

Rethinking “Basic Issues” in Moral Education

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Abstract

Purpose: This article presents an alternative interpretation of “basic principles” in moral education by reconsidering Dewey’s moral education theory, which has had profound influence on Chinese educational theory and practice.

Design/Approach/Methods: Through a close analysis of *Moral Principles in Education* (1909), this study identifies four ideological and logical limitations in Dewey’s moral education theory.

Findings: Analysis revealed four limitations in Dewey’s moral education theory. First, although “moral ideas” originate from real life, they are insufficient for developing a fully moral life. Second, the “moral trinity” is an ideal that cannot be fulfilled when exposed to reality. Third, the interpretation of “ideas about morality” needs to extend beyond examinations of their effects on behavior, particularly insofar as these ideas play a complex role in the overall development of individuals. Fourth, simply teaching ideas about morality constitutes the worst practice of “direct moral instruction.” In this respect, best practice involves cultivating moral ideas while facilitating the transformation of ideas about morality into moral ideas or vice versa.

Originality/Value: The distinction between “moral ideas” and “ideas about morality” has long been considered the basic problem of moral education. This study presents another approach to the “basic problem” of moral education that complements and reinforces these concepts.

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Keywords

Basic problems in moral education, Dewey, direct moral instruction, ideas about morality, moral ideas

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Introduction

Published in 1909, Dewey's *Moral Principles in Education* has become a seminal text in moral education theory. According to Dewey, the "moral principles"—that is, the "basic principles"—of moral education comprise "principles" and "warning." In this respect, "principles" refer to the basic ideas, ideology, and approaches that form "the moral trinity of the school" (Dewey, 1909, p. 43), the ultimate objective of which is to cultivate "moral ideas." In contrast, "warning" suggests that a school should not teach ideas of morality directly because of its inability to impact behavior sufficiently.

Dewey's work continues to influence moral education theory and practice today, especially in China. Countless schools of thought have been based on and developed Dewey's theory, including Lawrence Kohlberg's cognitive moral education theory. In China, moral education is shaped by Marxist theory, Chinese tradition, Confucian thought, and educators from the Republic of China period (1912–1949), such as Yuanpei Cai and Xingzhi Tao. Dewey's significant impact on educators like Cai and Tao is evidenced by their becoming known as "Dewey's Chinese successors." There is some overlap between Marxist human-being-oriented theory and the emphasis on Confucian moral practice. In the 21st century, China's new moral education theories—including "education returning to children's life" and "life moral education"—have been fully and satisfactorily developed. Deeply rooted in Chinese culture, these theories are profoundly influenced by Dewey's "life is education" and "moral ideas." Essentially, China's "life moral education" theory stems from and expresses Dewey's theory.

As such, while China's moral education is advancing through trial and error, it has greatly benefited from Dewey's "warning." According to Dewey, "direct moral instruction" will only teach students "ideas about morality," which is insufficient for improving their behavior. This argument constitutes a "legitimate criterion" in evaluating moral curriculum research and course offerings. In other words, arguing with Dewey provides the theoretical drive serving as the key role in the moral course offering. Naturally, the administration prefers to ignore the "theoretical drive" and favor a "policy drive." However, researchers need to remind administrators of Dewey's influence on China's current moral education, suggesting that China's moral education is locked in an assiduous struggle with Dewey's shadow.

Our moral education reform leader, Professor Jie Lu, understands Dewey's "warning." According to Lu (2003), "As early as the 1920s, Dewey had warned that professional education may lose

contact with real life” (p. 2). As part of China’s moral education reform and curriculum reform, our previous moral education research has sought to avoid the ineffectiveness of ideas regarding morality and the disadvantages produced by direct moral instruction. In this respect, we have clarified how educators need to address the dilemma caused by direct moral instruction (Gao, 2004), examined Dewey’s argument that direct moral instruction is ineffective (Gao, 2017), and argued for the use of direct moral instruction to introduce children to the moral challenges they might experience (Gao, 2018). It is not an exaggeration to say that Dewey’s warning is like a “high-hanging-sword” encouraging China’s moral educators to search for moral theoretical grounds that can be used to develop a theoretical drive.

Although we recognize Dewey’s basic principles, as moral education researchers we feel a strong impulse to move beyond his thinking. Our recent research into moral literacy has led us to recognize ideological and logical limitations in Dewey’s basic principles. More specifically, this study challenges the following four aspects of Dewey’s moral education theory.

First, we argue that moral learning is similar to language learning, as some of ancient Greek philosophers surmised. Answering Socrates’ question about the virtue teacher, Protagoras noted, “All virtue teachers try their best but none of them can teach virtue; similarly, if you ask who is the Greek language teacher, again you will find no one” (Plato, 2002, p. 449). An individual will be regarded illiterate if they cannot read or write. Therefore, daily life (i.e., learning to listen to and speak a language) without professional direction (i.e., learning how to read and write) is not sufficient to learn a language or become literate. Similarly, although the hidden moral value of daily life and school education is effective and well recognized, it is always limited. When a fairly moral individual encounters new moral facts, they will likely behave as if they were morally illiterate (Herman, 2007). In other words, in regarding life experience and indirect education as valid sources of moral literacy, Dewey may have neglected the possible limitations of moral ideas.

Second, although ideas about morality do not necessarily create moral behavior, they are still valuable. In this respect, Dewey may underestimate the positive connection between ideas about morality and moral behaviors.

