

Moral Character Education after COVID-19: An Interview

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Article abstract

This interview piece addresses the following questions: Does the COVID-19 pandemic offer any lessons for moral character education? Do the experiences of students, educators, and communities during the pandemic illustrate the importance of aspects of character education that may have been known but taken for granted? The three authors bring to this the perspectives of a philosopher of moral psychology and education (Curren, the interviewer), a clinical psychologist and co-founder of self-determination theory (SDT), a systematic approach in the psychology of motivation, development, and well-being (Ryan); and a moral theorist focused on mindfulness and virtue (Barber).

Moral Character Education after COVID-19: An Interview

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This interview piece addresses the following questions: Does the COVID-19 pandemic offer any lessons for moral character education? Do the experiences of students, educators, and communities during the pandemic illustrate the importance of aspects of character education that may have been known but taken for granted? The three authors bring to this the perspectives of a philosopher of moral psychology and education (Curren, the interviewer), a clinical psychologist and co-founder of self-determination theory (SDT), a systematic approach in the psychology of motivation, development, and well-being (Ryan); and a moral theorist focused on mindfulness and virtue (Barber).

Introduction

Philosophers of character education distinguish between education in moral character and education in intellectual character, but they generally see the two as interrelated and as pervasive aspects of education (Curren, 2015, 2017). Good judgement and valuing what is valuable – including what is morally valuable – are pervasive aspects of being good and well-educated persons. Character education often focuses on the cultivation of specific virtues – moral, intellectual, civic, and enabling (that is, performance) virtues – but this is secondary to its fundamental concern with how students develop and are constituted. Moral education is ultimately no different in sharing this fundamental concern, even if its conception of being morally well-constituted is having a good will, and even if many teachers and administrators mistake laying down rules and enforcing them for moral education. Predicating compliance on external sanctions amounts to giving up on moral character education or not knowing what it is to begin with (Curren, 2020). We will use the term *moral character education* (hereafter, *character education*) to signify all education focused on students' moral formation.

The question we grapple with in the interview that follows is what lessons the COVID-19 pandemic may have for future efforts to provide moral character education. A lesson of countless self-determination theory (SDT) studies is that character education requires continuity of need-supportive human relationships – connections that support students' needs for competence, autonomy, and positive relatedness as they engage in relevant activities of learning (Curren, 2017; Curren & Ryan, 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2017). The absence of such supports predicts amotivation, low academic performance, low academic self-esteem, and behavioural problems (Legault, Green-Demers & Pelletier 2006), and amotivation more or less precludes progress in character development. Have schools and colleges been able to provide enough *need support* to sustain learning in the absence of routine embodied and unscheduled forms of interpersonal contact? It does not appear that they have or that they are equipped

to do so in the midst of a pandemic. We see this as the most important lesson of COVID-19 for character education.

Another important lesson of the pandemic is that we need to be able to handle unexpected adversity. Preparing people to handle challenging situations is a basic aspect of character education, and we believe that mindfulness is an important aspect of this. Advocates of character education often speak in terms of virtues, such as patience, endurance, and wisdom, and these virtues are both cultivated through and manifested in practices of mindfulness and self-regulation (Curren, 2015, 2017).

Embodiment and Need Support: Questions for Ryan

Randall Curren: Human cognitive, linguistic, and moral development begin in physically intimate and nurturing care, eye contact, and interactive facial play between infants and caregivers. Pandemic social distancing underscores the importance of asking whether direct and embodied interpersonal exchanges remain important to development and learning across the lifespan. Does need support inherently involve direct and embodied interpersonal contact?

Richard Ryan: There is no question that in infancy and early childhood direct contact with caregivers is critical to healthy development. Proximity is important not just for contact comfort and sense of security, but also because the development of an internal sense of efficacy and agency depends upon the contingent responsiveness of caregivers, as they resonate to the child's spontaneous signals and initiations. As people develop, the interpersonal need for responsive, autonomy-supportive partners does not change, but the means through which support can be experienced become more varied, and can be conveyed from afar.

But can students experience sufficient autonomy-support, care, and responsiveness while physically separated from mentors and peers? During this pandemic we have seen valiant attempts to meet such needs in distance learning. The most successful of these are those that explicitly attend as much as possible to supporting students' autonomy, competence, and relatedness. These supports can be built into virtual learning, both through an instructor's style and by building in features that afford clarity and structure, flexibility and choices in learning pathways, and opportunities to connect and share information with others.

