

Towards a theory of moral education

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Towards a theory of moral education¹

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There has not been a Professor of Philosophy of Education at the University of Birmingham for some time. Prior to my appointment, the title was last held here by Robert Dearden, from 1978 until his retirement in 1989. Dearden, along with Richard Peters and Paul Hirst, was one of the founding fathers of philosophy of education as a distinct academic field in the UK. His best known book, *The Philosophy of Primary Education* (Dearden, 1968), effectively demolished the child-centred growth theory that dominated thinking about primary education in the 1960s. And his name is closely associated with the still influential idea that the central aim of education is the development of personal autonomy.

Dearden gave his own inaugural lecture 35 years ago, in February 1979. Entitled 'Theory and practice in education', the lecture drew some important distinctions between different kinds of educational theory and their relation to practice (Dearden, 1984). As my intention today is to sketch the contours of a theory of moral education, it may be instructive to begin by locating my project within the wider conceptual landscape Dearden maps.

Dearden draws his first distinction from a debate between D.J. O'Connor and Paul Hirst about the possibility of practical theories. A practical educational theory is described by Hirst as being 'concerned with determining the ends as well as the means of education' (Hirst, 1973, p.68): it is one that includes and purports to justify normative claims as well as empirical ones. Practical theories are contrasted with scientific theories, which are purely descriptive or explanatory and are capable of guiding practice only in the sense of identifying the most effective means to predetermined ends. O'Connor contends that the only genuine theories are scientific ones and that the possibility of practical theories is ruled out by our inability to demonstrate logical connections between statements of fact and statements of value. A theory, he insists, 'is a structure, not an intellectual salad' (O'Connor, 1973, p.56). Hirst's reasonable reply is that, given the manifest need for rational interrogation and robust justification of both the means and the ends of education, it makes little sense to stipulate a definition of educational theory that allows for one but not the other, whatever the challenges involved in connecting facts and values. Dearden follows Hirst in supposing it possible and sensible to distinguish theories that include normative claims and arguments from theories that do not.

¹ An inaugural lecture delivered at the University of Birmingham, January 2014.

Dearden's second distinction is between two ways in which theories can be relevant to practice. A theory has *thematic* relevance to practice when it is 'quite simply... about practice: somewhere or at some time' (Dearden, 1984, p.9). Dearden thinks it is a necessary feature of educational theories that they have thematic relevance, because a theory will only count as educational if it is in some sense concerned with the practice of education. By contrast, a theory has *pragmatic* relevance to practice when it has 'a bearing on the solution of a current practical problem' (p.9). This sort of relevance, Dearden argues, is optional for educational theories, which may be deliberately and properly dismissive of the terms in which current practical problems are couched. It would, therefore, 'be very unwise for educational theorising to be entirely governed in its direction of interest by a strict criterion of pragmatic relevance' (p.10).

These two distinctions, between practical and scientific theories and thematic and pragmatic relevance, yield a fourfold taxonomy of educational theories. Dearden is at pains to show that, while all four kinds of educational theory are such that they can, in principle, be applied to practice, none is such that its application to practice obviates the need for deliberation and judgment on the part of practitioners. Even a practical theory with pragmatic relevance, which is perhaps the kind of educational theory that wears its applicability most prominently on its sleeve, cannot hope to prescribe a specific pedagogical response to every conceivable classroom circumstance, even if that were thought to be desirable. As Dearden puts it, 'general principles do not apply themselves, and the final particular application of a piece of theory therefore requires an unteachable act of judgment' (p.17). It is not a legitimate aspiration of any educational theory to be teacher-proof, to make practical judgment redundant; nor is this an appropriate criterion by which to assess a theory's usefulness.

The theory of moral education I shall outline in a moment is of the applicability-flaunting kind: a practical theory with pragmatic relevance. It aims to advance justified action-guiding principles in response to an identified practical need. My hope is not, of course, to save teachers the trouble of deliberating about their practice in the area of moral education, but to supply them with a more adequate framework within which to deliberate. Dearden holds that one of the things educational theories should be able to offer practitioners is 'a more adequate and considered set of educational values, with an appreciation of their curricular and methodological implications' (p.19): this is the kind of contribution I seek to make to the practice of moral education.

