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## The Role of Ethics in the Education for Sustainable Development of Man

*Abstract:* In the paper the author deals with the increasingly important topic of ecology with reference to the sustainable development of man in connection to the issue of ethics and moral awareness. What is their relationship? Is a sustainable development of man without a well-developed individual moral consciousness possible at all?

*Key words:* sustainable development, moral awareness, vantage point, moral development, psychological development, conscience maintenance.

*Povzetek:* **Etika v odnosu do izobraževanja za trajnostni razvoj človeka**

Avtorica v članku obravnava vse bolj perečo tematiko ekologije in v tej povezavi trajnostnega razvoja človeka z vprašanjem etike in moralne zavesti. Kakšna je njuna povezava, je trajnostni razvoj sploh mogoč brez razvite posameznikove moralne zavesti?

*Ključne besede:* trajnostni razvoj, moralna zavest, izhodiščna točka, moralni razvoj, psihološki razvoj, upoštevanje vesti

### 1. Introduction

Sustainable development is »development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs« (Brundtland Report, the United Nations Commission on Environmental and Development conference).

The mere expression, which has now been used in every sphere of our life, may sound as a »metafix« that will unite everybody from the profit-minded industrialist and risk-minimising farmer to the equity-seeking social worker, the policy maker, the pollution-concerned individuals, etc. As it has become more important many people have tried to define sustainable development to suit their own purposes.

Nevertheless, it is a *process of change* in which core components of society (resource use, investment, technologies, institutions, consumption patterns) should come to operate in greater harmony.

The term itself attracts many supporters, but they also make sustainable development a highly contestable concept.

The core principles also beg many unresolved political questions. For example, what are basic needs? Should they reflect the needs of citizens in the USA or India or Slovenia maybe? How far will the living standards of rich industrialised nations have to be adjusted to achieve sustainable consumption patterns?

Different answers to these questions produce conflicting interpretations of sustainable development.

But nevertheless, a central feature of sustainable development as a policy paradigm is that it shifts the terms of debate from traditional environmentalism, with its primary focus on environmental protection, to the notion of sustainability, which requires a much more *complex process of social, economic and environmental priorities*. Our social capital consists also of the skills and knowledge and this is the topic I am referring to in this paper. It is about how to »teach« the child/adult to become aware of the preciousness of life.

Hence, the problem of sustainability and sustainable development should refer to the moral awareness of the individual, which has been neglected far too often when speaking about sustainability. How can we change the world if we don't start changing ourselves first? Therefore, the next question arises: Is proper moral development the same for all human beings? Are there moral beliefs, values, judgements and behaviour which should be characteristics of all human beings at different stages of life like psychological development for all human beings?

It seems clear enough that moral development presupposes a considerable measure of psychological development. After all, we do not suppose that a one-year-old can engage in abstract moral reasoning. Therefore, moral development is impossible without psychological development.

According to Lawrence Kohlberg's account of moral development there are three levels of moral development, each having two stages. Each individual moves sequentially from one stage to the next without ever skipping any. It is not the claim that all must advance to the highest level – stage 6, a person may plateau at stage 4 or 5.

#### *Level A. Preconventional*

Stage 1: *The stage of punishment and obedience*. One obeys in order to avoid being punished. One's only reason for doing what is right is to avoid punishment.

Stage 2: *The stage of individual instrumental purpose and exchange*. The only reason to do what is right is to advance one's own interests. (Conflicts are to be resolved through instrumental exchange of services)

#### *Level B. Conventional*

Stage 3: *The stage of mutual interpersonal expectations, relationships and conformity*. The concerns of one's group can take primacy over one's own interest. Doing what is right means living up to the expectations of those who are close to one. (One wants the approval of one's group).

Stage 4: *The stage of social system and conscience maintenance.* One is loyal to one's social institutions. One does what is right in order to maintain one's institutions.