Third, Dewey identified direct moral instruction with ideas about morality teaching. Consequently, he did not fully develop the possible connection between “direct moral instruction” and “moral ideas.”

Fourth, Dewey uses different logics to demonstrate the impacts of indirect moral instruction and direct moral instruction. More specifically, he applies ideal logic (prescriptive logic) when examining the formation and value of indirect moral instruction, thereby advocating that his ideal trinity leads to moral ideas. In contrast, Dewey uses factual logic (descriptive logic) when examining direct moral instruction, thereby claiming that such instruction can only teach ideas about morality.

This study unpacks these limitations in reevaluating Dewey's moral education theory. Focusing on the four aforementioned areas, this study identifies and explains Dewey's ideological and logical limitations before suggesting an alternative way to make further progress in moral education theory and practice.

Substance and logic of the basic problems of moral education

Before addressing Dewey's ideological and logical imitations, it is necessary to clarify the basic substance and inner logic of his moral education theory.

Distinction between moral ideas and ideas about morality

Dewey's attempt to clarify the basic problem of moral education serves as a starting point for the formal analysis of the basic principles of moral education. Dewey (1909) suggested that the distinction between *moral ideas* and *ideas about morality* constitutes the basic problem of moral education.

Moral ideas influence and urge behavior

According to Dewey (1909), "Moral ideas are ideas of any sort whatsoever which take effect in conduct and improve it, make it better than it otherwise would be" (p. 1). The following three points facilitate a better understanding of Dewey's position: (1) moral ideas will affect behavior, (2) these ideas have a positive effect that improves behavior, and (3) the presence of moral ideas is better than their absence. As such, moral ideas are necessary for creating better moral behavior.

Immoral ideas are also effective insofar as they can lead to the deterioration rather than improvement of moral behavior. Meanwhile, *non-moral ideas* are ideas not relevant to morality as these ideas neither improve nor damage behavior.

Inert and noneffective "ideas about morality"

Ideas about morality are situated between *moral ideas* and *non-moral ideas*. Moral ideas and ideas about morality overlap insofar as they both concern morals. Ideas about morality and non-moral ideas overlap insofar as they do not affect moral behavior, producing neither better nor worse behavior. "Ideas about morality" are only superficially moral as they are "indifferent, non-moral or moral" (Dewey, 1909, p. 1). Although ideas about morality should not be indifferent or even "non-moral" to moral problems because they are related to the moral, ideas about morality are morally "inert." Ideas about morality display indifference and non-morality when confronted with moral problems because they do not motivate behavior, nor do they automatically transform into behavior if external forces are absent.

The following three points summarize Dewey's ideas about morality. First, Dewey (1909) viewed ideas about morality as "information about honesty or purity or kindness" (p. 1) or "moral knowledge." In this respect, Dewey (1909) noted "the futility of assuming that knowledge of right constitutes a guarantee of right doing" (p. 17). Second, this kind of knowledge comes directly from other people or books, rather than personal experience. Therefore, ideas about morality are morally inert by nature, and their relevance with respect to the moral is merely superficial. Accordingly, "non-moral ideas" may be a more appropriate term. Third, ideas about morality are ineffective in respect to their capacity to improve, worsen, or motivate moral behavior.

Cultivation of moral ideas: The "moral trinity" of school life

Effective moral ideas do not come from direct moral instruction but from three elements comprising school life, namely, the school-community life, the democracy and morality of the teaching methodology, and the moral and social orientation of academic courses. The school is more than an intellectual institution; as a community, the school is a social organization performing a social function. The moral and ethical objectives pursued by a school are located in the social domain, which means that school life is a typical type of social life. As a social organization, school provides a moral education when it promotes social activities that help students to develop moral ideas that are desirable for effective behavior. This indirect process is actual, powerful, and valid. If we agree that teaching methods encourage students to engage in active learning in accordance with the objective of better serving society, then it is not surprising to find that learning by social cooperation functions indirectly, plentifully, and effectively. Similarly, although different academic courses are intended to provide intellectual training, they have a "positive ethical import" when "a study is taught as a mode of understanding social life" (Dewey, 1909, p. 40).

Two distinguishing characteristics of Dewey's moral trinity are worth further consideration, namely, "indirectness" and "idealness." In regard to *indirectness*, it is apparent that none of the three aspects of Dewey's trinity directly relates to the moral curriculum; instead, they point to school operation, teaching, and courses. The section characteristic, *idealness*, refers to how a moral function exists as an ideal and can seldom be found in actual school life, teaching, or courses. Where the first characteristic has become common knowledge, the second characteristic has gained little attention and deserves further explanation.

Dewey developed his argument from both a positive (i.e., supportive) and a negative (i.e., opposing) angle. The positive refers to the ideal, while the negative refers to the criticism of the factual. The latter is aptly illuminated by the following three examples: school life, teaching, and courses. First, in explaining the intellectual training provided by the school community, Dewey (1909) starts with the fact that the school applies "two sets of ethical principles" (p. 7) that exclude the lessons of social life. Second, in respect to teaching, Dewey (1909) discusses the "much

lamented separation in the schools between intellectual and moral training” (p. 15). Third, regarding courses, Dewey (1909) discusses passive learning before presenting a brilliant exposition on the “loss of moral power” (p. 25) produced by an evil learning motivation: fear of competition. Dewey (1909) also criticizes schools that exclude social life in referring to “the pigeonhole classification” (p. 32). These three examples offer different interpretations of the same fact: Dewey’s ideal trinity confronts multiple obstacles in harsh reality.

