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Moral Identity and Education in a Multicultural Society

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ABSTRACT: In answering the question, "Which moral identity has to be developed in a multicultural society?" we draw a distinction between *public* and *non-public* identities of persons. On our view, a liberal democracy is characterized by a *specific conception* of these two central components of moral identity. In section 2, we concentrate on the public identity, while, in section 3, the non-public identity is the centre of interest. In explaining these main components of moral identity, we will appeal to those aspects of identity as set out by Rorty & Wong which are constitutive of *moral* identity.

KEY WORDS: moral identity, multiculturalism, pluralism, Rawls, morality

I. INTRODUCTION AND PRESENTATION OF THE PROBLEM

The issue we want to raise in this contribution concerns the moral identity of persons in a multicultural society. Multiculturality implies, by definition, a moral pluralism, that is to say, a variety of incompatible and conflicting conceptions of the good life. Given such a pluralistic society, we pose the question, "Which requirements, if any, apply to the moral identity of persons, not only with regard to their more personal sphere of life, but also concerning their role as citizens?" This question must be understood as a typical *educational* question. What we aim at in education is the cultivation and development of a certain moral identity. In other words, our question is, "If we want to prepare our children for a life in a multicultural society, which moral identity should be our aim of education?"

Answering this question self-evidently depends on specific, normative starting-points. The perspective that we take as a starting-point is modern democratic liberalism, in particular, the political liberalism that is defended in recent publications by John Rawls (1993). This implies that we will explore which moral identity best 'fits' a liberal democracy. To put it yet another way, we are trying to find an answer to the question, "What demands should a liberal-democratic society make on the development of the moral identity of children?"

In our analysis we will make use of the distinctions that are made by Amélie Rorty & David Wong (1990) between different components or aspects of the identity of persons. In the first place, the identity of a person is partially determined by his or her *somatic dispositions*. Since such characteristics will influence, for example, the posture, gesticulation, and pattern of movement of persons (slender and graceful, fat and clumsy), every culture has certain social (and aesthetic) norms for somatic dispositions. Therefore, defining the identity of the other – as well as oneself – is partially dependent on these somatic dispositions.

A second aspect of personal identity mentioned by Rorty & Wong (1990) consists in *temperamental* and *psychological qualities*. The way in which people judge this component of identity, both that of themselves and of others, is extensively analyzed in modern personality theory. Through factor-analysis of such judgements, the same five personality dimensions are always found. These so-called 'Big Five' are generally described using such terms as 'extraversion', 'agreeableness', 'conscientiousness', 'neuroticism', and 'intellect' or 'openness to experience' (Hofstee, 1990).

According to Rorty & Wong (1990), *social role* and *socially-defined group identity* are also important aspects of personal identity. Social role is tied up with societal institutions and practices (family, profession, etc.), while group identity, which is often associated with stereotypical traits, is connected with ethnicity, religious community, class, age or gender.

Finally, the *ideal identity* or *ideal self* is a component of identity that consists in identification with a value-system or with certain ideals. According to Harry Frankfurt, the identity of persons is even intrinsically connected with ideals which need not necessarily be moral in nature. Frankfurt writes, "If someone has no ideals, there is nothing that he can bring himself to do. Moreover, since nothing is necessary to him, there is nothing that he can be said essentially to be" (Frankfurt, 1993, p. 25).

Our line of reasoning will be as follows. In our answer to the question, "Which moral identity has to be developed in a multicultural society?" we will make a distinction between *public* and *non-public* identities of persons.¹ We will try to make it plausible that a liberal democracy is characterized by a *specific conception* of these two central components of moral identity. In section 2 we concentrate on the public identity, while in section III the nonpublic identity is the centre of interest. In the explanation of these main components of moral identity, we will appeal to the aspects of Rorty & Wong (1990) already described. However, not all of these aspects are constitutive of *moral* identity. This is especially true for somatic dispositions and temperamental qualities. Therefore, in our analysis of the public and nonpublic moral identity, these aspects will be left out of consideration.

