

The Concept of Moral Responsibility in the Philosophy of Education

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Abstract:- The concept of moral responsibility in the philosophy of education is a multifaceted subject and its content allows us to answer the question: How do we have to shape the future of our society? The answer to this question in the field of philosophy of education sounds like the following Imperative: We have to shape the future of society through the cultivation of morally responsible individuals.

Keywords: free will, individual development, moral responsibility, problem of manipulation, social norms, Socratic self-reflection.

1. Introduction

In the field of the philosophy of education, it is becoming increasingly relevant to discuss the moral dimensions of teaching and learning. The concept of moral responsibility plays a crucial role in this discourse. The purpose of this research is to evaluate the importance of integrating the concept of moral responsibility into the philosophy of education and to study what role this philosophical perspective can play in shaping the philosophy of education for the future.

The 21st century has brought significant educational changes in Europe, which have altered the content of education and created a new concept upon which the main educational activities taking place today are based.

Each of these changes has its authentic meaning in the stream of changes, but among them, we can still distinguish those that essentially define the educational landscape today.

Before we delve directly into the moral discourse of the philosophy of education, it is important to outline these changes and, through them, determine how we understand the word "education" in the 21st century. Within this understanding, we should lead the process of shaping the society of the future in such a way as to place the concept of moral responsibility at the center of attention for the actors operating in this field.

The first important change, which is highly relevant today, is the integration of technology in education. The rapid advancement of technology has had a revolutionary effect on education, and today it seems that "everything takes the form of a technological game" (Marcuse, 1991, p. 81). Teaching methods, forms of student engagement, and access to information are just a few aspects that have been transformed into a whole new dimension by technology. This has raised several ethical issues and put the question of moral responsibility at the forefront.

Just putting the issue on the agenda was not enough. Blended learning, the STEM education model, competency-based learning, lifelong learning opportunities, inclusion and diversity, quality assurance framework, and global perspective are the list of changes, the implementation of which in today's philosophy of education sounds like an imperative call to understand the concept of moral responsibility from new perspectives.

Responsibility is the element of existence that reflects a person's ability to function rationally. It determines whether a person can cope with the growing needs of society, fulfill obligations, or act without the need for another authorized person or supervisor.

Moral responsibility is not only a static duty but also a dynamic process that includes critical thinking, reflection, and active participation in public life. Within this process, it is important to develop responsiveness in individuals, which is closely related to the concepts of free will, autonomy, and duty.

Kant's ethics is based on the principle of duty. According to Kant, moral actions can be considered rational when guided by universal principles. He believed that individuals have an inherent moral responsibility to act in accordance with these universal laws, regardless of personal desires or consequences. For Kant, moral responsibility rests on the autonomy of moral agents who can recognize and adhere to moral laws through reason.

While speaking about moral responsibility, it is impossible to avoid the issue of free will, which is closely related to a significant problem in the field of philosophy of education, namely the problem of manipulation (Haji I., Cuypers S., 2012). To address this issue in education, it is crucial to adopt an approach where students are viewed as moral agents rather than passive recipients of knowledge or information influenced solely by educators. According to Dewey's ideas, educational institutions should not merely prepare students for life; instead, the educational process itself is a vital part of real-life experience where students' free will can thrive. Therefore, we must move away from the "Idol of the Theatre"¹ mentality that views education as mere preparation disconnected from lived experience.

Based on the discussion above, it might appear that we are outlining ideals towards which educational theories and practices consistently aspire. However, to implement these ideals effectively, it is essential to outline the key concepts whose introduction into educational discourse will enable us to achieve the result we discussed earlier: the cultivation of morally responsible individuals.

The three main ideas that "work" on the field of philosophy of education and can be utilized to implement the concept of moral responsibility are free will, individual development, and social norms.

Free will stands as the central and universal concept². Meanwhile, the concepts of individual development and social norms perpetually conflict with each other. Throughout historical development, whichever idea gained prominence in this confrontation has shaped discussions in education. Within the philosophy of education, some authors prioritize individual freedom as the primary educational goal, while others oppose this view, seeing education as essential for preserving social norms and ensuring societal cohesion.

According to Paolo Freire, education serves either to integrate the younger generation into the logic of the current system, fostering conformity, or as a practice of freedom (Dimitriadis G., Kamberellis J., 2020). There is no third option. Consequently, we must choose between these two ideas and adjust educational theory and practice accordingly.

John Dewey's theory of education can be summarized by the central thesis that education is not merely preparation for life; rather, education itself constitutes life. Within this framework, the student is viewed as an individual, and the central focus of educational discourse is the individualization of educational processes. In Dewey's concept, individual freedom emerges as a fundamental idea that shapes the primary means of action.