Direct moral instruction is instruction about morals

Three aspects of Dewey’s argument regarding moral instruction differ from those of others. First, Dewey focuses on the origin of ideas about morality rather than morality itself, assuming that such ideas originate in direct moral instruction. According to Dewey (1909), “instruction *about* morals” (p. 4) is a better name than “direct moral instruction” (p. 4). Second, if moral ideas influence behavior, then the moral education of Dewey’s trinity, within which moral ideas develop, is also effective. However, if ideas about morality do not influence behavior, direct moral education—which is intended to cultivate ideas about morality—will be ineffective. Third, Dewey applies one type of logic in criticizing direct moral instruction but another when presenting his moral education trinity theory. More specifically, Dewey uses an ideal logic when describing his moral education trinity and how it will cultivate moral ideas and behavior in the ideal school circumstance. In contrast, Dewey uses factual logic to criticize direct moral instruction by emphasizing evil practices, such as fear of competition, rooted in reality.

As such, Dewey initiates his classical explication about the basic problems in moral education by distinguishing *moral ideas* from *ideas about morality*. After defining *moral ideas* and their function in moral behavior, he examines school life—one pillar of his moral trinity by which moral ideas are cultivated. Dewey (1909) then suggests that direct moral education is “instruction *about* morals” (p. 4), noting this as an ineffective means by which to form moral ideas. While Dewey’s arguments are closely linked and generally persuasive, they are not without flaws. Nonetheless, this study does not reject Dewey’s basic principles. Rather, it attempts to uncover and understand Dewey’s logical limitations in order to explore another way of completing basic principles in moral education.

Are moral ideas sufficient?

Although Dewey (1909) always measured the value of moral ideas by whether they impacted behavior, he also noted that moral ideas are an essential “part of character” (p. 2). Behavior can be improved by moral ideas for two reasons. First, moral ideas construct the rational part of an individual’s character or maybe character itself. Second, moral ideas emerge and diminish in the experience of individuals and are closely connected with personality, tendency, and interest. The

latter raises questions regarding moral literacy. Does an individual's acquisition of an abundance of moral ideas through their personal and school life experiences necessarily mean that they are morally sufficient? Moreover, do adults (immature minors are not included in the discussion, at least provisionally) who are mentally, physically, and spiritually mature need to develop further moral literacy?

These questions can be elucidated by the example of Minhong Yu, a famous public figure. Although it is impossible to access Yu's real moral character, he has long enjoyed an excellent public image based on his public behavior. However, in 2018, he commented, "It is women's degeneration that leads to the nation's degeneration"—a serious and discriminatory insult to women. Although he made a formal apology, the damage lingers. As a public figure and educator, Yu had no intention to deliberately insult women, and it can rationally be assumed that Yu respects women in his daily life. Accordingly, it can be assumed that he was not aware that his comment discriminated against women. Only by fully acknowledging the seriousness of his statement can he avoid making such statements in the future, influencing his career and financial livelihood. This example illustrates that though Yu possesses basic moral ideas, he also has "moral blind spots," suggesting that he requires further "moral literacy" concerning gender equity and respect for women.

Another example is a more common phenomenon: in an environment of valuing men and belittling women, it is not unusual for a morally sound father to differentiate between a son and a daughter. Such a father may financially support his son's university career but ask his daughter to start working immediately after she finishes high school. He might also pay for his son's house but leave his daughter waiting in vain. This type of fatherly behavior is quite common. In such social circumstances, no one questions the father's moral character and the father himself does not feel guilty. It is reasonable to assume that if such a father had two sons rather than one son and one daughter, he would be impartial to his sons and not discriminate between them. While the father would treat two sons equally, he would treat a son and daughter unequally. This example reveals that despite possessing moral ideas, such a father remains "morally illiterate" in terms of gender equality.

As illustrated by the examples above, basic moral ideas do not guarantee moral literacy. The ancient Greeks recognized the similarities between moral learning and language acquisition. Moral literacy theory has its foundation in reading and writing literacy theory. While it is natural to gain listening and speaking abilities, people will be deemed *illiterate* if they cannot read or write. In other words, reading and writing abilities cannot be obtained in ordinary daily life as professional training is necessary. Similarly, language literacy can only be established and maintained through a combination of daily life learning and professional training. Understanding such a relationship may provide insights into the similarities and differences with moral learning. They are similar insofar

as moral ideas are also learned naturally in daily life but differ insofar as a certain degree of moral literacy can be achieved without professional training. Moreover, each individual's basic moral character is inevitably and intimately involved with daily life; it is, in a manner of speaking, the expression of daily life. Accordingly, people will continue considering and articulating moral problems, and no one will be "morally illiterate" despite lacking professional training.

Although basic moral literacy can be achieved by self-learning in daily life, the earlier examples demonstrate the real existence of "moral illiteracy." That is to say, people who have basic moral ideas are probably unaware of moral problems. This suggests that the moral literacy acquired in normal daily life is relative and not fully developed. Denying the moral imperfections of human beings is unhelpful, as is raising a "holy spirit-like standard" for normal people. If a large community or even all of human society are "morally illiterate" to a particular moral problem, an individual's unawareness will not be regarded as moral illiteracy. For instance, it is unjustifiable to use modern ethical standards to judge primitive tribes. It is equally unjustifiable to reproach the slavers of the ancient Greco-Roman era by criticizing their abuse of human rights.