RC: So, during the pandemic we have seen more and less successful attempts to provide students with the kinds of need support that would be essential to character education. In the absence of conclusive evidence that remote need support lacks something essential to sustaining character education, the lesson that educators should draw is that it is an essential aspect of remote instruction. They should do as much as they can to support students' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

In saying this, we should recognize the limitations of what teachers have been able to provide and that supporting students' needs requires need-supportive contexts for teachers as well. We should also recognize that the inherent rewards of their work – the rewards that sustain them – flow from their role in enabling students to flourish. The pandemic has also resulted in many teachers feeling cut off from colleagues and students, and less competent, successful, and fulfilled in their teaching. They need to experience being part of their students' flourishing and being part of a flourishing school community that embodies the qualities of character essential to flourishing. The pandemic has disrupted the ecologies of need support and collective flourishing in schools, and an obvious lesson is that we need to make them stronger and more resilient before future crises unfold.

RR: I fully agree that supporting students' needs is only sustainable in an organizational culture that also supports teachers' needs. Pressures on teachers have been intense during the pandemic, including many changing demands and mandates. We also know that contexts that frustrate teachers' need for autonomy often lead them to teach in more controlling ways that frustrate their students' need for autonomy (e.g., Nie, et al., 2015; Ryan & Brown, 2005; Pelletier & Sharp, 2009). Thus, a critical focus is empowering

teachers, giving them more voice and choice in instructional matters so they can bring their best practices to the classroom, as well as resources to connect with each other.

RC: Psychologists consider self-regulation a central aspect of moral functioning (Eisenberg, 2000; Nigg, 2017) and virtue theorists regard it as integral to virtue (Snow, 2006). Can you address the significance of need support for the development of self-regulation, Rich? You have a recent paper on this (Roth, Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2019).

RR: To act morally requires a capacity to withhold urges and impulses, to be reflective about one's choices, and to have moral sensibilities. These are all capacities that are facilitated during childhood by caregivers who are autonomy-supportive. Children of autonomy-supportive parents display more self-control, better executive functioning, and greater empathy, and display more prosocial, and fewer antisocial, propensities than children from more controlling homes. Thus, capacities essential to self-regulation come from need-supportive environments, and these capacities in turn facilitate moral behaviour.

Mindfulness and Virtue: Questions for Barber

RC: This is a good segue to our second COVID lesson, concerning mindfulness and the importance of being equipped to handle adversity. You have been working on the relationships between mindfulness and virtue, Zach.

Zachary Barber: Yes, I draw on a rich history of philosophical thought about adversity in human life. It is a common philosophical observation, found in many traditions, that all human experiences are impermanent and in flux. Recognizing the difficulty and suffering that often results from life's vicissitudes, many of these traditions recommend cultivating one's mind so as to maintain a mental state of equanimity, calm, and freedom from disturbance. This kind of counsel is most obviously manifested in the West in the philosophy of Stoicism, in the East, in Buddhism.

Recently, researchers in many academic fields have directed their attention to mental techniques developed by these schools of thought – techniques that purport to stabilize the mind and offer a kind of mental peace in the face of adversity and change. An abundance of research in psychology and neuroscience testifies to the efficacy of these techniques in reducing depression, anxiety, and addiction (e.g., Brewer, 2011). Foremost among these techniques of mental training is mindfulness meditation. Many practitioners of this kind of meditation (both religious and secular) seek out meditation “retreats,” which offer prolonged periods of social isolation for the purpose of deepening their practice and cultivating more lastingly equanimous states of mind.

What's interesting about the recent COVID pandemic is that it forced many of us into circumstances similar to a meditation retreat – isolation, minimal social stimulation, and lots of time for acquainting oneself with the private mental world. The problem is that many of us were unprepared, unable to coexist mindfully with our thoughts. For many, the pandemic offered an environment perfect for the kind of rumination that is so conducive to depression and anxiety. This was a dire situation for many reasons, and a reminder that education must equip us for the more trying circumstances of life. It can do this by cultivating our minds: mindfulness and the freedom from disturbance that it offers should figure more heavily in educational curricula. It has been shown to improve our ability to regulate negative emotions (Menezes, Pereira, & Bizarro, 2012; Zautra, et al., 2008). Meditation that enhances mindfulness can make dire circumstances more mentally tolerable. By relating to our thoughts mindfully, we can lead mentally healthier lives, even in the midst of severe challenge.

RC: So, meditation can enhance mindfulness, improving our response to adversity by strengthening our ability to self-regulate. And self-regulation is a fundamental aspect of virtue and moral functioning.