The practical problem

What is the current practical problem my theory purports to address? It is a problem that consists in the tension between two thoughts widely entertained by teachers, policy-makers and the general public. The first thought is that morality must be learned: children must come to see what morality requires of them and acquire the motivation to submit to its authority. The second thought is that morality is controversial: there is deep uncertainty about both the requirements of morality and the reasons to comply with them. The tension between these thoughts is not hard to discern: the former seems to demand that children are educated in morality; the latter seems to prohibit it. Unless we teach children to subscribe to moral standards, there is no reason to expect that they

will come to do so; but to engage in such teaching in the face of controversy about the content and justification of morality appears tantamount to indoctrination.

The standard responses to this problem are as familiar as they are inadequate. We might deny that morality needs to be taught, optimistically putting our faith in the natural goodness of children or their propensity to discern and comply with social norms of their own accord. We might relieve schools of their duty to tackle the problem by making moral education the sole responsibility of parents (though this is plainly just to pass the buck from one social institution to another). We might bite the indoctrination bullet and resolve to inculcate moral standards without supplying reasons for them, perhaps selecting for inculcation those standards for which there is broad popular support. (This seems to have been the thought behind the work of the 1996 National Forum for Values in Education and the Community, whose Statement of Values ‘upon which there is common agreement within society’ (SCAA, 1997) was appended for a number of years to the National Curriculum for England.) Or we might decline to educate *in* morality and simply educate *about* it, inviting children to reflect critically on a range of moral codes and putative justifications and decide for themselves which, if any, merits their compliance.

That these responses are inadequate is, I think, perfectly obvious to most teachers and policy-makers. What is less obvious is whether there is a viable alternative to them. Few teachers are dogmatically committed to the idea that morality is innate, or to opting out of moral education, or to moral indoctrination, or to neutral reflection on moral codes; rather, seeing no other alternative, most shift uneasily back and forth between these options, resting with each just long enough to be reminded of its shortcomings. This is meant not as a criticism of teachers but as a description of their plight: teachers are, in the main, at an understandable loss to know what responsibility they bear for the moral education of children, and what means they have at their disposal for discharging that responsibility.

The pragmatic purpose of my theoretical inquiry, then, is to resolve the tension between the apparent necessity for and impossibility of moral education, to show that there is an alternative to the standard responses to this tension, and thus to assist teachers in making sense of their responsibilities in this area. Now to the theory itself.

Moral standards

One of the things human beings do is hold themselves, and sometimes each other, to standards or norms of conduct. We follow rules, obey laws, adhere to principles and comply with policies. In some cases, such as New Year’s resolutions, adoption of a standard is a deliberate and dateable event and adherence to it requires continual motivational effort and regular self-reminders of one’s reasons for subscribing. In other cases, such as rules of subject-verb agreement in one’s first language, adoption is a gradual and subconscious process and subsequent adherence comes quite naturally, without need of effort or reminders, and even without the ability to formulate the rules one is following. Typically, perhaps, if it is possible to generalise over such a large and diverse class, subscription to standards falls somewhere between these poles: the rules we follow in our day-to-day lives soon become second nature to us, so that compliance

requires no special effort; but from time to time, when action contrary to our standards appears to promise some benefit or advantage, we find it helpful to remind ourselves, if not of our reasons for subscribing, then at least of the fact that we subscribe.

Some standards are trivial (pour the milk before the tea); others momentous (love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind). Some are precise (exercise for thirty minutes three times a week); others vague (do the right thing). Some are specific to particular activities or contexts (drive on the left); others are quite general, applying to all activities in all contexts (live in the moment). Some are epistemic (proportion your beliefs to the evidence), some grammatical (don't split infinitives), some medical (take two tablets at bedtime), some horticultural (plant spring-flowering bulbs in the autumn).

It always makes sense to ask of a standard to which one subscribes, or to which one is thinking about subscribing, whether subscription is justified. What counts as an adequate justification will be different for standards of different kinds. Where a standard is an arbitrary convention the function of which is to coordinate behaviour in a social group, for example, what justifies subscription to it is precisely the fact that it has currency in the group in question. I subscribe to the standard 'drive on the left' for the very good reason that everyone else in my country of residence subscribes to that standard too. By contrast, I subscribe to the standard 'plant spring-flowering bulbs in the autumn' because I know that spring-flowering bulbs require a sustained dormant period of cold temperatures to stimulate root development. Whether this horticultural standard happens to be current in a social group is quite irrelevant to the justification for subscribing to it.