II. PUBLIC MORAL IDENTITY

In political philosophy, a distinction is drawn between the so-called public and the nonpublic domain. The public domain is defined as the field of legitimate state interference (in the form of legislation), whilst the nonpublic domain concerns the field in which the citizen is offered the freedom of living her life according to her own conception of the good.

There are different opinions with regard to what is considered to be part of the public or nonpublic domain. In other words, the concepts of 'public' and 'non-public' are filled in with the help of different normative conceptions. Typical of a liberal democratic society is the idea that public morality is relatively *small*,

and that, consequently, the nonpublic morality is correspondingly *broad*. In illiberal societies, on the other hand, the relation is precisely the reverse: public morality – and, with that, the field of state interference – is comprehensive, while the scope for living one's life according to one's own values is limited and, sometimes, virtually absent. In a theocratic society (such as Iran, for example) (broad) public morality comprises far-reaching prescriptions concerning clothing and appearance, the division of roles between the sexes, the media, and, of course, the arts as well. Even capital punishment was decreed for an author on the basis of a literary text.

Now what is the content of that small liberal morality? In the first place, public morality in a Western democracy comprises a group of relatively concrete and elementary rules (cf. Spiecker & Steutel, 1995). The general observance of the rules we have in mind here forms a central condition for every minimally tolerable form of social life, including the illiberal and undemocratic variants. Therefore, the public morality in a liberal society will include a complex of rules aiming to protect the elementary interests of the members of society by inhibiting certain forms of behavior, in particular, expressions of aggression, hostility, and greed (cf. Mackie, 1977, pp. 107–111). In this connection, Richard Peters (1981) speaks about *basic* rules. As examples, he mentions the rules which oblige us to observe contracts, to respect collective or individual property, to avoid inflicting unnecessary physical injury, and also to care for the younger generation. The positive obligation to offer help that does not put a great strain on us but produces great benefit to our fellows can be considered as a basic rule as well.

Although the interpretation of basic rules varies from culture to culture, such rules are in fact universal in character. Corresponding with basic rules are specific human objectives and social practices that are considered to be of importance in every minimally tolerable society, including the protection of life against aggression and such other miseries as pain, illness, death and hunger. Despite all differences in their conceptions of the good life, people will, given the vulnerability of human existence, consider theft, cruelty, rape, robbery and arson to be evils. "All ways of life require protection against the great evils, even though different conceptions of the good may rank their prevention in very different orders of priority" (Hampshire, 1989, p. 91). Consequently, to keep life in a society livable and tolerable, people will have to impart to their children the capacity and the willingness to observe basic rules at all times. These are, at any rate, the mental dispositions that form part of the desired public moral identity in a liberal democratic society.

Moreover, in Western democracies, the public morality comprises a number of basic rights (and the corresponding duties to respect these rights). Here, we refer in particular to the classical civic liberties (such as freedom of thought and liberty of conscience) and the political-democratic rights (such as the right to vote and the right to run for public office). These basic rights correspond to the well-known civic virtues, in particular, the virtues of tolerance, non-discrimination, reasonableness and democratic attitudes, including the willingness to compromise. A person who has acquired these virtues is able and willing to support

and respect the basic rights. These mental dispositions also form part of the public moral identity of persons in a liberal-democratic society. And, again, an important aim of education is indicated here: we should make clear to the child – as future citizen – what a liberal democracy really is, and what this requires of people living and working in it.

The public morality of our multicultural society, we can summarize, consists of basic rules and basic rights. Basic rules underlie all minimally tolerable forms of social life, including the illiberal. Thus, an ethically relativistic attitude with regard to such rules is out of place. Basic rights on the other hand, are only widely respected in liberal societies. In spite of this, to citizens of a multicultural society, a culturally relativistic point of view with regard to our liberal-democratic achievements will also be unacceptable. An important aspect of our personal identity corresponds to the described rules and rights: the desired public moral identity in a multicultural society. After the recent violence against ethnic groups in Germany, Uganda, and the former Yugoslavia, we have a notion of what the absence of such a public morality can imply.