Accordingly, while the previous examples belong to the contemporary context, they clearly express moral illiteracy to gender equity. Moreover, gender equality is a basic moral idea and by no means a "holy spirit-like standard." This raises the question of why Minhong Yu and the fathers in the earlier examples do not possess this basic moral idea. The root cause may be traced back to their concrete social life, the main source of moral ideas. Treating women as inferior to men is a common practice in real social life—one that became increasingly apparent as ideas about gender equality were introduced. In such social environments, people tend to be blind to gender equality despite having formed basic moral ideas. Having unconsciously developed a gender bias, it is natural that such people are considered "morally illiterate."

Dewey's contribution to moral literacy is his understanding of the effectiveness and power of the moral ideas learned in daily life. However, this accomplishment may obscure an accompanying drawback. Social life is complex; while teaching us moral ideas, it exposes us to *moral bias* or what Dewey referred to as "immoral ideas." Moral bias results in individuals making morally wrong judgments and produces moral illiteracy. Sociocultural conventions tend to ignore or even smother new moral facts, causing moral illiteracy about these new facts. In a consumerist society, the money-first idea is so powerful that it suppresses not only new moral facts but also some basic moral values such as "always hold good intentions toward others," "rely on honest labor," and "a gentleman has his proper way to attain monetary aspirations."

Analysis has hitherto revealed that we rely on life to cultivate our moral literacy; however, this indirect teaching method is by no means the only way of overcoming moral illiteracy. Paradoxically, if we wish to reduce the moral illiteracy shaped by the negative elements of daily life, it is necessary to turn to regular education rather than relying on daily life alone. Dewey supports this

argument, claiming that “education is life itself.” This does not mean that he believed education to be the exact copy of social life; rather, he understood education as a “simplification” of social life. In other words, education should be a “simplified life” that has already eliminated all non-values, thus providing appropriate and correct instruction (Dewey, 1986). Dewey (1986) approved the “processed and simplified” life in particular, noting:

It is the office of the school environment to balance the various elements in the social environment, and to see to it that each individual gets an opportunity to escape from the limitations of the social group in which he was born, and to come into living contact with a broader environment. (p. 20)

Students come from different social groups, and each group naturally locates the meaning of moral ideas, moral illiteracy, and other moral restrictions in their particular social domain. One of the objectives of regular education is to help students overcome the restrictions of a particular time, location, and ethical group. As such, their moral ideas originate from a foundation of general humanism. According to Dewey, school life plays an indirect role in moral education, suggesting that refined and simplified school life can provide a kind of direct moral education.

While Dewey’s suggestion of indirectly cultivating moral ideas in school life is feasible, it suffers from two limitations. First, while emphasizing indirect moral education, Dewey overlooks other possible means of reducing moral illiteracy, as discussed in the next section. Although Dewey’s suggestion is grounded in his understanding of an ideal educational background, reality is more difficult. It is no accident that modern school education is largely developing in the way Dewey criticized. For example, learning is inspired by the possibility of gaining higher social status rather than the love of knowledge and accomplished through competition rather than cooperation. However, even harsh reality does not completely undercut the positive moral influence of school life.

During Dewey’s lifetime, the positive value conveyed by the term “science” was powerful. However, today, *science*—especially *natural science*—seems to have achieved a high level of “hegemony” at a cost potentially unimaginable to Dewey. Indeed, the language of science dominates school life, with moral language driven into a desperate impasse. It is common knowledge that moral language represents moral ideas and perception. Consequently, the lack of moral language constitutes a decline of “moral vision,” indicating that when we are confronted with a moral problem, the proper moral language will not be available to help us make decisions about what to do (Kekes, 1984). Accordingly, the attempt to cultivate moral ideas by relying solely on school life is untenable because the ideal moral trinity is not necessarily supported by harsh reality, just as the best wishes will often unavoidably turn out to be illusions.

Moreover, moral ideas indirectly cultivated in social and school life may remain at an unconscious level, suggesting that people may not be aware of the moral ideas they hold. Academically

speaking, people tend to care more about “aware but not own” rather than “own but unaware,” particularly insofar as numerous discussions about moral literacy are based on “own but unaware.” However, “aware but not own” parallels “own but unaware” in that they are equally imperfect. Common changes from “aware but not own” and “own but unaware” to “aware and own” seem to favor self-determination and conscious ownership. Moral ideas acquired in school life may belong to the category of “own but unaware” due to their indirect acquisition. Therefore, the acquisition of moral ideas through indirect education is insufficient due to the inability to consciously improve moral literacy through hard work.

Dewey’s theory is limited insofar as it is not a law but a guideline for moral education. Recognizing its rationality, this study seeks to identify and resolve some of these limitations. Three points illustrate this perspective. First, the basic moral ideas gained through indirect education are inadequate for creating a good moral character. Second, social and school life may not be a reliable means of creating moral literacy because of the paradoxical fact that moral illiteracy increases as moral vision declines. Third, Dewey’s moral trinity is premised on ideal life, rather than actual school life. In light of the complexity of social life, Dewey believes that a simpler purified school life will make up for the deeply rooted flaws in education, which forms part of this complex social life. Unfortunately, this belief is not supported by actual school life. This prompts the question of whether there is a simpler way of remedying educational imperfection. The next section examines “ideas about morality” and “direct moral instruction.”