*Level C. Postconventional and principled level*

Stage 5: *The stage of prior rights and social contract.* There is a rational perspective according to which there are values and rights – such as life and liberty – which do not owe their importance to social institutions, and must be upheld in any society. The laws and duties to society are based upon the ideal of the greatest good for the greatest number. One does what is right because as a rational creature one is obliged to abide by the precepts, which embrace life and liberty, to which one had otherwise agreed.

Stage 6: *The stage of universal ethical principles.* There are universal ethical principles which take priority over all legal and other institutional obligations. One does what is right because as a rational creature one grasps the validity of these principles and is committed to following them (Thomas 1991, 464–475).

## 2. Implications for education

According to W.C. Crain, Kohlberg would like to see people advance to the highest possible stage of moral thought. The best possible society would contain individuals who not only understand the need for social order (stage 4) but can entertain visions of universal principles, such as justice and liberty (stage 6).

Kolberg maintains that all stage 6 people just »see« that life is always more valuable than property. By just a short thought about utilitarianism this judgement fails completely.

Let us bring out an important difference between the claims concerning moral reasoning on behalf of the cognitive skills of Stages 5 and 6 on the one hand, and stages 1 through 4, on the other.

The stages 5 and 6 are claimed to have substantive moral content, by contrast, the cognitive skills of earlier stages are not claimed to have any substantive moral content. From stages 1 through 4 people identify with the interests and values of others. With these stages, there are no restrictions whatsoever on what the objects of these interests and values can be. So, from a stage 4 perspective, a society which seeks to preserve its homogeneity at the expense of minority ethnic groups is just as good as a society which endeavours to treat all people equally, regardless of their ethnical background? Therefore, proper moral development for children in either society would be to embrace (at stage 4) the interests and values of their own society because the children identify with members of their society.

Whereas with lower stages life and liberty are negotiable, they became non-negotiable at stage 5. How should people move from lower to upper stages, sta-

ge 5, for example? Kohlberg stresses out that with sufficient cognitive skills a person comes to see that summarily restricting the liberty of others or depriving them of their life is morally wrong.

Anyway Kohlberg's model is not to be taken literally. For those at stage 4, there are no proper moral values to embrace – only the values of one's society. Just think of the Nazi Germany; people can be at stage 4 cognitively and yet evil human beings.

Accordingly, we cannot talk about *moral development completely independent of content*. And also, cognitive and moral development are not as parallel or isomorphic as Kohlberg would like to think. And as Lawrence Thomas remarks: »According to Aristotle, moral training is indispensable to moral development. A firm disposition to do what is right is necessary for having a good moral character. And to do what is right is acquired only with the passing of time.«

It would seem that there can be no moral development in the absence of some substantive content about right and wrong. And here we have come to the notion of Gardner's moral intelligence or the capacity to understand right from wrong, which is interlaced with concrete cultural, religious and values systems. Or as Stanko Gerjolj puts it in his article 'The Relevance of Moral Intelligence in Educational processes': »The Moral intelligence includes the spread of metacognition or rather metaworking. Moral meta-working of a person forces the person to the formation of intercultural interreligious or intersystemic values synthesis, it demands consideration and respect of differences and stimulates to the search for a path for creative coexistence.« And moral intelligence leans here on the consideration of the preventative and curative role of authority.

Without moral training, moral development seems to be absolutely impossible. And Kohlberg's theory is not incompatible with such training.

But how can one promote moral development? How should this be implemented into our educational system or school curricula?

We all know that when children listen to adults' moral judgments, the resulting change is slight. This is what Kohlberg might have expected, for he believes that if children are to reorganize their thinking, they must be more active. Therefore Kohlberg encouraged his student Moshe Blatt to lead discussion groups in which children had a chance to grapple actively with moral issues. Blatt presented moral dilemmas which engaged the classes in a good deal of heated debate. He tried to leave much of the discussion to the children themselves. He stepped in only to summarize, clarify, and sometimes present a view himself. He encouraged arguments that were one stage above those of most of the class.

In essence, he tried to implement one of Kohlberg's main ideas on how children move through the stages. They do so by encountering views which challenge their thinking and stimulate them to formulate better arguments.