Note, however, that while we can always sensibly ask whether our subscription to a standard is justified, it does not follow that we shall in fact ask this question, or that we shall care too much about the answer to it. It is quite possible, and quite common, for people to follow rules with great diligence and with no thought for the question of justification. Indeed, it is not unusual for us to keep following rules even when we have carefully examined our reasons for doing so and found them wanting. I confess that I continue scrupulously to avoid splitting infinitives, despite being aware of and persuaded by the arguments of grammarians for abandoning this rule.

And just as we can adhere to a rule without believing adherence to be justified, so we can believe adherence to be justified without actually adhering. The world is not short of lotus-eaters who grasp and endorse the good reasons for exercising for thirty minutes three times a week, or of dogmatists who are convinced by the arguments for proportioning their beliefs to the evidence. Of course we want to say that something has gone wrong, or is not as it should be, when subscribing to a standard and believing subscription to be justified come apart like this; but that should not prevent us from acknowledging that their separation is a familiar and unexceptional feature of our lives.

That some of our standards are appropriately classified as *moral* standards is uncontroversial. Rather more controversial is the question of how the class of moral standards is to be delimited. I see little prospect of formulating a definition of this class that includes all the standards competent English-speakers ordinarily describe as moral and excludes all the standards from which they ordinarily withhold this description:

ordinary usage here is too divergent, too elastic, too subject to interference from theoretical background noise. A more promising strategy, I think, is to define the class in such a way that few if any competent English-speakers would be inclined to dispute that the standards included are moral ones, even if they feel there are other kinds of moral standard that are improperly excluded. From the wide range of standards one *might* describe as moral, then, I want to identify a subset whose members one *cannot but* describe as moral.

With this in mind, I suggest that a person's moral standards have two distinguishing features. Both features have to do with the way she subscribes to the standards in question, rather than the form or content of the standards themselves. First, a person who has moral standards not only intends and inclines to comply with them, but also desires and expects everyone else to comply with them too. Sometimes we mind not at all whether others follow the same rules as we do; at other times we mind only that our rules have currency in a particular group to which we belong. Where our subscription to standards is a personal or local matter, the standards are not moral ones. It is only standards to which our subscription is universally-enlisting, in the sense that we want and expect everyone to comply with them, that are candidates for classification as moral.

The second distinguishing feature of a person's moral standards is that she regards failure to comply with them as creating a presumption of liability to punishment. Our moral norms are those whose violation we see as warranting a penalty of some kind, as being the sort of thing for which a person should be condemned or censured. Violations of our epistemic or grammatical or horticultural norms may irritate or displease us, but we do not usually see them as deserving to be punished. This penalty-endorsing criterion of moral subscription was famously noted by John Stuart Mill:

For the truth is, that the idea of penal sanction, which is the essence of law, enters not only into the conception of justice, but into that of any kind of wrong. We do not call anything wrong, unless we mean to imply that a person ought to be punished in some way or other for doing it; if not by law, by the opinion of his fellow-creatures; if not by opinion, by the reproaches of his own conscience. This seems the real turning point of the distinction between morality and simple expediency... [There are things] we wish that people should do, which we like or admire them for doing, perhaps dislike or despise them for not doing, but yet admit that they are not bound to do; it is not a case of moral obligation; we do not blame them, that is, we do not think that they are proper objects of punishment. (Mill, 1962 [1861], pp.303-4)

A standard is moral, then, when a person's subscription to it is both universally-enlisting and penalty-endorsing; that is, when she expects everyone to comply with it and sees infractions as deserving of punishment.² I take it that any standard meeting these criteria would be immediately classified as moral by competent English-speakers. I take it, too, that all or most of us do in fact subscribe to some of our standards in this way. We are disposed not only to comply with prohibitions on killing, stealing and cheating but also to expect compliance of others and to sanction penalties for non-compliance. Note

² This account of moral standards is heavily indebted to, though not quite the same as, the one advanced by David Copp in his *Morality, Normativity and Society* (Copp, 1995).

that, because this account of moral standards is content neutral, it readily accommodates the otherwise puzzling fact that the same standard can be moral for one person and non-moral for another. Moral and non-moral vegetarians alike comply with the standard 'don't eat meat': the difference between them is that the non-moral vegetarian either doesn't mind about the non-compliance of others or feels it inappropriate to condemn them for it.