Is moral awareness really insignificant?

The basic standard by which Dewey judges ideas about morality is whether they impact behavior. While it is well-known that Dewey opposed behaviorism, his emphasis on and use of behavior as a standard for evaluating ideas about morality may help elucidate the prevailing behavior of his time. Behavior, thinking, and feeling are integral to human beings and underlie their complexity. With the exception of some mechanical responses, the majority of human behaviors do not exist alone as thinking and feeling are also involved. The relationship among behavior, thinking, and feeling is so complicated that we often find that different thoughts and feelings lead to the same behavior while the same thoughts and feelings result from completely different behaviors. Therefore, it is difficult to judge the nature of a behavior if the judgment is solely based on behavior and thinking and feeling are ignored.

However, an ethical orientation covering topics ranging from the quality and morality of behavior to that of human beings is reflected in concerns like “What kind of people will we be?” and “How will we live a good life?” Moreover, the morality of behavior is difficult to judge if comprehensive criteria—such as “what kind of people will we be?”—are disregarded. Moreover, the question of “what kind of people will we be?” does not emerge unprompted; rather, it is

influenced by countless behaviors. Kekes (1984) captures this in a simple but powerful metaphor: Life is a symphony, and its musical notes are various behaviors. Life (the symphony) as a whole is more important than the small behaviors (notes) from which it is composed.

As such, life is not solely comprised of behavior; rather, it includes feeling and thinking, consciousness and subconsciousness, social conditions, cultural traditions, our own private worlds, public life, and interrelationships (Kekes, 1984). Therefore, it is natural to conclude that behavior alone does not determine the value of ideas about morality as both thinking and feeling are also involved.

As discussed, although the moral ideas acquired through ordinary social and professional school life significantly reduce moral illiteracy, they are hardly a sufficient means of abolishing moral illiteracy. While an individual who completes their elementary education may be morally literate at that time, they will encounter new moral questions as their life unfolds, thus necessitating continuous improvement. This holds true for those who acquire their moral literacy through indirect education. An awareness of moral problems cultivated by reading books or consulting other people will be illuminating, with even a simple awareness significant by virtue of its intellectual nature. To obtain moral knowledge and ideas in this manner is to intellectually and cognitively overcome ignorance.

Although the meaning of “ignorance of the truth” and “ignorance of morality” varies, this study argues that *ignorance* is not a neutral term: At the deepest level of its significance, it implies a negative effect. Essentially, although we are morally limited, with full morality far beyond our reach, we still need to fight moral illiteracy because it constitutes a kind of moral “deficiency.” This kind of moral deficiency is evident in Minhong Yu’s ignorance regarding gender equality, which requires careful amendment. This prompts the question: If clearly wrong behavior is a moral flaw, what about moral ignorance? Although moral ignorance is less destructive compared to morally wrong behavior, they are closely related, with such behavior typically rooted in moral ignorance.

While behavior can be used to judge the value of moral knowledge, it is insufficient; other factors, such as an individual’s moral character and life, are also necessary. If we evaluate moral knowledge from the perspective of behavior alone, some “awareness” is not that significant. However, it *is* a quality—or to rather, *attainment*—in respect to the overall development of a human being. Human beings are not superficially “behavior beings,” indicating that behavior is integral to our existence. External behavior can be understood as the “tiny part above the water,” with the main body of moral–spiritual activities concealed beneath. While reading a book, listening to music, or indulging in a random daydream do not impact behavior, they are part of our experience. Similarly, although moral knowledge or ideas about morality cannot directly change behavior, they constitute a type of accumulation or accomplishment, ultimately changing and

shaping behavior. Viewed from this perspective, while moral knowledge does not play a direct role in changing behavior, it plays an indirect role by influencing character and a whole life.

Dewey undervalued the efficacy of ideas about morality insofar as he overlooked the various potentialities of *awareness*. Although ideas about morality do not improve or damage behavior, they prevent behavior from deteriorating—a point overlooked by Dewey. The moral knowledge and ideas obtained from serious and sophisticated scholarship or the classroom do not automatically transform into moral character or motivation because personal experience is largely uninvolved. Nevertheless, such knowledge and ideas prohibit wrong behavior. For example, if Minhong Yu had learned about gender equality and thus fully understood which comments were appropriate, he probably would have bridled his tongue, even if he did not personally accept gender equality. This suggests that external moral knowledge will have a moderate influence in negating immoral behavior while failing to urge good, moral behavior. Nevertheless, moral knowledge has value in that: (1) it is knowledge in the domain of “right and wrong,” thus resulting in moral enlightenment; and (2) human beings are “moral beings” who will not commit immoral behavior once they consciously understand “right and wrong.”

Although moral knowledge can prevent immoral behavior, “knowing-but-losing-morality” still occurs, challenging the significance of moral knowledge. As such, moral knowledge and even moral awareness cannot directly change an individual’s moral choice or prevent them from committing moral mistakes. People are multifaceted; moral knowledge and awareness cannot independently create a moral character or determine their moral choices. No one is consistently driven by a single desire in every place and time. When other desires surpass a moral desire, “knowing-but-abandoning-morality” will occur.