Let us now connect our outline of the public moral identity with the aspects of personal identity that are distinguished by Rorty & Wong. First, it turns out that this public identity is connected with a specific *social role*, namely, our role as citizens. A particular feature of this social role is that no one can escape from it. At birth, one automatically becomes a (future) citizen of a society, either by blood-relationship (Germany) or by place of birth (France). In a liberal-democratic society, the role of citizen is laid down by basic rules and basic rights. And the aspect of our identity that is connected with this role is composed of mental dispositions that correspond to these rules and rights.

Secondly, we can consider the public moral identity as a special form of *group identity*, namely, an identity that we share with all fellow-citizens. It is the common identity of the group of citizens in a liberal-democratic society. Citizenship, according to Kymlicka and Norman, is not just a certain status, defined by a set of rights and responsibilities, but “It is also an identity, an expression of one’s membership in a political community” (Kymlicka & Norman, 1994, p. 369). The oft-expressed complaint that modern society is fragmented and individualized needs, therefore, to be relativized. Rawls rightly claims that citizens in a well-ordered society, in which justice is conceived as fairness, do have final aims in common (cf. Rawls, 1993, p. 202). Whilst these citizen do not affirm the same substantial doctrine of the good, they do share basic ends, in particular, the end of supporting institutions and relationships that meet basic rights and basic rules. It is wrong, according to Macedo, to assume that only substantial conceptions of the good can furnish persons with common ends: “Justice furnishes liberal citizens with ends capable of imparting a deep and noble unity to liberal community” (Macedo, 1992, p. 219). In a properly functioning liberal democracy, public moral identity is a binding and unity-creating element. Given our explanation, this identity is less “thin” than some communitarians want us to believe. In any case, the public identity certainly is not an ‘unencumbered self’ (Sandel, 1982, p. 182). On the contrary, it is a social self that is rooted in the long tradition of liberal democracy.

III. NONPUBLIC MORAL IDENTITY

In Western democracies the public morality is rather small. This implies that the nonpublic domain, that is to say, the field of thought and action in which the state has no right of coercive control, is relatively broad. In a liberal-democratic society this 'free space' is guaranteed and protected by the small morality, in particular, by basic liberties such as freedom of movement, freedom of speech, freedom of press and so on. Ultimately, it is shared public moral identity that enables and maintains the broad nonpublic domain.

In a liberal democracy, public morality prescribes only in a limited manner how we are to arrange our lives. The members of such a society, whether or not they are joining a particular tradition, will themselves have to develop a nonpublic morality. In the relevant literature such a relatively broad morality is generally called a "*conception of the good life*". According to Rawls, such a conception consists of a more or less determinate scheme of final aims, that is, of aims that we think intrinsically worthwhile, as well as of attachments and loyalties with regard to persons, groups, and associations. Moreover, a conception of the good is closely associated with a religious, philosophical, or moral doctrine, by reference to which we understand the value and the significance of our ends, attachments and loyalties (cf. Rawls, 1993, pp. 19–20, 74, 108, 302).

The nonpublic moral identity can be explained in terms of a conception of the good. In other words, what constitutes our nonpublic moral identity are aims that we think worthwhile striving after and attachments with other persons, groups and associations which we think important to maintain. Moral education in a multicultural society consequently does not only consist of civic education, that is, education for good citizenship. We also have to help and support the child to develop his (personal) conception of the good life.

Let us now return to the aspects of personal identity distinguished by Rorty & Wong (1990). In the first place, the nonpublic moral identity, obviously, must be understood in terms of the *ideal self*. How we define our own nonpublic identity is, at any rate, a function of the conception of the good with which we identify and from which we will organize our life. According to Charles Taylor, there is an essential connection between our identity, our sense of self, and our sense of the good (Taylor, 1989, p. 41). The question "Who am I?" can only be understood and answered from a moral framework: "To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose" (*ibid.*, p. 27). In short, we only have a nonpublic morality to the extent that we succeed in committing ourselves to a specific conception of the good life.