Moral education

I now want to suggest that a central task of moral education is education in or about moral standards. I do not want to claim that this is its *only* task. It may be that moral educators typically and properly attend to a wider range of phenomena than standards to which some people's subscription is universally-enlisting and penalty-endorsing. They may attend to standards of other kinds; and they may attend to phenomena that are not well-described as standards at all. I am, for example, open to the possibility that moral educators should be concerned in part with the cultivation of virtues, and I take it that possession of a virtue is different from subscription to a standard: being patient or temperate is not primarily a matter of adhering to a rule. I have no particular view to defend about the range of phenomena, other than moral standards, that might be seen as falling within the moral educator's purview.

The point I want to press is that a programme of moral education not centrally concerned with moral standards would thereby be deficient. One reason for this is that moral standards are integral to what most people understand by morality, and moral educators cannot sensibly ignore what most people take morality to be, even if they personally favour some more idiosyncratic account. Another reason is that, regardless of whether one thinks them justified in doing so, it is a striking and important fact about human beings that they almost invariably subscribe to moral standards. One thing we know about the lives children will lead when they leave school is that they will be expected by others to comply with certain rules of conduct and will be condemned or censured for non-compliance. Even if we took this state of affairs to be regrettable, we should be obliged to prepare children adequately for the world they will live in by helping them to understand the nature and operation of moral standards. If, on the other hand, we take the currency of moral standards to be desirable, and subscription to them to be rationally justified, we have even more reason to consider them worthy of sustained educational attention.

It is, at any rate, education in or about moral standards that interests me, and on which I focus in what follows. My theory of moral education is, more precisely, a theory of this central and indispensable part of moral education.

We noted earlier the distinction between subscribing to a standard and believing subscription to a standard to be justified. This distinction holds as much for moral standards as for standards of other kinds. It is possible to subscribe to a moral standard without believing it to be justified, and to believe a moral standard to be justified without subscribing to it. For an example of the former, think of the way some people disapprove of same-sex relationships and condemn those who enter into them, yet openly admit that they can give no reason for their disapproval. For an example of the

latter, think of the person who is entirely persuaded by the moral arguments for vegetarianism but finds herself disinclined either to give up meat herself or to condemn others for their meat-eating. Full moral commitment must therefore be understood as having two components: subscription to a standard and belief that subscription is justified. A person is fully committed to a moral standard when she is both dispositionally inclined to hold herself and others to it and convinced that she has good reason to do so.

Corresponding to these two components of full moral commitment, I now want to draw a basic distinction between two kinds of moral education. I will call these *moral formation* and *moral inquiry*. While it is quite possible, and indeed quite normal, for moral formation and moral inquiry to be pursued in tandem and in ways that are at least intended to be mutually reinforcing, the two educational endeavours are logically distinct and each can be intelligibly pursued in the absence of the other.

Moral formation is the attempt to bring it about that children subscribe to certain moral standards: that they intend and incline to comply with those standards and desire and expect everyone else to comply with them too. It is a matter of shaping children's dispositions by means of praise and admonition, example and modelling, rule-enforcement and boundary-setting, habituation and training. Exerting influence on children's intentions, inclinations, desires and expectations is a different sort of enterprise from exerting influence on their beliefs: it is not fundamentally a matter of making them see things in a certain way, but of molding them into people of a certain kind.

It does not follow, of course, that this kind of moral education is entirely noncognitive. A person who subscribes to the standard 'do not steal' must know what stealing is, be able to recognise cases of stealing, and be able to infer the prescription 'do not take that purse' from the conjunction of the standard 'do not steal' and the judgment 'taking that purse would be stealing'. Bringing it about that children subscribe to moral rules certainly involves enabling them to make the judgments and inferences required for compliance with those rules, and to that extent at least moral formation has cognitive as well as affective and conative dimensions.

