

MORAL EDUCATION AND RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION; A PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The development of consciousness and identity of individuals and communities on ethical and moral issues requires moral education along with the instruction of religion. In the current societal conditions, the philosophy of moral education constitutes moral education's focus on the transmission, internalization, and practice of values. While both moral education and moral formation along with instruction and integration of religion pivots on spiritual and theological narratives, the present research attempts to delineate the philosophical perspectives of that integration. It investigates the historical dimensions and foundations of moral education considering the influence of religion on moral evolution, the philosophical rationales both for and against the debated integration of religious education within the framework of formal education, and education's implications on integrated and overall development of the human person. This study is anchored in virtue ethics theory as articulated by Aristotle, complemented by Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development. Virtue ethics emphasizes character formation through habituation, moral exemplars, and community values, aligning with the moral and spiritual aims of religious instruction. Kohlberg's developmental theory provides a psychological dimension, explaining how individuals progress through stages of moral reasoning—from externally imposed norms to autonomous ethical judgment. Together, these theories provide a philosophical and developmental framework for understanding how moral education and religious instruction contribute to ethical maturity and social responsibility. In addressing the issues, integrating arguments from the writings of the ancients and more recent authors, the author presents the case for a pluralistic dialogical approach as a means of constructive moral engagement.

Keywords: Moral education, Religious instruction, Philosophy, Ethics, Values, Education

Introduction

Education is conceptualized as more than the transmission of intellectual knowledge. Character formation and the nurture of dispositions are of primary importance and fundamental to all forms of education (Carr, 2020). Moral education aims to foster virtue, provide moral reasoning, and prepare responsible citizens. Religious instruction, however, introduces the learner to the theology, ethics, and spirituality that shapes behavior and worldview (Haydon, 2012). In pluralistic societies, the overlap of moral education and religious instruction has ignited philosophical discourse, particularly regarding the functions of the state, autonomy of the learner, and the preservation of moral and cultural heritage.

The discipline of philosophy profoundly informs the analysis of aims, substance, and strategies of moral and religious education. Evaluating normative claims, clarifying concepts, and offering integration frameworks are all philosophical pursuits that aid moral and religious education integration to promote individual flourishing and social cohesion (Audi, 2017).

Moral education is the conscious attempt by educators and educational institutions to promote moral advancement, ethical reasoning, and the virtuous character of students (Arthur et al. 2016). It involves not only the instruction and education of moral values such as honesty, justice, respect, and responsibility, and the cultivation of the ability to make ethical decisions but also the appreciation of moral education as a guiding force to help learners through the stages of moral reasoning as posited by Kohlberg (1981), specifically moving from moral obedience to the universal ethical principles.

Religious instruction includes the teaching of beliefs, doctrines, practices, and moral codes ascribed to a religion (Sullivan 2018). It can be nurturing (confessional), in the sense of promoting adherence to a particular tradition, or it can be non-confessional, which is aimed as teaching other religions to promote understanding and tolerance (Jackson 2019). For a long time, in many cultures, moral education was a form of religion instruction as moral codes were intertwined with faith teachings, and religion and institutions of faith were the primary source of education.

The philosophical approach to education involves the rationales, ethical underpinnings, and coherence of educators' practices. It concerns the educational questions of what is to be taught, why, and how is to be (Carr 2020). Educational philosophers such as John Dewey (1934) and Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) take different approaches; the former ascribes primacy to rational critical reflection and moral autonomy whereas the latter emphasizes the moral communities and traditions.

In the past, teaching morality and religion together was the norm. Every civilization—Greece, Rome, and Israel—regarded education as serving moral and intellectual goals, often with a religious worldview (Wilson, 2017). In Medieval Europe, the Church was the educator and moral education was purely Christian (Sullivan, 2018). In many African societies, the moral lessons in indigenous religious traditions and practices were embedded in stories, and communal practices (Gbadegesin, 2020).

There was a shift towards secular moral education during the Enlightenment with a focus on reason and individual autonomy. Immanuel Kant was one of the most important Enlightenment thinkers and argued that reason, as opposed to religion, should be the basis of moral claims (Kant, 1785/1996). Religious education was also prominent indicating that religion was still the backbone of moral expectations and social identity in many communities.

