

Toward a Bold Agenda for Moral Education

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Volume 26, numéro 2, 2019

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1071434ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1071434ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Canadian Philosophy of Education Society

ISSN

2369-8659 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Chinnery, A. (2019). Toward a Bold Agenda for Moral Education. *Philosophical Inquiry in Education*, 26(2), 117–123. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1071434ar>

Résumé de l'article

In his 2006 essay, "Moral Education's Modest Agenda," Robin Barrow argues for a clearly bounded conception of morality; he presents the moral domain as concerned with moral principles, and moral education as the cultivation of moral understanding. Barrow rejects behaviourism, character education, values clarification, developmentalism, and what he calls "the insidious influence of political and moral correctness" as practices and ideas that are irrelevant and inappropriate for moral education. While I share some of Barrow's concerns about some of these approaches, I believe he over-restricts the scope of legitimately moral concerns and what educators ought to do in the name of moral education. In this paper, I make a case for a broader and bolder agenda for moral education, putting the question of what constitutes a human life (which Barrow takes to be a non-moral question) at the very heart of morality and moral education.

Toward a Bold Agenda for Moral Education

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In his 2006 essay, “Moral Education’s Modest Agenda,” Robin Barrow argues for a clearly bounded conception of morality; he presents the moral domain as concerned with moral principles, and moral education as the cultivation of moral understanding. Barrow rejects behaviourism, character education, values clarification, developmentalism, and what he calls “the insidious influence of political and moral correctness” as practices and ideas that are irrelevant and inappropriate for moral education. While I share some of Barrow’s concerns about some of these approaches, I believe he over-restricts the scope of legitimately moral concerns and what educators ought to do in the name of moral education. In this paper, I make a case for a broader and bolder agenda for moral education, putting the question of what constitutes a human life (which Barrow takes to be a non-moral question) at the very heart of morality and moral education.

In his 2006 essay, “Moral Education’s Modest Agenda,” which appeared in the inaugural issue of *Ethics & Education*, Robin Barrow argues for a clearly bounded conception of morality and moral education. He presents the moral domain as concerned with moral principles, and moral education as the cultivation of understanding of those principles. He rejects behaviourism, character education, values clarification, developmentalism, and what he calls “the insidious influence of political and moral correctness” (p. 13) as practices and ideas that are irrelevant and inappropriate for moral education. While I share some of Barrow’s concerns about some of these approaches, and depart from him on others, I believe that he over-restricts the scope of legitimately moral concerns and what educators ought to do in the name of moral education. So, in what follows, I want to make a case for a bolder agenda for moral education by claiming a space for the question of what constitutes a human life, which Barrow takes to be a non-moral question (p. 8), in moral theory and moral education.

First, however, a brief note on method. One of the differences between Barrow’s conception of moral theory and the conception I will be drawing on here is that Barrow’s work is in the tradition of ideal moral theory, in line with Plato, Kant, Rawls and others. Ideal theory seeks to provide a blueprint at a general abstract level for how things ought to be. Of course, ideal theorists are not naïve utopians; they acknowledge that the contingencies of real life—the circumstances of one’s birth, health, opportunities in life, and so on—create the less than ideal situations in which we must live. But the main point from an ideal theory perspective is that moral theory should start by articulating a vision of an ideal moral universe based on the principles of “freedom, fairness, respect for persons, truth and felicity” (Barrow, 2006, p. 10), and in which everyone does his or her fair share to uphold those principles. Then, from the ideal situation, one can draw conclusions about how one ought to act in the non-ideal circumstances of real human lives. As Barrow (2006) puts it,

Implicit in the distinction between a moral theory, which provides an ideal blueprint, and the practical questions of what I ought to do or may be permitted to do in a particular situation, is the point that by its nature a moral theory should be at a general abstract level. It ‘should’ be so, not just because as a matter of fact it is concerned with the ideal, but because the particular circumstances of time and place do of course make a difference to what in practice we ought to do or what may in fact be justified. ... Morality is defined in terms of the higher principles that ... particular rules draw upon” (p. 8).

However, there is more than one way of going about moral philosophy. In contrast to ideal theory, some scholars, such as Charles W. Mills, Amartya Sen, Colin Farrelly, and others argue that moral theory should start from the non-ideal contingencies of everyday life in order to build a conception of morality and the moral life that balances the ideal with the real. In other words, from a non-ideal perspective, moral philosophy should be about articulating a vision of the moral life that is both desirable and feasible. A third approach to moral philosophy can be found under the broad umbrella of Continental thought. In this line of thinking, we find the work of Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Blanchot, and others. I align much of my own thinking about ethics and moral education with these philosophers—especially Levinas—and one of the reasons I find their work compelling is that, as Simon Critchley (2001) puts it, Continental thought seems “closer to the grain and detail of human existence ... truer to the drama of life, to the stuff of human hopes and fears, and the many little woes and weals to which our flesh is prone” (pp. 9, 11). In other words, it doesn’t deny, smooth over, or attempt to solve the messiness of human life. However, in this paper, I will draw mainly on Cora Diamond, an American analytic philosopher, whose work is more in line with non-ideal moral theory.

