

Moral Education – Part 1

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Lawlessness has aroused national concern in Trinidad and Tobago (T&T). However, intelligent interventions by our socialising institutions, such as the education system, could rescue us from this turmoil. Yet, our education system focuses on traditional subjects, and largely ignores preparation for peaceful living, although the fundamental beliefs expressed in the *Education Policy Paper (1993-2003)* recognise moral development as a prime aim of T&T's education system. That document mandates the education system of T&T to develop a spiritually, morally, physically, intellectually, and emotionally sound individual, and asserts that ethical and moral concerns are central to human development and survival. Furthermore, fundamental constructs such as decency, justice, respect, kindness, equality, love, honesty, and sensitivity are major determinants of the survival of our multicultural society (p. xvii).

This article considers how moral identity develops, and Part 2 will outline views about developing and implementing a moral education programme in T&T's schools.

Morality refers to the principles we use to distinguish right from wrong; however, what is right or wrong is often unclear. Some people maintain that society's norms and traditions are inherently right, but others feel that individuals should be able to decide for themselves what is right or wrong. Rational programmes for moral education should be informed by theories of moral development that have emerged from sociological and developmental perspectives.

The sociologist Emile Durkheim suggested that morality emerged as a consequence of attachment to a specific cultural group. This bonding leads the young to respect the rules, symbols, and authority of the group. Piaget and Kohlberg viewed moral development as progression to more sophisticated ways of thinking. Piaget identified three stages in moral development, where young children first believe in the integrity of rules and authority, but later on they question blind obedience and begin to look at rules and authority critically.

Lawrence Kohlberg extended Piaget's work and identified six stages of moral development. In Stage 1, individuals obey rules to avoid unpleasant consequences. In Stage 2, their behaviour depends on perceived benefits. In Stage 3, they recognise the value of rules in their local community and try to meet group expectations. In Stage 4, this concern for community rules is extended to conventions valued by the wider society, and individuals come to believe that obedience is necessary to maintain a system of laws that protects everyone. By Stage 5, they consider the principles underlying laws and question universal application of laws. In Stage 6, the highest level, individuals evaluate laws in terms of ethical fairness rather than as systems for preserving social order.

As an alternative to cognitive development, some researchers have focused on development of the human conscience. The conscience can be understood from different perspectives. From a religious perspective, the conscience is considered to be an inner voice that bothers a person when he or she does or contemplates evil. From a philosophical perspective, the conscience implies a moral standard of action in the mind, together with a consciousness of one's actions. However, the secularists regard conscience as a function of the human brain that evolved to facilitate unselfish behaviour, and as such the conscience can be instinctive or it can be the result of different experiences.

Three processes have been identified in the development of the human conscience. The first is through identification with parents, where identity is shaped by the values of parents, the school, and the community. The second involves the impact of specific instructions and training, and the third is the influence of peers, teachers, the media, and events in the wider society, which can either reinforce prevailing conceptions of rightness or challenge them. These findings suggest that development of the conscience could be perverted by inappropriate experiences, and that we may not all share a common understanding of good and evil.

Recognising that satisfactory development of the conscience cannot be left to natural processes, Mustakova-Possardt looked at the development of critical moral consciousness. She described this as “a way of being, which includes, moral identity, moral reasoning, moral affect or any other particular moral dimension.” She explained that the first phase—pre-critical consciousness—extends from early childhood to adolescence. In this phase, moral motivation results from exposure to moral discourse, prompted by daily events and by exposure to lived examples of uprightness. The transitional phase occurs during adolescence where moral authority develops as a consequence of group membership. In this phase, youth service projects help to develop moral consciousness. With a foundation of moral motivation and moral identity, more mature individuals can explore the social world to expand their appreciation of moral and social responsibility. These experiences help them to extend their concern to the larger human family, and to seek answers to spiritual questions about the true meaning of life.

Following these considerations about how people develop moral identity, the focus of the next article will be on the role of religion in moral education, approaches to moral education, and proposals for a programme of moral education for T&T.

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