Nonetheless, moral knowledge is significant for the following three reasons. First, “knowing-but-losing-morality” and “knowing-and-doing-morality” both occur. In other words, *moral awareness* and *moral behavior* have two possible outcomes that oppose but do not contradict each other. Second, “knowing-but-losing-morality” differs from “not-knowing-but-losing-morality.” When an individual is fully aware of right and wrong but surrenders to stronger desires and makes an immoral choice, they will not be marked as “bad” providing they still possess basic morals; they will also feel a sense of shame and guilt. It is important to remember that a sense of shame and guilt urges people away from immorality (Von Hartmann, 2012). In contrast, a person without basic moral knowledge will not recognize their moral mistakes and thus defend their actions plausibly and at length; believing that justice is on their side, they will not express regret, shame, or guilt. Accordingly, this kind of “not-knowing-but-losing-morality” can cause more harm. Third, moral problems will not be recognized if moral knowledge is not readily applicable and unproblematic and as long as no psychological moral mechanism is activated. In addition to regret, shame, and guilt, this moral mechanism includes moral imagination. When “knowing-but-losing-

morality” occurs, the individual concerned will most likely imagine the possible consequences of their mistake. For instance, if Minhong Yu had been aware of basic ideas of gender equality, he would have anticipated the public response regardless of whether he accepted these ideas.

The significance of *awareness* is in its potential to turn into moral ideas in at least two ways. The first points to the future. Acquired moral knowledge may not be instantly integral to our consciousness, nor will it immediately transform into moral ideas. However, this knowledge can incubate in our minds, and at a future time, it can spontaneously transform into moral ideas. This possibility has two grounds. First, by its nature, moral knowledge is a kind of “good” knowledge; therefore, its good potentiality will take effect in the present or future. Second, human beings are “moral beings” and will naturally—either actively and consciously or passively and subconsciously—gravitate toward moral knowledge. The second way in which awareness can turn into moral ideas involves the present moment. Awareness can transform into moral ideas in the present through personal reflection or emotional sympathy. While some basic moral ideas are formed on the basis of personal experience and self-exploration, these ideas are seldom fully developed. Surprisingly, when these basic moral ideas are confronted by appropriate moral knowledge, external moral knowledge and internal personal realization arouse sympathy, thereby producing fully developed moral ideas. Under certain circumstances, this transformation is a natural process. Dewey also contended that moral knowledge, including principles, will lose its vitality and instrumental capacity the more it is absolutized—that is, when not continuously reexamined in light of present conditions (Pappas, 2008, p. 51). In other words, ideas about morality *can* turn into moral ideas as long as favorable conditions and moments are present. Therefore, when ideas about morality and moral intuition meet and reinforce each other, or when ideas about morality explain moral confusion to some extent, an expectation arises that these ideas will transform into moral ideas.

This kind of *awareness* is not only relevant to moral education, as it can lead to moral ideas being applied in other fields. However, as noted, moral ideas gained through personal experience are limited by the time and subject of this experience. In most cases, moral ideas are present in personal experience but are only effective within a certain set of parameters. For instance, we are born with a sense of justice, a foundation from which to develop ideas about justice. However, this idea of justice is confined to certain spheres and people. The tension between the scope and idea of justice plays out strongly in the earlier example of the father who values his son more than his daughter insofar he does not apply the same ideas or scope of justice to his daughter.

Nevertheless, ideas about morality have the potential to extend to new fields. For example, Winter (2012) suggests that enlarging the scope of ideas about morality can be equated with moral development, rather than moral principles. Winter’s (2012) argument is based on the fact that while basic moral principles were discovered a long time ago, their use remains limited, including those

regarding *respect* and *rights*. Moreover, these ideas have been narrowly applied to particular groups of people so that their extension to slaves, people of color, and females was recognized as significant progress. This progress constitutes an improved moral vision and expanded moral view when preexisting moral ideas are applied in new fields.

Ideas about morality are constructed by moral concepts and moral knowledge. Over-delivering these moral concepts may force students to rely on rote memorization, which they do not enjoy but frequently occurs. However, this does not diminish the function of moral concepts for interpreting reality. Human beings are “code beings,” suggesting that we rely on interpretable codes and language to understand the world and ourselves, and use concepts to define, explain, and reconstruct our reality. Two examples clarify this point. First, the moral concept of *hypocrisy* accuses people of wrong behavior, profoundly influencing human relationships. In other words, this concept encourages people to govern themselves and be morally decent. Second, the phrase “traitor to China” describes and criticizes those who make the wrong choice when confronting life-and-death issues related to the nation, the resulting power of condemnation exceeding normal expectations. Consequently, learning about and understanding moral concepts will benefit everyone. In a consumerist society that worships profit and power, the matter warranting greater attention is not the abundance of moral concepts but their gradual disappearance from our daily vocabulary. The gradual disappearance of moral concepts is not a problem related to linguistics but fundamentally related to how morality itself is disappearing from our daily life experience.

Dewey’s concept of *ideas about morality* is not merely a moral concept but an ethical theory. While the ethical theory is not indispensable, examining it may be beneficial. Starratt (2010) suggests that every teacher’s personal experience, parents, and education contribute to the making of their primary, raw ethical foundation. Characterized by its unrefined and natural condition, this ethical foundation cannot overcome ambiguity and subjective feelings when confronted with real ethical problems in real educational settings. Pre- and on-the-job training are designed to help teachers cultivate a formal ethical foundation and learn how to deal with moral problems by considering ethical theory rather than relying on their subjective feelings. This kind of training helps teachers advance in terms of a new moral vision and fresh moral view that leave the untrained, “emotional-response-first” teachers far behind. However, not everyone is a teacher, and young people, who are mentally and physically immature, are significantly different from their teachers. Therefore, it may be unfair to demand that young people—and people in general—be as morally correct as teachers who have had ethical theory training. Regardless, if people—and especially young people—learn about ethical theory, they could use this knowledge to address the ethical and moral problems in their real lives.