Kant's ethics are rooted in the notion that an action's value should derive not from fulfilling personal desires but from fulfilling one's duty. It is essential to instill in youth a love for others and subsequently promote adherence to universal civic principles. While Kant acknowledges the importance of children benefiting from the common good, this might suggest a preference for the social aspect of education in the debate mentioned earlier. However, this interpretation misrepresents Kantian doctrine.

In Kant's theory, one crucial concept that underpins his ethics is the transcendental subject. How we interpret this concept shapes our understanding of Kantian ethics itself. The transcendental subject denotes a reality distinct from phenomenal reality—it is an intersubjective phenomenon that lies beyond individual subjectivity, forming an objective basis. From this objectivity arises the moral law.

¹ The "Idol of the Theatre" is one of the four "Idols" named by Francis Bacon in his *Novum Organum*, published in 1620. These idols represent various types of errors in human thinking that hinder scientific research and the search for truth. The "Theatrical Idol" specifically derives from scientific theories accepted without question, which resemble theatrical plays in their deceptive nature. Bacon criticized the tendency to adhere rigidly to established doctrines and theories and urged thinkers to adopt a more critical and empirical approach to knowledge.

² Just as in Neoplatonism, the idea of goodness stood hierarchically above the idea of beauty and truth, at the top of the so-called pyramid.

Alongside the transcendental subject and the moral law, the concept of freedom forms a trivium. Examining them together helps us better understand the significance Kant attributed to each. In this framework, the moral law functions as the voice of my rational self. We comprehend it through intersubjectivity, which represents a kind of universal personhood behind each individual. Freedom, then, is expressed in listening to and obeying this moral law.

It may seem paradoxical to view freedom as obedience to the moral law, as obedience and freedom are often seen as opposing concepts. However, Kant's connection of these ideas can be understood more clearly by considering the perspective of the Prominent Georgian philosopher Merab Mamardashvili. Mamardashvili's exploration of freedom is deeply intertwined with his broader philosophical inquiry into consciousness, self-awareness, and authenticity. His approach emphasizes both the inner and outer dimensions of human existence, drawing inspiration from Descartes and advocating for philosophical meditation and introspection as pathways to clarity of thought and inner freedom. According to Mamardashvili, by engaging in deep, reflective thinking, individuals can liberate themselves from illusions and misconceptions (Mamardashvili, 2022). Similarly, Kantian freedom does not imply acting on personal whims and desires without restraint. Instead, it recognizes humans as "Animal Rationale" implying a responsibility to exercise reason. True freedom, according to Kant, lies in taking responsibility for oneself—listening to one's rational self and obeying it because it represents the highest aspect of our nature. Hence, Kant argues that free will and the will governed by the moral law are essentially the same (Kant, 2020).

Kant's theory offers a key to resolving the conflict between individual freedom and social norms in education. Moral responsibility serves as a concept that strikes a balance between these two ideals. It manifests individual freedom, which, when harmonized with social norms, becomes a duty to heed the call from the transcendental subject and implement it in social reality.

Based on that view, the answer to the question of how to lead the process of forming the society of the future can be summarized as follows:

The process of forming the society of the future should be carried out only through the education of morally responsible individuals.

However, another crucial question arises: how can we achieve this?

As one of the world's most renowned futurologists, Alvin Toffler, would argue, the new education must teach individuals how to classify and re-classify information, assess its accuracy, adapt categories as needed, shift between concrete and abstract thinking, and approach problems from new perspectives—essentially, how to teach oneself (Toffler, 1970, ch. 18).

On May 17, 2024, a study on student involvement in moral education was published in the journal "Educational Administration: Theory and Practice". The study explores the necessity of moral development in universities and the interrelationship between morality and education. It underscores the influential role of teachers and lecturers in shaping students' moral identities. According to the research, students' moral development is particularly significant during the early university years, highlighting the crucial role of moral education in higher education. The findings suggest that moral education should be considered as fundamental as academic teaching and research within university education.

The study concludes that "Education is not only about imparting knowledge; it also includes developing the moral qualities of students, which is a paramount goal of education. Morality is as crucial as material wealth for the development of a nation. It provides a potent spiritual force and is a vital component of human civilization and its value system" (Bing, 2024:1).

In her book *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (2003), Martha Nussbaum passionately discusses moral development in education. She argues that modern education should not solely focus on imparting knowledge and skills but should also prioritize the cultivation of moral values and ethical reasoning.

Nussbaum emphasizes that education plays a pivotal role in shaping responsible individuals who embody the core values essential to global citizenship.