Theoretical Framework

Every philosophical and educational inquiry rests on a theoretical foundation that guides its conceptual orientation and analysis. This study adopts a dual-theoretical framework, drawing from Aristotle's Virtue Ethics and Lawrence Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development. Together, these theories provide complementary philosophical and psychological bases for understanding the processes of moral formation and the role of religious instruction in cultivating ethical behavior and social responsibility.

1. Aristotle's Virtue Ethics

The first theoretical pillar of this study is Virtue Ethics, as developed by Aristotle in his seminal work *Nicomachean Ethics* (trans. 2009). Virtue ethics centers on the cultivation of moral character rather than the mere observance of moral rules or the pursuit of consequences. Aristotle posited that moral excellence (*arete*) is achieved through the habitual practice of virtue—actions that reflect a balance between extremes, or what he termed the “Golden Mean.” According to Aristotle, education plays a critical role in moral formation because it enables individuals to develop virtues such as courage, temperance, justice, and prudence through repeated practice and rational reflection.

From an educational standpoint, virtue ethics provides a holistic moral philosophy that integrates thought, emotion, and behavior. It emphasizes the importance of role models and moral exemplars—teachers, parents, and religious leaders—who embody virtuous conduct and inspire learners to emulate them (Arthur et al., 2016). Within religious instruction, the narratives of saints, prophets, and moral heroes serve a similar purpose by offering concrete examples of virtuous living.

Aristotle's virtue ethics thus aligns with the moral objectives of religious education. Both traditions aim to cultivate good character and foster the internalization of virtues rather than mere external conformity to rules. As MacIntyre (1984) later argued, virtues are sustained within moral traditions and communities, making the integration of religion and moral education philosophically coherent and educationally enriching.

2. Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development

The second theoretical foundation is Lawrence Kohlberg's (1981) Theory of Moral Development, a psychological model explaining how individuals progress through stages of moral reasoning. Kohlberg identified three major levels—pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional—each comprising two stages that represent increasing moral sophistication. His theory suggests that moral education should aim to move learners beyond obedience and conformity toward principled moral reasoning grounded in justice, autonomy, and universal ethical principles.

Kohlberg's framework is particularly relevant to this study because it emphasizes cognitive moral growth and the role of education in advancing moral maturity. Religious instruction, when philosophically grounded, can provide the moral content and reflective context necessary for learners to engage in higher stages of moral reasoning. For example, discussions of moral dilemmas found in sacred texts or theological debates can stimulate critical thinking and moral reflection, consistent with Kohlberg's advocacy for moral dialogue (Narvaez, 2010).

However, unlike Aristotle's virtue ethics—which focuses on character formation through habituation—Kohlberg's theory focuses on rational moral judgment. The integration of both frameworks enables a comprehensive understanding of moral development that encompasses both cognitive reasoning and affective moral character. This dual emphasis mirrors

the dual aims of moral education and religious instruction: to form morally responsible individuals who both think and act ethically.

3. Integrative Relevance of the Two Theories

The integration of virtue ethics and moral development theory offers a robust philosophical foundation for moral education and religious instruction. Virtue ethics emphasizes the content and embodiment of morality—what virtues to cultivate and how to live them out—while Kohlberg’s theory emphasizes the process of moral reasoning—how individuals come to understand, question, and justify moral principles. Together, they provide a balanced framework that supports both moral formation and moral autonomy.

In educational practice, this theoretical synthesis encourages both character-based moral instruction (rooted in community and tradition) and reason-based moral dialogue (rooted in reflection and critique). The philosophical implication is that moral and religious education should neither impose belief uncritically nor reject moral tradition outright, but rather engage learners in a reflective process that harmonizes reason and faith, autonomy and tradition (Habermas, 2008; Audi, 2017).

Thus, this theoretical framework undergirds the argument of this study: that moral education and religious instruction, when guided by philosophical reflection, can jointly foster moral maturity, ethical awareness, and responsible citizenship in a pluralistic society.

Literature Review

Numerous studies have been conducted on the interplay of moral education and religious education. These studies have been conducted in the fields of philosophy, education, theology, and ethics. This literature review focuses on three primary dimensions: the theoretical and philosophical moral education literature; the contribution of religion to moral maturation; and recent writings on the harmonization of moral education and religious education in a pluralistic context.