Moral inquiry, by contrast, is the investigation of whether and which moral standards are justified. To engage children in moral inquiry is to invite them to consider what reasons there might be for holding themselves and each other to standards of conduct. Are these reasons ever really strong enough to justify universally-enlisting and penalty-endorsing subscription, and if so, to which standards exactly? How should the merits of rival moral codes be weighed against each other?

Moral inquiry may be *directive* or *nondirective*, or a mixture of the two. It is directive when a teacher has the aim of persuading children that the moral standards under investigation are, or are not, justified. It is nondirective when teaching about moral standards is deliberately noncommittal, when the teacher refrains from promoting or endorsing a view on their justificatory status. A teacher might feel entitled to recommend verdicts on all putative justifications for moral standards, or obliged not to recommend verdicts on any of them; or she might favour a middle path and defend the

arguments for some moral standards while merely refereeing discussion about the arguments for others.

An interesting upshot of the distinction between moral formation and moral inquiry is that the approach to moral education I earlier described as 'biting the indoctrination bullet' – that of inculcating moral standards without supplying reasons for them – may not be indoctrinatory after all. Indoctrination would, I think, be involved in any attempt to make children believe that there are good reasons for subscribing to a moral code when in fact there are not. But the situation is a little different if the question of justification is simply not raised. A programme of moral education that consisted solely of moral formation might, in theory, bring it about that children subscribe to a set of moral standards without holding any beliefs at all about their justificatory status. We need only remind ourselves of the way children learn to abide by everyday rules of grammar and etiquette to see that formation of this kind is possible. So those troubled by persistent disagreement about the content and justification of morality might take comfort in the thought that children can be taught to adhere to moral rules without being persuaded that they have good reason to do so.

If, however, the aim of moral education is to bring about full moral commitment, it is clear that it must comprise both moral formation and a directive form of moral inquiry. Children must be brought both to subscribe to moral standards and to believe their subscription to be justified. It will not be enough for them to intend not to steal, expect others not to steal, and know how to avoid stealing. They will also need to believe that at least one putative justification for the moral prohibition on stealing is sound.

And there is some reason to think that full commitment is rather more important in the sphere of morality than it is in the spheres of grammar and etiquette. For most of us, most of the time, it matters little *why* we should use a plural verb for two or more subjects connected by 'and', or refrain from putting our elbows on the table at mealtimes. We learn as children to follow these rules and are rarely thereafter much tempted to depart from them. They are just how we go on when speaking or eating. In the case of moral rules, though, compliance is a good deal more onerous. We find ourselves frequently and sorely tempted to stray from the path prescribed by our moral standards. It is often in our immediate personal interest to break a promise, tell a lie, take what does not belong to us or disregard the interests of another. Such conflicts between our interests and our standards prompt us to deliberate, to think about which of our conflicting inclinations should carry the day. And, to the extent that we are rational, one important consideration here will be the justificatory status of the standards in question. We shall want to check that our dispositions to refrain from promise-breaking, lying and stealing are not pathological barriers to the satisfaction of our desires, but justified constraints on our freedom of action. Judging them to be justified constraints does not, of course, guarantee that we shall resist the temptation to flout them; but judgments of this kind do play a more significant motivational role in compliance with moral norms than they do in compliance with norms of grammar and etiquette.

If this is right, moral education that comprises both moral formation and directive moral inquiry is preferable to moral education that comprises only moral formation, or moral formation in conjunction with purely nondirective moral inquiry. The crucial question is

whether directive moral inquiry is educationally permissible: is it possible to supply children with good reasons for subscribing to a specified set of moral standards, or is the attempt to persuade children that particular moral standards are justified necessarily an exercise in indoctrination?