Dewey’s overlooking of ideas about morality is rooted in philosophical traditions. Indeed, Plato’s philosophy and his written records of Socrates stress the importance of ideas, essence,

and principles. They contended that moral thoughts can be attained as long as people fully understand moral principles and that a lack of personal experience does not significantly change anything. Greatly influenced by Plato, London (2001) argues that Aristotle supported a “principle first” ethical approach in his earlier years. In *The Eudemian Ethics*, Aristotle claimed that the main learning method involves learning general moral knowledge and then applying it in specific circumstances. Accordingly, this method suggests that people can gain moral knowledge without personal experience. Aristotle changed his position on moral knowledge in *The Nicomachean Ethics*, emphasizing the significance of practice. Aristotle believed that virtue was practice-based, thus always demanding personal experience. As a high objective in life, virtue cannot be obtained through theory alone. Where Plato and Socrates emphasize the importance of moral knowledge, Aristotle emphasizes the power of moral practice and personal experience. Both arguments have advantages and disadvantages, and Dewey clearly supports Aristotle, accepting the inherent disadvantages of his ideas.

Dewey adopts a factual approach to arguing how “ideas about morality” are ineffective in influencing behavior. However, the argument advanced in this study centers on real life in general rather than individual behavior and supports the notion that ideas about morality are valuable. While Dewey revealed the least desirable aspects of ideas about morality, this study focuses on the means of discovering the most desirable aspects of these ideas. The least and most desirable aspects are not necessarily oppositional; rather, they can support, reinforce, and cooperate with each other. This discussion may illuminate the importance of preventing the least desirable while realizing the most desirable aspects of these ideas.

Is direct moral instruction effective?

Dewey’s judgment of ideas about morality provides a starting point for discussing basic principles and serves as the background for his further critique of “direct moral instruction.” However, this study shows that ideas about morality have some degree of significance, pointing to the existence of another way of estimating the value of “direct moral instruction.”

Dewey criticizes the efficacy of direct moral instruction in two ways. First, this kind of instruction only concerns moral knowledge, which excludes the life experience of children. Dewey argues that the exclusion of the life experience of children from textbooks results in the provision of moral knowledge beyond children’s understanding, thereby preventing the generation of moral ideas from this knowledge. Various methods and approaches are readily available and applicable for the delivery of direct moral instruction, ranging from teaching moral concepts and knowledge, which Dewey critiques, to discussing children’s experiences. This study presents another possible approach: To address children’s confusion at home, at school, and in their social lives, a moral program should be designed to encourage and develop children’s problem-solving abilities—a

process that involves instructing children to make the right choices and do the right things. However, while feasible, such a program will likely encounter several difficulties. Notably, direct moral instruction, which occurs in a particular classroom at a particular time, fails to cover every aspect of life. However, as such a program has the potential to express the core problems and main concerns of children's lives, teachers can cultivate a life instruction and moral appreciation in their students by solving their most pressing concerns first.

Second, Dewey criticizes the efficacy of direct moral instruction based on his observation that direct moral instruction and school life are completely separate. However, this "separation" is only applicable to the complex relationships between the two. As Dewey suggests, the school that applies his "moral trinity" theory will cultivate moral ideas among students. In such ideal circumstances, a moral program will serve to summate moral ideas. In addition to summarizing and organizing informal and randomly acquired moral ideas by applying direct moral instruction, such programs will reveal and organize moral ideas through recourse to moral knowledge and ethical theory, thereby fulfilling an objective to turn away from informality and developing clear consciousness and self-control among students. However, in the worst-case scenario, the school will only fulfill its intellectual responsibilities, with teaching motivated by stringent competition and all classifications arranged according to a knowledge framework that disregards the core beliefs and values of society. A moral program can be implemented as a concrete "moral highland" when a prevailing ignorance of moral education is the norm. The moral highland can provide a space for moral reflection and learning, encouraging students to consider and evaluate school and social life. However, these two scenarios regarding moral education—that is, the most and least desirable—rarely occur in a real school situation, with the most common scenario being neither good nor bad.

Direct moral instruction functions well in at least four aspects. First, it teaches the idea of morality proposed by Dewey. Second, it cultivates moral ideas. Third, it helps create favorable conditions for developing practical connections between ideas about morality and children's personal experiences, resulting in the emergence and transference of moral ideas. Fourth, organically generated moral ideas can transform into awareness through rationality and experience, while self-realization and self-control can surpass the casual and informal acquisition of moral ideas. However, teaching ideas about morality may be equivalent to direct moral instruction, which is the least desirable kind of moral instruction. School life may even teach immoral ideas, which are also undesirable. However, given the aforementioned positive functions, identifying other possibilities of direct instruction beyond this least desirable situation will be beneficial.

As researchers, we were wary of "moral specialization" due to our belief that, regardless of its ambiguity, morality is ubiquitous and thus difficult to achieve through specialization. However, a moral class may be a way to improve morals should we justify the good function of direct moral instruction. Providing that the learning rules are respected, such a program may prove effective.