In “The Importance of Being Human,” which appeared in David Cockburn’s edited volume, *Human Beings* (1991), Diamond makes a case for the concept ‘human being’ as central to ethics and moral theory. As Cockburn notes in his introduction to the collection, several of the philosophers in that volume, including Diamond, Christopher Cherry, and Raimond Gaita, “are united in thinking that the notion of a human being is of crucial importance in our thought. ... [and this claim] marks their views off from ways of thinking which have a strong hold in much contemporary philosophy” (p. 1).

Diamond begins her essay by outlining three arguments against taking the notion ‘human being’ as important to ethics and moral theory, the first of which, if I read Barrow correctly, is likely the stance that he would take. It goes roughly like this:

What makes us human beings is that we have certain properties, but these properties, making us members of a certain biological species, have no moral relevance. If, on the other hand, we define being human in terms which are not tied to biological classification, if (for example) we treat as the properties which make us human the capacities for reasoning or for self-consciousness, then indeed those capacities may be morally relevant, but if they are morally significant at all, they are significant whether they are the properties of a being who is a member of our species or not. And so it would be better to use a word like ‘person’ to mean a being that has these properties, to bring out the fact that not all human beings have them and that nonhuman beings conceivably might have them. (Diamond, 1991, p. 35).

Part of what is being objected to here is that if we include the concept ‘human being’ within the range of moral concepts, rather than only as an empirical or legal concept, we run the risk of a kind of speciesism that would prioritize human well-being over other moral goods. But, as we will see shortly, that is by no means a necessary outcome.

Now it is not that Barrow thinks there is no place in philosophy for thinking about what it is to be human. The second chapter of the most recent edition of *An Introduction to Philosophy of Education* (Barrow & Woods, 2006), for example, is devoted specifically to that idea. For Barrow, what sets human beings apart from all other creatures is that human beings are uniquely endowed with the capacity for reason and a distinctive kind of language. In his words:

It is [the] ability to formulate propositions that may be true, false, or imaginary, and by extension, to promise, imagine, and hypothesize, and the consequent ability to explain our world and to some extent predict and control it, that makes us who we are. There are other ways that one might try to define humans (e.g., by reference to a soul if one is religious, or in purely physiological terms if scientifically inclined), so I do not propose this as the definition of a human being. But it remains the case that this is the most striking unique feature of humans, and it is difficult to think of anything more powerful and important. (Barrow & Woods, 2006, p. 23)

Barrow's theory of what it means to be human, as he explains elsewhere, is an Aristotelian teleological view that focuses primarily on the capacity for understanding and the human mind as distinct from brain (2014, p. 132). But the key point for our purposes here is that, on Barrow's view, the question of what constitutes a human life is not itself a moral question (2006, p. 8). Admittedly, that claim gets just a brief mention in the "Modest Agenda" essay, and seems to have been made almost in passing, but it is a widely held view, and one that I think may overly constrain both moral theory and moral education. It goes without saying that not any old concept should be considered a moral concept, but in my view, the concept 'human being' is sufficiently morally salient to warrant further consideration.

Diamond also sketches two other arguments that have been mounted against taking 'human being' as a moral concept, one by Richard Rorty and the other by Annette Baier (1991, pp. 36-37). Rorty and Baier take different starting points from the argument I sketched above, and neither is worried about the risk of speciesism. For Rorty, the notion 'human being' is simply too expansive. He claims that moral concepts and duties belong to communities, and that what I owe my fellow Canadians or my colleagues at SFU ought to have more moral weight than what I owe to all human beings, and, as such, the notion 'human being' in and of itself has no moral significance (Diamond, 1991, p. 36). For Baier, on the other hand, the notion 'human being' is too narrow. She argues that our sphere of moral concern needs to extend to a wider and "widen-able" circle of beings, and for that reason, she rejects the concept 'human being' as having moral worth (Diamond, 1991, pp. 36-37).