Directive moral inquiry

This brings back into focus the second of the two widely entertained thoughts with which we began: that there is deep uncertainty about the requirements of morality and the reasons to comply with them. Plainly there is some truth in this thought. There are many standards in relation to which it is an open question whether universally-enlisting and penalty-endorsing subscription is justified. Some reasonable people subscribe to them in this way, others subscribe to them in less stringent ways, and still others do not subscribe to them at all. And, in the case of moral standards to which more or less everyone subscribes, there are various putative justifications for subscription whose soundness is a matter of rational dispute. Some reasonable people find them persuasive, others do not. Rational disagreement about the justificatory status of many moral standards, and about the soundness of many arguments for moral subscription, looks set to be a salient feature of our moral landscape for the foreseeable future.

But it would be premature to infer from this state of affairs that robustly justified moral standards are unavailable. From the fact that some moral standards have an uncertain justificatory status, it does not follow that all do; and from the fact that some arguments for moral subscription are dubious, it does not follow that all are. Perhaps, somewhere in the melee of controversial moral standards and arguments, there are at least some standards on which all are agreed and to which subscription is demonstrably justified.

This, I think, is just how things are. Within the reasonable plurality of moral standards there is an identifiable subset to which more or less everyone subscribes and for which the reasons to subscribe are compelling. There is a very broad consensus in society on some basic moral prohibitions (on stealing, cheating, causing harm, etc.) and prescriptions (to treat others fairly, help those in need, keep one's promises, etc.). And there is a familiar rational justification for those basic moral standards whose cogency is hard to dispute. The justification I have in mind is the one advanced by H.L.A. Hart (1961), G.J. Warnock (1971) and J.L. Mackie (1977), and more recently by David Copp (2009). It is, briefly, that moral standards are justified when their currency in society serves to ameliorate what Copp calls the 'problem of sociality', the ever-present risk in human social groups of breakdowns in cooperation and outbreaks of conflict. This risk is ever-present because of certain contingent but permanent features of the human condition: namely, our vulnerability to one another, our limited capacity for sympathy, and a limited supply of needed or wanted resources. If we were invulnerable to attack, or capable of infinite altruism, or if supplies of the things we want were unlimited, it may be that moral standards would be unnecessary; but, in the world in which we find ourselves, none of these conditions is satisfied. We each want more than we would have if the resources available were shared out equally. We are each vulnerable to attempts by others to deprive us of the resources in our possession, or to eliminate us from the competition for resources as yet unclaimed. And we are each capable of much but not unlimited concern for the welfare of others: when push comes to shove we tend to

prioritise our own interests and the interests of our loved ones. These three facts together give social groups an inherent instability; no matter how great, and how widely recognised, the advantages of social cooperation, the threat of conflict is an inescapable feature of communal life.

This threat is significantly reduced when members of social groups subscribe to cooperation-sustaining and conflict-averting standards of conduct. Such standards, writes Mackie, are 'ones whose central task is to protect the interests of persons other than the agent and which present themselves to an agent as checks on his natural inclinations or spontaneous tendencies to act' (Mackie, 1977, p.106). Crucially, for standards of this kind to be effective in ameliorating the problem of sociality, everyone must subscribe to them and in a way that is not easily overridden. If only some members of a social group elect to comply with rules prohibiting violence, deception and theft, they simply make themselves more vulnerable to exploitation and harm by those who elect not to comply; and if subscription to such rules is easily overridden by subscriptions and inclinations of other kinds, incidence of the prohibited forms of conduct will be only marginally reduced and the social group will remain unstable. So, to be effective in ameliorating the problem of sociality, subscription to the relevant standards of conduct must be both universally-enlisting and penalty-endorsing: we must each insist on the compliance of everyone else, accept few excuses for non-compliance, and stand ready to punish those whose conduct falls short. The kind of subscription needed, in other words, is moral subscription.

There is, then, a straightforward and robust justification for subscription to a set of basic moral standards, and the standards so justified are ones to which the great majority of us do in fact subscribe. All of us who live in social groups have an interest in averting breakdowns of cooperation and outbreaks of conflict, so we all have an interest in holding ourselves and each other to rules of conduct that sustain cooperation and peace. To help children understand this is to supply them with good reasons for subscribing to at least a subset of the moral standards current in society. It follows that directive moral education can be fully rational, insofar as it is restricted to endorsement of the problem-of-sociality justification for cooperation-sustaining and conflict-averting moral standards. Children can be educated for full moral commitment without recourse to indoctrination.