ZB: Regarding character education, I would argue that mindfulness meditation can promote a kind of self-regulation that is morally valuable, much in the way that Rich argues above. Mindfulness affects the way we relate not only to ourselves but to others as well. To see this, we have to understand how mindfulness meditation works. Practitioners turn their attention to whatever phenomena they find in their consciousness, and they do so in an accepting and merely observational way. The meditator is to merely witness thoughts and emotions, without getting caught up in their content. Thinking, for example, is antithetical to mindfulness practice. Instead of being captivated by thoughts, we are to simply notice them and maintain a kind of distance from them. In this way, mindfulness meditation is a method of developing a clearer understanding of the movements of one's mind. Meditators spend time acquainting themselves with their minds while avoiding the captivating power of thought and emotion. Meditation can therefore engender a more adept ability to respond to the movements of the mind in healthy and moral ways.

How a person responds or reacts to their anger or sadness is a matter that may positively or negatively affect others, depending on the circumstances. Meditation can allow for more moral behaviour by encouraging us to step back. From this perspective, we can more aptly assess the moral appropriateness of our mental states. We can more autonomously choose how to respond to our mental states. Importantly, I don't mean to suggest that meditation encourages the suppression of our emotions. Rather, it encourages an accepting and observational attitude toward them. The meditator trains her mind to merely witness how it is coloured by thought and emotion. From this more impartial standpoint, she can respond to emotions by embracing them or by gently allowing them to subside – whichever is morally appropriate. To use Rich's language, my point is that we can develop a greater ability to withhold urges and impulses and to be more reflective about our choices. We can watch our impulses without automatically being moved by them. This has positive moral consequences. The point of my ongoing research is to show that the qualities of mind developed by mindfulness meditation play essential roles within the very structure of virtue itself.

RC: Could you walk us through one or two examples of qualities of mind that are essential to virtue and promoted by mindfulness meditation?

ZB: Training oneself to maintain a more vigilant gaze at the mind can bring about a heightened kind of mental autonomy. As I mentioned previously, we become no longer identified with and captivated by thought and emotion. This is liberating and morally empowering since the default state of mind most of us are in most of the time is one that is captivated by thought and emotion. Neuroscientists posit something called the “default mode network,” which comes online when we are not actively focused on a task. It is the operation of this network that is responsible for the flow of thoughts and feelings that engage us during much of our waking life. The attention often fixates on this meandering narrative of thought and feeling. Especially during a pandemic like COVID, this flow of thoughts and feelings can be acutely negative, causing a lot of unnecessary suffering. Mindfulness, however, has been shown to break this spell by increasing self-awareness, helping us see thoughts as thoughts and emotions as emotions, instead of being captivated by their content (Creswell, et al., 2016; Brewer, et al., 2011; Bauer, et al., 2019).

My claim is this: Meditators develop a kind of distance from their thoughts and emotions, which in turn allows them to evaluate their moral appropriateness and determine whether they should act on them. In various virtue ethical traditions in philosophy, this kind of autonomy is a trait that has been seen as an essential constituent of virtue. Aristotle, for example, thought that genuinely virtuous action is motivated by the right emotion and the right reason. This would entail a highly developed kind of self-awareness, self-regulation, and autonomy. Rich's work on motivation suggests that a similar kind of autonomy is facilitated by mindfulness (Ryan & Deci, 2017, pp. 56, 76).

RR: Indeed, a recently published meta-analysis (Donald, et al., 2020) confirms that greater mindfulness is associated with greater autonomy. Specifically, the evidence shows that, when more mindful, people are less likely to be motivated by external pressures, social approval, or ego-involvements, and more likely

to be acting in accord with their abiding values and interests. In turn, even meta-analytic data connects autonomy and autonomy support with greater prosocial, benevolent, and moral behaviours, whereas controlled motives predict greater antisocial behaviour (Donald, et al., in press). As Zach suggests, our evidence supports the view that mindfulness allows people to feel more choice and to experience greater autonomy, and when having autonomy, they are more likely to act in prosocial, as well as moral, ways (see Ryan, Donald & Bradshaw, 2021).

Conclusion

Whether or not human beings' basic psychological needs can be fully met without some direct, embodied interpersonal contact, it is clear that schools and teachers vary in how effective they are in providing the need support that is foundational to character education. The difficulties in sustaining meaningful education of any kind during the pandemic have revealed weaknesses in the need support ecosystems of our educational institutions, just as COVID's differential impacts on health, mortality, income, and residential security have revealed weaknesses in our public health systems and social safety nets. We need stronger and more resilient institutional ecosystems of need support and we need to facilitate mindfulness that is conducive to moral self-regulation.

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