

## Deeper Than Emotion and Reason: Moral Motivation and Education for Global Citizenship

David E. Meens

*University of Colorado Boulder*

Education for global citizenship (EGC) is increasingly seen as an imperative not only of ethical living but also of human survival.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the imperative of responding to environmental crises shifts the focus of educational theory from the intrinsic value of learning for the individual to the instrumental end of enabling young global citizens to act to alter our current course, and inculcating in them the motivation and disposition to do so. In light of this latter requirement, some philosophers of education have suggested that a primary goal of education for survival and a human future should be affective and dispositional — that emotional learning of empathy or compassion for others is essential to motivating the kind of altruistic action required of good global citizens.

Liz Jackson critiques the idea that moral action requires “emotions such as empathy, pity, and sympathy toward diverse others,” *rather* than a standard of impersonal and “objective” duty. Jackson helpfully indicates important pitfalls related to EGC that seeks to evoke or inculcate particular kinds of emotional experience in students. She points out that a variety of responses are possible when students encounter emotions related to environmental and social crises and injustices, including resistance, avoidance, cynicism, and symbolic “hand washing” actions that, although ineffectual, may assuage a guilty conscience. At the risk of oversimplification, Jackson’s central claim seems to be that the connection between such moral emotions and effective action is a loose and underdetermined one, such that a focus on emotional learning fails to make the link between learning and behavior that motivates the project of EGC.

However, I would argue that, at least as stated, Jackson’s alternative focus on “rational altruistic duty” in the form of “non-relational care,” is susceptible to the same criticisms that she levels against the goal of morally significant emotional learning. She asserts that “[o]bjective human good motivates action that benefits others, and it can (*possibly*) exist without any particular feelings.” But why should we assume that “non-relational care” is any more likely to be acted upon in the long term than affective experiences or interpersonal encounters? “Appropriate, intended empathy can be fleeting, disappearing as soon as one returns home from their field trip.” Surely the experiences of many educators confirm that “cognitive and skill-based learning” can be just as temporary, and is not necessarily more likely to lead to effective action. Judged in terms of a pragmatic criterion of effectiveness in generating transformative action, knowledge and cognitive skills that exist without or prior to (particular) feelings appear to stand in the same loose, underdetermined relationship to effective action as altruistic emotions.

The underlying issue here, for Jackson’s position as well as those she criticizes, occupies the intersection of moral philosophy and moral psychology: suppose some

good is affectively or rationally recognized as such — why should *I* want to do (or be) good, especially if this comes at a personal cost? What is the bridge between recognizing the good and the motivation to act on it? This problem is one of the oldest and most persistent in Western philosophical ethics. Plato asserted that failure to do the good one recognizes as such would be characteristic of a “weak will.”<sup>2</sup> Kant famously asserted that the bridge between reason and ethical action is a “good will,” the will determined entirely by the dictates of the Moral Law.<sup>3</sup> Such accounts take pains to side step the question of *how* one comes to *want* a good will, even when it is expedient or advantageous (in terms of one’s own narrow and short-term self-interest) to have a weak one.

As Jackson notes, the relationship between perceiving something’s rightness (whether “objectively” or “subjectively”) and good intention and action is an empirical one, a question of moral psychology. The moral discourse we in the Anglophone academy have inherited from the modern Western philosophical tradition is, as John Dewey and so many others have indicated, fraught with conceptual dichotomies that often distort and limit, rather than focus and enrich, experience and inquiry. The distinction between cognitive skills and “objective” moral duty, on the one hand, and affect, on the other, seems closely related to dichotomies between reason and emotion, body and mind, things and persons, nature and culture, etc.<sup>4</sup> When empirical matters are significant to our reasoning on a given matter, such dichotomies can stymie productive enquiry, locking us into a back-and-forth of dialectically constructed options.