1. The philosophical and historical dimensions of moral education

Literature demonstrates that moral education was embedded in the instructional design of programs long before the structured practice emerged. The emphasis on the importance of moral education and character development in the works of Plato and Aristotle is well known. According to Plato, it is the function of education not only to cultivate the soul but also to direct it toward the attainment of virtue, justice, and the good, (Plato, trans. 2004, pp. 54-57). Aristotle, in *Nicomachean Ethics*, defined moral virtue as a disposition that is formed through habituation, rationalization, and moral exemplars, and claimed that a soul is well-ordered only if it has been trained in the virtues of courage, justice, temperance, and harmonization, all of which moral dedication is ever-present. (Aristotle, trans. 2009, pp 9-12).

Moral instruction during the medieval period was primarily integrated with religious education. In Christendom, the Church’s schools taught theology and concurrently provided moral instruction, focusing on the cultivation of various Christian virtues (Sullivan, 2018). Likewise in Islamic education, *tarbiyah* (moral nurturing) was taught along with other religious instruction within the framework of *madrasahs* (Al Zeera, 2001). In several African communities, oral traditions, religious ceremonies, and the elder members of the community provided moral education. Here, moral norms were intertwined with and inseparable from religious cosmologies (Gbadegesin, 1991).

During the Enlightenment period, there was a notable transition from religious moral teachings to secular morality. For philosophers like Immanuel Kant (1785/1996), moral obligation arises from one’s rationality and autonomy, and not a divine order. John Dewey (1934)

characterized moral development as an experiential process that entails the rejection of authoritarian religious moralism and the embrace of democratic moral reasoning. These developments in philosophy opened up the space for moral education to develop as a distinct discipline, and, to a large extent, secular as well.

2. Religion and Moral Development

The influence of religion on moral development has been covered within the frameworks of psychology, philosophy, and theology. Lawrence Kohlberg (1981) developed a stage theory of moral development that describes a shift from the ‘external’ to the ‘internal.’ Although Kohlberg’s work does not seem to reference religion directly, it has been noted that religious teaching aids the development of movement through these stages (Narvaez 2010).

Religion creates rituals, stories, and moral codes that alter an individual’s view of the world (Haydon 2012). For instance, the Bible, Quran, and Bhagavad Gita provide narratives of virtue, moral commandments, and exemplars of moral behavior. Research has indicated that moral education (such as that provided within a religious context) encourages altruism, honesty, and a sense of responsibility (King and Boyatzis 2015).

Despite the positive influence of religious education on moral development, some scholars identify the risks associated with it. James Rest (1986) claimed the disconnection of moral belief and reasoning, and Carr (2010) criticized the promotion of moral autonomy through religious instruction as uncritical. The goal is to embrace the moral elements of religion and engage with them in a philosophically critical manner.

3. Contemporary Perspectives in Pluralistic Societies

The combination of multiculturalism and secularism creates challenges in the contemporary integration of moral and religious education. Habermas (2008) proposes the idea of a post-secular society in which religious and secular moral discourses co-exist in the public sphere and enter rational exchanges with one another. Hence, educational systems must embrace moral and religious pluralism by offering balanced moral literacy and religious literacy (Jackson, 2019).

Arthur et al. (2016) and other scholars propose character education anchored on secular virtue ethics and religious moral traditions, as well as integrative empathy and civic virtue. This is appropriate in the virtue ethics framework where religious stories and moral exemplars are considered supportive and instrumental in character formation, as long as the religious system is not forced (MacIntyre, 1984).

Incorporating moral and religious education in a dialogical and inclusive manner yields positive student moral reasoning and moral social behavior, as empirical studies illustrate (Nucci & Narvaez, 2014). Furthermore, the omission of religious elements may leave individuals with moral relativism, cultural disconnection, or a combination of both (Thiessen, 2018).

Educational philosophers propose that moral education should entail instruction in moral reasoning and the exercise of empathy. When subjected to critical scrutiny, religious education can also offer valuable and rich content, as well as structures that inform and deepen moral education (Audi, 2017).