Indeed, moral specialization is not simply a possibility but a necessity for the future. According to Tuana (2007), we need to make numerous moral choices and decisions in our different capacities—including as individuals, professionals, and citizens. These choices directly influence our own lives as well as those of our relatives, friends, and even strangers. Is this a well-grounded reason to pursue moral specialization? Clearly, individuals expend time and energy learning different kinds of scientific knowledge, despite knowing that the majority of such knowledge will never be applied practically and will likely be forgotten in just a few years. Moral understanding is a lifelong pursuit that deserves special learning. Just as the acquisition of scientific knowledge demands special training, so moral understanding requires diligent and specialized efforts.

As discussed in this study, the success of Dewey's moral trinity is dependent on the quality of a student's life, although it excludes the impact of concrete reality on the student's moral understanding. From this perspective, the school has become, at least provisionally, a place "lacking" morality (Gao, 2013). If it is difficult for school life to cultivate moral ideas effectively, then it follows that other choices should be available. Based on the well-established educational function of social life, Dewey suggests that the value of the school is maintained through the provision of a simplified and purified school life consistent with social life, one which receives both praise and censure, but cannot be reduced to social life. Therefore, if the school life is not thoroughly reliable in terms of its two-sided impact (i.e., its good and bad influence), then the specialized approach (i.e., direct moral instruction) will address this gap. Accordingly, the school is the "moral highland" of society, with the moral class constituting the "moral highland" of the school.

Conclusion

This study concludes by returning to the basic problems Dewey proposed. As noted, Dewey regards the distinction between ideas about morality and moral ideas as the "basic problem" of moral education. More specifically, while moral ideas are effective, ideas about morality are ineffective. Involving the teaching of ideas about morality, direct moral instruction is ineffective. Therefore, moral education requires a moral trinity as a sufficient foundation for moral ideas. Built on sound reasoning, Dewey's argument is considered the basic principle of successful moral education. In general, his approach reveals the objective problems and dangers of direct moral instruction, thus guiding the provision of moral education in schools.

Dewey's theory suffers other limitations. First, moral ideas acquired in life are not enough to ensure moral decency, and moral illiteracy still occurs. Second, the ideal moral trinity may be practically out of reach and rarely be fulfilled due to harsh reality. Third, ideas about morality can be evaluated based on more than the impact they have on behavior; the rich potentiality of moral knowledge to "transform into" moral ideas is always present. Fourth, in the least desirable

circumstance, direct moral instruction involves the teaching of ideas about morality. However, as this circumstance is not guaranteed, direct moral instruction may also lead to moral ideas.

As moral ideas are insufficient, and ideas about morality are not meaningless and have the potential to become moral ideas, the content of “basic problems” should be reconsidered with attention to the important difference between these two concepts in Dewey’s theory. This prompts the question: What are the “basic problems” in moral education? The distinction between moral ideas and ideas about morality is only the first step and illuminates the advantages, disadvantages, and working conditions of these two concepts. This study demonstrates that the “basic problem” of moral education should also consider how to maximize the potential and address the deficiencies of these two concepts.

This study advances an alternative way of understanding the “basic problems” of moral education as follows. First, an objective understanding of the sufficiency and deficiency of moral ideas and ideas about morality can be applied to reinforce and improve moral ideas to reach the consciousness and influence self-control. Second, profound understanding of the complexity of school life provides a context for the proper application of direct moral instruction. Third, understanding ideas about morality involves identifying their potential value through their connection to moral ideas. Finally, complete understanding of the preferred aspects and potential dangers of direct moral instruction is clearest in its warning against the least desirable outcome of direct moral instruction, prompting consideration of the advantages of establishing a “moral highland.”

As life moral education researchers, we have been particularly concerned about the legitimacy of the moral education curriculum. Our rethinking of Dewey’s “basic principles” is simultaneously a reevaluation of our own life moral education theory. Rather than a rejection of Dewey’s theory, we have sought to present an alternative perspective to moral education. The possibilities of life moral education appear to have grown with the implementation of direct moral instruction and ignoring of the imperfections of school life. However, favoring life education while overlooking the value of direct moral instruction may produce new obstacles, including little opportunity for the systematic learning of moral knowledge, and the failure of students to consciously pursue moral knowledge. Other hurdles include the fact that the moral reflection of life lacks an academic guide, the absence of an outer drive to erase moral bias, and the difficulty of differentiating and managing “new moral facts.” Therefore, another rational form of moral education may be the combination of life moral education and an organized moral curriculum, wherein life serves as the base and is supplemented by moral specialization.

Authors’ note

This article is partially based on the authors’ recent study of Dewey’s moral education theory, which was published as a Chinese-language article in the journal *Educational Research* (《教育研究》) in January 2020.

However, in the current article, the authors have extended their focus from identifying Dewey's influence and our breakthrough in Chinese educational theory and practice—the major concern of the article published in *Educational Research*—to an alternative interpretation of “basic principles” in moral education and an exploration of another approach to the “basic problem” of moral education. The use of the analysis of Dewey's moral education theory has been authorized by *Educational Research* and acknowledged by *ECNU Review of Education*.

Contributorship

Desheng Gao was responsible for writing the bulk of main body and finalizing the paper. He covered various aspects of the paper including analyzing *Moral Principles in Education*, revealing limitations of Dewey's moral education theory and reinterpreting two basic conceptions as another approach to the “basic problem” of moral education. Di Wang contributed by writing the abstract, revising the essay thoroughly, and responding to reviewers' comments.

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