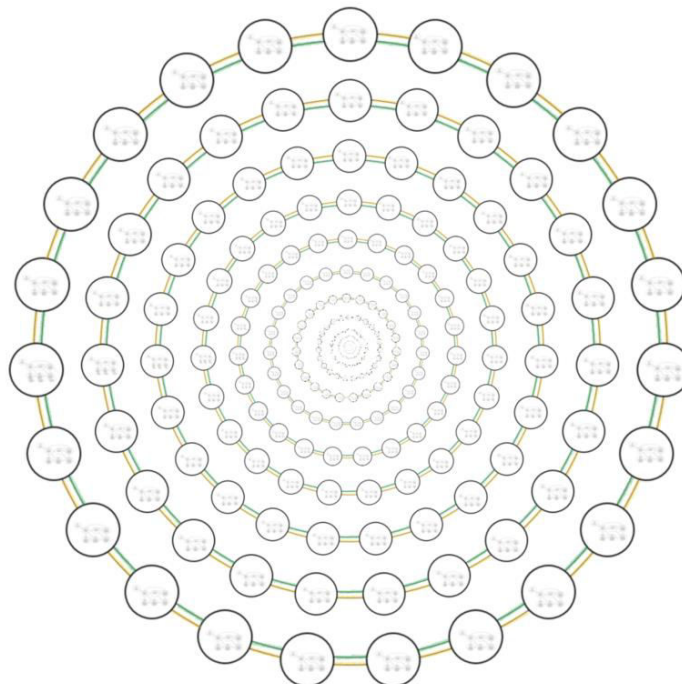


Figure 3: Creating a context of caring by promoting natural and ethical care informed by the social intuitionist model. Yellow links represent natural care through interventions directed towards intuition. Green links represent ethical caring increased by intervention directed at reasoning and judgment.



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