Critical Gaps in the Literature

Although there is an abundant literature, there are still a number of gaps. Much of the literature still pertains primarily to the West, as there has been less emphasis on African and indigenous contexts where religion and morality are tightly woven (Gbadegesin, 1991). Further, there has been little to no philosophical discourse on the integration of disparate epistemologies—religious, moral, and secular—within pluralistic frameworks of education.

Third, there are many empirical studies that focus on the short term, and thus, the long-term development of the moral dimension is often neglected. These gaps suggest that more interdisciplinary research is needed that integrates philosophical discourse, theological insights, and educational theories.

4. Philosophical Appraisal of Moral Education and Religious Instruction

Moral Autonomy and Religious Authority:

A central philosophical debate is the tension between promoting moral autonomy and adhering to religious authority. Liberal philosophers such as Dewey (1934) and Kohlberg (1981) argue that education should foster critical moral reasoning independent of religious dogma. In contrast, religious philosophers argue that moral education divorced from transcendent values becomes relativistic and unstable (MacIntyre, 1984).

Pluralism and Moral Consensus:

In pluralistic societies, integrating religious instruction into moral education raises questions about whose values should be taught. Philosophers like Habermas (2008) advocate for a “post-secular” public sphere where religious and secular reasoning coexist through dialogue. Religious instruction, if approached inclusively, can contribute to shared moral understandings while respecting diversity.

The Virtue Ethics Approach:

Virtue ethics, rooted in Aristotle, emphasizes character formation through habituation and moral exemplars (Aristotle, trans. 2009). Religious instruction often provides narratives and role models—such as prophets, saints, or moral heroes—that exemplify virtues. A philosophical integration of virtue ethics with religious instruction can promote both personal moral development and communal moral cohesion.

Implications for Education:

Integrating moral education and religious instruction has several educational implications:

1. **Holistic Formation:** Education should aim at the intellectual, moral, and spiritual development of learners, nurturing both reason and faith (Arthur et al., 2016).
2. **Curriculum Design:** Philosophical frameworks can guide the development of curricula that balance moral reasoning with religious narratives, fostering critical engagement rather than indoctrination.
3. **Teacher Preparation:** Educators should be trained to facilitate moral and religious discussions sensitively and inclusively, respecting diverse perspectives.
4. **Public Policy:** Policymakers must navigate the legal and ethical complexities of incorporating religious instruction in public education while upholding freedom of conscience and religion.

Findings

Based on the philosophical analysis, literature review, and theoretical grounding in Aristotle’s Virtue Ethics and Kohlberg’s Moral Development Theory, several significant findings emerge. These findings reflect the interconnectedness between moral education and religious instruction and their collective role in shaping ethical consciousness in contemporary society.

1. Moral and Religious Education Share a Common Goal of Character Formation

The first major finding is that moral education and religious instruction pursue a shared objective—the cultivation of moral character and virtuous citizenship. Both educational approaches aim to form individuals who act responsibly and ethically within their communities. While moral education emphasizes rational moral judgment, religious instruction nurtures

spiritual values and virtues such as compassion, justice, humility, and integrity. Philosophically, this convergence supports Aristotle's assertion that moral excellence is achieved through the habitual practice of virtue and moral exemplarity.

In contemporary contexts, the integration of these two domains helps produce well-rounded moral agents who embody both ethical reasoning and moral sentiment. This finding underscores the necessity of viewing moral and religious education not as competing domains but as complementary dimensions of holistic moral formation.

2. Philosophical Reflection Enhances the Quality of Moral and Religious Instruction

Another finding is that philosophical analysis enriches both moral education and religious instruction by providing conceptual clarity, rational grounding, and ethical coherence. Philosophy challenges educators and learners to critically evaluate moral norms, religious doctrines, and cultural assumptions rather than accepting them uncritically.

Through philosophical reflection, moral education avoids moral relativism, while religious instruction avoids dogmatism. This dialogical relationship—between reason and faith—ensures that moral and religious education together contributes to the development of reflective moral agents capable of ethical discernment in complex pluralistic societies.

3. Religious Narratives Serve as Powerful Tools for Moral Formation

The study finds that religious stories, rituals, and teachings function as moral pedagogies that shape ethical identity and behavior. Across traditions, religious instruction employs parables, moral exemplars, and spiritual disciplines to internalize moral principles in learners.