Two points are worth emphasising here. First, the foregoing argument does not imply that moral educators are entitled or obliged to give blanket endorsement to the prevailing moral code. The set of moral standards generally accepted in a society will usually include the ones needed to counteract the inherent instability of social groups, but they may also include some whose contribution to this end is negligible or non-existent. They may include, for example, rules prohibiting certain non-harmful sexual practices, such as masturbation and fornication. The mere fact that rules have found their way into the prevailing moral code of a society implies neither that there are good reasons for them, nor that children can legitimately be taught to think there are.

Second, convincing children that the problem-of-sociality justification for basic moral standards is sound does not involve persuading them to abandon other putative justifications for those standards. It is quite possible for standards to enjoy more than one kind of justification, and it may be that current rational disputes about some

putative justifications for moral subscription will eventually be settled in their favour. Moral educators can afford to be pedagogically agnostic about many moral standards and arguments and need not set about dislodging children's existing moral commitments and theories unless these directly contradict the content or justification of the cooperation-sustaining and conflict-averting moral code.

The latter point is a particularly important one for the moral education of children with religious commitments. Many religious traditions include distinctively theological justifications for basic moral standards, justifications to which children raised in those traditions may be firmly attached. Because such theological justifications are highly contentious, it would be inappropriate for moral educators to endorse them. For the same reason, it would be imprudent to assume that children currently persuaded by them will continue to find them persuasive throughout their lives. By engaging religious children in the sort of directive moral inquiry I have described we can furnish them with good reasons for moral subscription that supplement, rather than supplant, the reasons they think they already have, and that should sustain their commitment to basic moral standards if their religious convictions subsequently change.

Teaching moral standards

The solution to the practical problem with which we began, then, is that uncertainty about the content and justification of morality is not quite as deep as it may first appear. Moral educators are not impaled on the horns of an indoctrination-or-neutrality dilemma because not everything in the moral sphere is rationally unsettled. Let me conclude by identifying three classes of moral standards, distinguished by the strength of the arguments in their support, and saying something about the pedagogical approach appropriate to each.

Some moral standards, as we have just seen, are robustly justified: namely, those whose currency in society serves to ameliorate the problem of sociality. Standards of this kind should be taught in two ways. First, moral educators should aim to bring it about that children subscribe to these standards by means of praise and admonition, example and modelling, habituation and training. Second, they should aim to help children see that they have good reasons to subscribe, either by explicit instruction or by gently guiding the direction of classroom discussion. These two kinds of teaching – moral formation and directive moral inquiry – should be complementary and mutually reinforcing, though admonition for breaking a moral rule will not always be accompanied by reiteration of the reasons to obey it, and efforts to elucidate the rational justification for basic moral standards may go better when held apart a little from efforts to inculcate them.

Other moral standards are supported by justificatory arguments the soundness of which is a matter of reasonable disagreement among reasonable people. Standards in this category should be critically discussed in the classroom, but without any attempt by the teacher to bring it about that children subscribe to them, or to persuade children that they are, or are not, justified. That is to say, the pedagogical approach appropriate to these standards is nondirective moral inquiry.

Finally, there are some moral standards that are straightforwardly unjustified, in the sense that all arguments advanced in their support are demonstrably unsound. These standards should be subjected to critical scrutiny in the classroom with a view to bringing out the inadequacy of their supporting arguments. Like robustly justified moral standards, straightforwardly unjustified ones are fitting objects of directive teaching: pedagogical agnosticism is out of place when dealing with standards to which moral subscription is rationally untenable. At least some familiar standards of sexual morality belong to this class. I have, for example, argued in some detail elsewhere that none of the attempts to defend a moral prohibition on homosexual acts has rational merit and that moral educators have an obligation to bring that fact to light through a directive form of moral inquiry (Hand, 2007).

If it is true that many teachers find themselves at a loss to know what responsibility they bear for the moral education of children, and what means they have at their disposal for discharging that responsibility, then I hope the theory I have sketched offers them a way out of their predicament. Teachers can and should see themselves as moral educators of the children under their tutelage, can and should aim to inculcate basic moral standards and furnish children with good reasons for them, and can and should facilitate critical discussion and exploration of the gamut of standards of conduct to which human beings morally subscribe.

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