In the second place, we can connect the nonpublic moral identity with the aspect called '*group identity*' by Rorty & Wong (1990). To the extent that we share our conception of the good life with others, our personal nonpublic identity coincides with a specific group identity. If we consider ourselves, for example, to be Protestant, Muslim, Socialist or Humanist, then we have in mind that aspect of our identity that we share with particular groups in society.

A specific component of group identity is *national identity*. A person identifies herself as a member of a community with its own language, culture and history. Citizens of a liberal democracy can have different national identities, like the Basques and Catalans in Spain and the Flemish and Walloons in Belgium (cf. Tamir, 1992). On our view, however, many aspects of this national identity should not be regarded as components of the *moral* (group) identity.

IV. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Our main question was "If we want to prepare our children for a life in a multicultural society, then what moral identity ought to be our aim in education?" Our answer is that, in a liberal democracy, moral education must consist of two aspects. On the one hand, we should cultivate a public identity in our children. We have to impart to the young the dispositions that will make them able and willing to respect basic rules and basic rights. This aim of education, the specific civic component, is in principle the same for all children, regardless of their ethnic, cultural or national background. On the other hand, we should also help our children to develop their nonpublic identity, that is to say, we must support our children in finding a substantial conception of the good life. In a multicultural society, the content of this aim of moral education will vary considerably among groups.

However, what is also typical of a liberal-democratic society is the specific *relation* between public and nonpublic components of moral identity. The small public morality indicates, as it were, the limits within which practising conceptions of the good is allowed. To use the words of Rawls, "'the Right' has priority over 'the Good'" (Rawls, 1993). Therefore, in upbringing and education, children must be taught that they are not to identify with conceptions which are contrary to the liberal small morality. An example of such a conception is a fundamentalistic religious view of life. He who has acquired such a conception will pay little respect to liberal basic rights and can even commit terrorist acts against fellow citizens or the state. Another example concerns groups in which only their own extended family, tribe or ethnic grouping defines their moral identity (so-called a-moral familism). In all these cases of moral development, the desired differentiation between public and nonpublic components of the identity is stagnated.

Philosophers have very often discussed the question to what extent persons in a liberal-democratic society should be able and willing to reflect critically on conceptions of the good life, including the conception imparted to them in their upbringing. Amy Gutmann, for example, is of the opinion that a liberal government "Must aid children in developing the capacity to understand and to evaluate competing conceptions of the good life" (Gutmann, 1987, p. 44). William Galston, on the other hand, thinks that liberal government has to guarantee precisely the liberty "to live unexamined as well as examined lives" (Galston, 1991, p. 254). Regardless of one's opinion on these complicated matters, we definitely have to impart to our children the disposition to evaluate critically whether or

not conceptions of the good life exceed the bounds of public morality. Even though liberalism does not necessarily imply the ideal of critical reflection on conceptions of the good as such, giving priority to small morality implies that citizens should be able to distance themselves from their nonpublic identity in order to determine to what extent this identity conflicts with basic rules and basic rights (cf. Larmore, 1990, pp. 350–351). In short, moral education in a multicultural society requires not only the cultivation of a public and a nonpublic identity, but also the stimulation of the disposition and the ability to adjust one's own nonpublic identity to the public morality.

NOTE

¹ According to Rawls, citizens in a liberal society are characterized by two forms of identity, a public (or political) and a nonpublic (or nonpolitical) identity. The public identity of these citizens is composed of two moral powers, a capacity for a sense of justice and a capacity for a conception of good. This stands in contrast with, for example, persons who live in a caste system. Their public identity is not dependent on a specific religion or social position and, therefore, remains the same when they convert from one religion to another or when their social position changes (Rawls, 1993, pp. 30–31).

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