To recap, then, contrary to many prominent philosophers, Diamond (1991) asserts that the simple fact of being human is morally salient. As she puts it, "merely being human has a role in moral thought, a role quite different from that of properties like sentience or rationality or the capacity for moral personality" (p. 59). It is important to note that she is not saying that being human is the most important consideration in morality, nor that it necessarily outweighs other moral concerns, such as the moral treatment of non-human animals or our moral responsibilities to the environment. In her words, "To treat the notion of human beings as important in moral thought, as I have, is not to treat animals as outside the boundaries of moral concern, because it is not any kind of attempt to determine the limits of moral concern" (p. 59). But she is saying that simply recognizing that a being is a *human being* has implications for how we ought to treat that being.

Diamond's conception of human being is not about setting out a list of substantive and uniquely human qualities, traits or capacities. Rather, she says, a human being is simply "someone who has a human

life to lead, as do I; someone whose fate is a human fate, as is mine” (1991, p. 59). Recognition of another being as a human being is not—as it is for Kant—recognition of her or his rational autonomy. Instead, for Diamond, what enables us to recognize the other as a human being is an act of imagination wherein we see the other as a “fellow passenger” from childhood to the grave (p. 49), with no other requisite attributes.

When asked by a colleague what it means to say of someone with severe mental disabilities¹ that he or she has a human life to lead, Diamond insisted that having a human life to lead does not mean having a life in which distinctively human capacities, such as reason, or the capacity to formulate propositions, or to create and pursue a vision of the good life for oneself, are exercised: “Someone may be deprived, for part or all of his life, of distinctively human capacities... . A human life *without* the exercise of those capacities is *his* human life. The one human life he is given has that terrible deprivation; that, in his case, is what his having a human life to lead has been. We may perfectly well think of that as a particularly terrible human fate” (p. 59 fn 48). In other words, on Diamond’s view, with which I concur, whether a particular human life is characterized by intellectual acumen or profound mental disability; whether it is the life of an Olympian athlete or a life confined to a hospital bed, the simple fact that the other is a being with a human life to lead, and whose fate is a human fate, is morally relevant. And, I would add, regardless of how incomprehensible we may find it, the life and fate of a human being with severe mental disabilities is a life and fate that comes with significant moral obligations for the rest of us.

I realize that Diamond’s minimal conception of human being as “someone who has a human life to lead, as do I; someone whose fate is a human fate, as is mine” (1991, p. 59) may seem rather circular, unsatisfying, and not capable of getting us anywhere philosophically. But I think she is onto something, and I will say more below about what her conception makes both possible and obligatory in moral theory and the moral life. I will also consider how Diamond’s argument for the concept ‘human being’ as a moral concept might help us to think about moral education beyond the understanding of moral principles which, I would argue, while important, is not the only—or perhaps even the main—thing moral education should be about.

For me, Diamond’s argument is strongest when viewed from the weakest end. Let me explain what I mean. As I was contemplating her claim, the inscription on Josiah Wedgwood’s 1787 anti-slavery medallion came to mind. At the centre of the medallion is the image of a Black man on bended knee, bound in shackles and chains. Surrounding the image is the inscription, “Am I not a man and a brother?” That question, “Am I not a man and a brother?”, is an appeal that pierces to the heart of our own humanity. It comes to us not as an empirical question, nor a legal one, but rather as a deeply moral question that calls us to respond, “Yes, I recognize you as a man. I recognize you as someone who has a human life to lead, as do I, and whose fate is a human fate, as is mine.”

Primo Levi’s firsthand account of surviving Auschwitz, *If This is a Man*, is another example of the appeal to the concept ‘human being’ as a deeply moral concept in and of itself. In both instances, the appeal is not an appeal to moral principles of justice or fairness, or even to respect for persons if the category ‘person’ is reserved for those with particular traits and capacities. Rather, it is an appeal to the simple fact of our shared humanity. In the face of these appeals, “Am I not a man?” and “If This is a Man,” I can’t help thinking that when we remove the question of what constitutes a human life from the domain of the moral, we are left with a significantly flattened view of morality and the moral life. There

¹ In Diamond’s chapter and her correspondence with colleagues, the term used is “severely retarded person,” but I have changed the terminology here to reflect current usage.

is something deeply troubling about seeing the suffering of the slave or prisoner of Auschwitz primarily as instances of injustice. Now I am sure that most moral philosophers would argue that principles aren't as cold and lifeless as they are sometimes made out to be, and that, properly understood, the principle of justice would lead one to conclude that slavery and genocide are serious moral wrongs. As Barrow (2006) puts it, "While formal understanding does nothing to prevent some individuals from doing serious wrong, it is nonetheless the case that some socially and morally undesirable behavior is the product of people not really knowing what they should be doing in particular situations because they do not understand how morality works—what it is, or how it is constituted" (p. 7). Thus, for Barrow, the proper purview and purpose of moral education is to foster moral understanding, not the long list of other educational, social, and political aims that are often conducted in its name. Let us turn, then, to a brief discussion of moral education.