From a virtue ethics perspective, these narratives serve as moral exemplars that embody virtues such as courage, honesty, and love. Within Christian education, for example, the life of Christ becomes a model of sacrificial love and justice; in Islam, the Sunnah of the Prophet exemplifies obedience and moral integrity; and in African traditional religions, moral wisdom is embedded in communal proverbs and oral traditions. These examples reinforce the Aristotelian view that moral virtue is cultivated through imitation and habituation.

4. Moral Autonomy and Religious Authority Can Be Harmonized

The philosophical and theoretical analyses reveal that the apparent tension between moral autonomy and religious authority is not necessarily irreconcilable. Theory emphasizes moral autonomy achieved through reasoned judgment, while religious traditions emphasize obedience to divine or moral law. However, a philosophical approach allows both dimensions to coexist through reflective faith and rational commitment. This harmony is achieved when learners are encouraged to engage critically with religious teachings, understanding moral laws not as imposed commands but as rationally justifiable ethical principles. Such an approach aligns with Dewey's call for education that fosters both moral inquiry and spiritual reflection.

5. Pluralism Requires a Dialogical and Inclusive Approach

In today's pluralistic world, the study finds that moral and religious education must be inclusive and dialogical. Exclusivist or dogmatic instruction can alienate students from diverse backgrounds, while purely secular moral education risks moral superficiality. The most effective approach integrates diverse moral and religious perspectives through critical dialogue and mutual respect.

This finding supports the idea of a post-secular educational model—where secular and religious worldviews engage in reasoned conversation, fostering moral understanding across differences. Such dialogical education encourages tolerance, empathy, and civic harmony, all of which are essential for ethical coexistence in multicultural societies.

6. Moral and Religious Education Contribute to Holistic Human Development

The study also finds that the integration of moral education and religious instruction contributes to holistic human development—the intellectual, moral, and spiritual growth of learners. When moral reasoning is grounded in both ethical philosophy and religious wisdom, education addresses the whole person: reason, emotion, and spirit. This holistic model aligns with virtue ethics, which views moral formation as a lifelong process of shaping character within community and tradition. It also resonates with Kohlberg’s vision of moral maturity as the internalization of universal ethical principles. Together, these insights affirm that moral and religious instruction is not merely academic exercises but transformative practices that build ethical communities.

7. Contextual Gaps and Need for Culturally Grounded Models

A final finding is that context-specific research remains insufficient, particularly in African and indigenous educational settings where religion and morality are deeply interwoven. Western-centric frameworks often neglect communal ethics and spiritual worldviews that play vital roles in moral formation within African societies. Future scholarship should thus explore integrative models of moral and religious education that are culturally relevant, spiritually grounded, and philosophically rigorous.

8. Educational Implications

The research posits that philosophically integrating moral education with religious education has the potential to achieve all dimensions of human development—intellectual, moral, and spiritual. Schools that implement both domains in a balanced, critical, and inclusive manner tend to promote advanced moral reasoning, civic engagement, and intercultural respect (Arthur et al., 2016; Audi, 2017).

Conclusion

This seminar has examined moral education and religious instruction from a philosophical perspective, highlighting conceptual foundations, historical development, philosophical debates, and educational implications. Moral education aims to nurture ethical reasoning and virtues, while religious instruction provides theological and moral frameworks rooted in traditions. Philosophy helps critically analyze and integrate these dimensions in education. Moral education and religious instruction are mutually enriching when approached philosophically. A purely secular moral education may lack transcendence, while uncritical religious instruction may stifle moral autonomy. Philosophical reflection offers a balanced path that respects pluralism while promoting moral responsibility and character formation.

Recommendations

1. Educational systems should foster dialogue between moral philosophy and religious traditions to enrich moral education.
2. Curriculum planners should integrate ethical reasoning, comparative religion, and virtue ethics to promote both moral autonomy and cultural rootedness.
3. Teachers should adopt pedagogical methods that encourage critical reflection, empathy, and interfaith understanding.
4. More interdisciplinary research is needed on effective models of integrating moral and religious education in diverse contexts.

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