The central concept in Martha Nussbaum's work is "cultivation," emphasizing the skills that need to be nurtured in individuals. She identifies several critical skills that are particularly relevant today: critical thinking, empathy, imagination, moral reasoning, and the ability to engage in ethical deliberation.

Essentially, the mentioned group of skills can be categorized into three main fields that educational institutions today need to focus on developing: Socratic self-reflection, global citizenship, and narrative imagination.

The concept of narrative imagination suggests that students should be encouraged to imagine themselves in other people's conditions in specific situations, allowing them to try out different perspectives and experiences. Through this process, students develop empathy and understanding, which are crucial for moral development.

In the article "The Moral Demands of Democratic Education in the 21st Century: Cosmopolitanism and Critical Reflection of Ideals" (2015), Professor Devrim Badamci of Leiden University criticizes Martha Nussbaum's three-faceted system in education, suggesting that there are actually only two principles: Socratic self-reflection and global citizenship. I agree with this division because Socratic self-reflection encompasses what Nussbaum refers to as narrative imagination. Similarly, the concept of global citizenship inherently includes the development of empathy.

Returning to Martha Nussbaum, she believes that the most important value educational institutions can impart to students today is Socratic reasoning and questioning techniques. Students should be able to use their independent minds critically and reflectively in all aspects. Autonomy in the modern world means investigating ideas and information from various "authorities" around us and questioning them rather than accepting them unconditionally. For Socrates, truth was accessible to all citizens capable of reasoning. Education should refine this reasoning ability and make it the main principle for navigating the "information jungle" of the 21st century. In other words, we need to help people develop the ability to "go beyond the existing program and find new, creative, disruptive, and unexpected ways" (Hofstadter, 2011:12).

From the discussion above, it follows that developing personal responsibility is a crucial goal in the philosophy of education today. As stated, "the main task in this field is the formation of individuals who can proactively manage their own futures" (Zakariadze, A., 2021:476).

This concept pertains to individuals recognizing their own capabilities and cultivating their ability to take action. In the discourse of the philosophy of education, fostering the development of personal moral responsibility entails encouraging students to acknowledge the consequences of their actions and empowering them to make rational decisions.

An emphasis on personal moral responsibility may prioritize individualism over public values and collective responsibility. Critics such as Glenn Loury, Jonathan Haidt, Michael Rectenwald, and others argue that this focus could undermine the social cohesion necessary for a functioning society. In other words, the conflict between personal development and social norms, which has been discussed extensively, should not be resolved by favoring one over the other, potentially creating a gap between these dichotomous concepts again.

However, the concept discussed above, rooted in Kant's ethical framework, aims for a balance between social and individual development. It requires proper implementation in educational discourse so that moral responsibility is understood as foundational to personal development oriented towards universal benevolence and social unity.

In the field of education, students, parents, teachers, leaders, and policymakers often create and accept responsibility for their actions without fully understanding its nature. Barbara Stengel, in her 2023 book *Accountability: Philosophy of Education in Practice*, argues that every educational interaction invites all participants to consider their responsibility. Accountability serves as a goal for students, a guiding principle for teacher practices, and a foundational concept for leaders and policymakers.

Stengel utilizes a critical pragmatist framework to explore the concept of responsibility, demonstrating that a deeper focus on responsibility enhances understanding and appreciation of diversity, equity, and the common

good. As discussed earlier in this article, achieving a balance between social norms and individual development is achievable through the recognition of moral responsibility.

Stengel suggests a fundamental examination of the moral dimensions of teaching and learning, emphasizing its dynamic and evolving nature. She integrates philosophical discussions on responsibility with the lived experiences of students, teachers, and administrators. The core message of the author encourages educators to take responsibility for their own lives and the lives of their students, fostering individual well-being within society.

2. Conclusion

In the evolving landscape of education, the concept of moral responsibility emerges as a pivotal framework for cultivating individuals who are not only academically proficient but also ethically aware and socially engaged. Kant's theory, emphasizing the autonomy of moral agents and the duty to act according to universal moral laws, provides a key to balancing social norms and individual development. Barbara Stengel's exploration of accountability underscores the transformative potential of integrating responsibility into educational practices. By embracing moral responsibility grounded in Kantian ethics, educators and policymakers can foster a learning environment that nurtures critical thinking, empathy, and civic engagement among students. This approach not only prepares students for personal success but also equips them to contribute meaningfully to a cohesive and equitable society. As we navigate the complexities of modern education, prioritizing moral responsibility offers a pathway to harmonize individual development with societal well-being, ensuring a future where education serves as a beacon of ethical leadership and social progress.

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