In his 2007 *Introduction to Moral Philosophy and Moral Education* Barrow outlines seven essential features of moral education, which I have summarized as follows:²

1. Students need to be taught the meaning and nature of morality (i.e., the first-order moral principles of freedom, fairness, well-being, respect, and truth) and the difference between morality, religion, law, social values, customs, etc.
2. Students need to be taught that a moral person is one who acts in accordance with the first-order principles because of their inherent value, not for praise or any other extrinsic reason.
3. Students need to be shown that there are a number of second-order principles (e.g., showing tolerance, defending freedom of speech, not stealing or cheating, cultivating friendship, not treating people as means, etc.) that can be derived by reasoning from the first-order principles. These second-order principles are generally good and desirable, though not absolute, so students must also develop an understanding of how to weigh competing moral demands.
4. In addition to coming to understand the likely consequences of various moral actions, students need to be shown the importance of conceptual work and conceptual clarity in moral discussion and decision-making.
5. Teachers (and adults in general) need to exemplify, draw attention to, and encourage various moral dispositions (e.g., tolerance and kindness) so students come to care about morality itself and about becoming a moral person. This cultivation of care for morality is the affective side of moral education that complements moral understanding.
6. Related to points 1 and 3 above, students need to learn to distinguish (by the process of reasoning) between actions and issues that are properly considered moral and those that are not (e.g., actions that may be desirable, but are not moral *per se*, or undesirable, but not immoral).
7. Finally, students need to be taught the role of intention in morality and the moral life—specifically, that moral acts are those acts undertaken with the intention of acting on moral principle and not for other reasons, regardless of whether the act ultimately has morally desirable or undesirable results. (pp. 174-176)

² For a fuller description, see Barrow, 2007, pp. 174-176.

In Barrow's words, "To promote understanding of [these] seven points...is one and the same thing as to provide moral understanding," which in turn is the essence of moral education (p. 176). He acknowledges that there is no guarantee that those who possess moral understanding will always act morally, but he insists that without such understanding, even if one acts in morally desirable ways, one cannot properly be said to be acting morally because moral action requires recognizing the moral (i.e., principled) obligation behind the action (p. 176).

While Barrow's conception of moral education flows directly from his conception of morality and moral theory, accepting Diamond's argument for expanding the domain of morality and moral theory to include the concept 'human being' and the question of what constitutes a human life does not lead to a specific approach to moral education. What it does do, however, is tilt moral education away from an emphasis on moral understanding and toward the cultivation of moral perception and moral imagination. This latter focus is compatible with a number of approaches to moral education including, but not limited to, Nel Noddings' (2013) ethics of care and moral education as learning to "meet the other morally"; Martha Nussbaum's (1990) argument for the potential of literature to cultivate the moral imagination; and Lawrence Blum's (1994) work on moral perception and particularity. Noddings, Nussbaum, and Blum all base their moral thought on a conception of human beings as fundamentally vulnerable and dependent creatures (a conception I also share), in contrast to the prevailing conception that emphasizes the uniquely human capacities of reason and autonomy. For Noddings, Nussbaum, Blum, et al., moral principles and moral reasoning have a place in moral theory and the moral life, but they are neither the primary source of moral motivation nor ought they to be the primary focus of moral education. Rather, on their account, moral education should be about fostering the capacity to perceive the suffering and well-being of others as our own moral concern and responsibility, before and beyond any rational calculus. And I would add that we should focus especially on our moral responsibility for the most vulnerable among us—for those "fellow passengers to the grave," as Diamond (1991) would call them, whose human lives may lie at the furthest margins of our imagination, and who may stretch, or even exceed, our capacity for sympathy and empathy.

Now it may turn out that the difference between Barrow's argument for moral understanding as the essence of moral education and the approach I support, which highlights moral perception and the moral imagination, is one of emphasis rather than incompatibility. I am not suggesting that moral principles and reasoning aren't important, but I am not convinced that they ultimately take us where we need to go in moral theory and moral education. So, where Barrow argues for a modest agenda for moral education, I want to press for a bolder agenda that puts the question of what constitutes a human life—in all its weakness, messiness, and unpredictability—at the centre. There is, of course, much more that needs to be said about all of this, but that will have to wait for another day. For now, let me close by extending my sincere thanks to Robin Barrow for his important body of scholarship on moral philosophy and moral education, and for the ways in which his incisive thinking will continue to push and challenge all of us to think deeply about what matters most in education.

Acknowledgments

An earlier version of this paper was presented at *Philosophical Issues in Education: A Symposium in Honour of Dr. Robin Barrow*, held at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, BC on November 2, 2018.

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