Blatt began a typical discussion by telling a story about a man named Mr. Jones who had a seriously injured son and wanted to rush him to the hospital. Mr. Jones had no car, so he approached a stranger, told him about the situation, and asked to borrow his car. The stranger, however, refused, saying he had an important

appointment to keep. So Mr. Jones took the car by force. Blatt then asked whether Mr. Jones should have done that.

In the discussion that followed, one child, Student B, felt that Mr. Jones had a good cause for taking the car and also believed that the stranger could be charged with murder if the son died. Student C pointed out that the stranger violated no law. Student B still felt that the stranger's behavior was somehow wrong, even though he now realized that it was not legally wrong. Thus, Student B was in a kind of conflict. He had a sense of the wrongness of the stranger's behavior, but he could not articulate this sense in terms that would meet the objection. He was challenged to think about the problem more deeply. Blatt said, was not legally wrong, but morally wrong.

In so doing, he might have robbed Student B of the chance to formulate spontaneously his own position. He might have done better to ask a question or to simply clarify the student's conflict (e.g. »So it's not legally wrong, but you still have a sense that, it's somehow wrong«). In any case, it seems clear that part of this discussion was valuable for this student. Since he himself struggled to formulate a distinction that could handle the objection, he could fully appreciate and assimilate a new view that he was looking for.

The Kohlberg-Blatt method of inducing cognitive conflict exemplifies Piaget's equilibration model. The child takes one view, becomes confused by discrepant information, and then resolves the confusion by forming a more advanced and comprehensive position. The method is also the dialectic process of Socratic teaching. The students give a view, the teacher asks questions which get them to see the inadequacies of their views, and they are then motivated to formulate better positions. Blatt found that over half the students moved up one full stage after the 12 weeks.

Although Kohlberg remains committed to the cognitive-conflict model of change, he has also become interested in other strategies. One is the »just Community« approach. Here the focus is not the individuals but groups. Students are encouraged »to think critically, to discuss assumptions, and when they feel it is necessary, they challenge the teacher's suggestions«. Thus, moral development remains a product of the students' own thinking (Crain 1985, 118–136).

### 3. Evaluation

Although being criticized by many (C. Gilligan claims that his theory is sex-biased), Kohlberg, a follower of Piaget, has offered a new, more detailed stage sequence for moral thinking. Whereas Piaget basically found two stages of moral thinking, the second of which emerges in early adolescence, Kohlberg has uncovered additional stages which develop well into adolescence and adulthood. He has suggested that some people even reach a postconventional level of moral thinking where they no longer accept their own society as given but think reflectively and autonomously about what a good society should be.

The suggestion of a postconventional morality is unusual in the social sciences. Perhaps it took a cognitive developmentalist list to suggest such a thing. For whe-

reas most social scientists have been impressed by the ways in which societies mold and shape children's thinking, cognitive-developmentalists are more impressed by the capacities for independent thought.

If children engage in enough independent thinking, they will eventually begin to formulate conceptions of rights, values, and principles by which they evaluate existing social arrangements. Perhaps some will even advance to the kinds of thinking that characterize some of the great moral leaders and philosophers who have at times advocated civil disobedience in the name of universal ethical principles.

Accordingly, his suggestions and findings should be implied in our approach to the school curricula, taking into account that the traditional notion of intelligence, based on IQ intelligence is far too limited and that Gardner's eight different intelligences (including moral intelligence) should be considered for a broader range of human potential in children and adults.

Nevertheless, whatever criticisms and questions we might have, there is no doubt that Kohlberg's accomplishment is great. He has studied the development of moral reasoning as it might work its way toward the thinking of the great moral philosophers. So, although few people may ever begin to think about moral issues like Socrates or Kant, Kohlberg has nonetheless provided us with a challenging vision of what development might be.

Teachers devote a lot of their time to make pupils achieve a certain stage of intellectual knowledge and are not always aware of the influence they (can) have on the moral growth of the pupils. Together with the parents they participate in moulding pupils' characters and therefore develop pupils' moral awareness. Not only cognitive side of the pupils but also their affective part should be taken into account in the school curricula.

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