What is called for, to borrow Dewey’s terminology, is an empirically sensitive “reconstruction” of our philosophical concepts such that they can do the new work that we now require of them. Philosophers often refer to this type of work today across sub-disciplines as “non-ideal theory.” A *non-ideal* theory of EGC would begin from the empirical realities of moral psychology as well as our current environmental and social crises, and, based on the interaction of these facts, would develop normative claims as hypotheses to be tested in practice.<sup>5</sup> Much could be said regarding what such an approach might add to the conversation in which Jackson has engaged us; I am here limited to suggesting one component relevant to “non-relational care,” which has been termed “the situationist challenge.”<sup>6</sup> An array of findings in social psychology seem to count against our long-standing tendency to believe that the cause of moral or immoral behavior is something intrinsic to the moral agent herself, whether this be a capacity for moral feelings, reasoning, or personal qualities of character or virtue. This tendency has been observed so frequently to distort experience and mislead inquiry into moral phenomena that it is referred to generally as *the fundamental attribution bias*.

Contrary to this entrenched bias, the conclusion reached by interpreters of this research is that decidedly “non-moral” factors — e.g., conscious or unconscious sensory stimuli such as scent, temperature, light — exert a powerful influence on much of what we normally consider to be morally significant behavior. Kwame Anthony Appiah points to the implications of such research for claims in moral

philosophy: “If these psychological claims are right, very often when we credit people with compassion, as a character trait, we’re wrong. They’re just in a good mood”<sup>7</sup> — a good mood caused by a whiff of a pleasant perfume, or fresh pastries from the nearby bakery, or any number of other seemingly accidental, morally irrelevant factors. Some consider that these findings deflate the entire project of moral education.<sup>8</sup> This is not, however, a necessary or even reasonable conclusion. A small proportion of subjects across these studies (according to Appiah, about 10 percent)<sup>9</sup> seem relatively immune to circumstantial factors: across variable contexts, they act in accordance with moral prescription. This could mean that they have developed a stable character virtue of compassion that transcends contextual factors, interpreted in terms of a Kantian “good will” or an ingrained stimulus-response pattern. Being good in this sense is perhaps rarer than we like to believe. Recent large-scale efforts to develop positive character traits in school children have found direct instruction in morals to be remarkably ineffectual.<sup>10</sup>

One lesson we can safely draw is that we ignore the significance of the context of moral action at our peril. What sorts of instructional or educational contexts support care, whether it is understood relationally or non-relationally? Morally significant features of the context can be even more important than the examples given above. In cases that involves a black defendant, white jurists have been found to reason differently, and morally more effectively, when a single black individual is present on the jury.<sup>11</sup> Integration can be seen as an imperative of social justice, and perhaps more importantly, of social justice *education* in a pluralist society. Conditions for effective deliberation are likely to do more to improve moral reasoning than instruction that presumes the moral core of an individual can be shaped directly.<sup>12</sup> As Michael Morrell has argued in his study *Empathy and Democracy*, democratic deliberation with others necessarily entails both affective and non-affective cognitive skills and dispositions.<sup>13</sup>

Teaching citizenship is difficult and poorly understood — how much more so teaching citizenship that is global? Some version of non-relational care may be an appropriate ideal for this grander moral stage. This depends, as I noted at the outset, on pragmatic consideration of whether it helps us to address looming environmental and social crises. To theorize and operationalize such an ideal for EGC requires an explicitly non-ideal approach that attends to empirical realities of moral psychology and that eschews long-held idealizations of human agency and motivation that lead us down blind alleys, where we may soon find ourselves facing the wall with a rising sea lapping at our heels.

---

1. Randall Curren, “Education for Global Citizenship and Survival?,” in *Philosophy of Education in an Era of Globalization*, ed. Yvonne Raley and Gerhard Preyer (New York: Routledge, 2010), 67–90.

2. Plato, *Protagoras*, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. E. Hamilton and H. Cairns (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), 308–352.

3. Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 62–67.

4. John Dewey, *Unmodern and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Phillip Deen (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012).

5. Elizabeth Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 3–6.
6. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Experiments in Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 44.
7. *Ibid.*, 45.
8. John M. Doris, *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
9. Appiah, *Experiments in Ethics*, 48.
10. Institute for Education Sciences, *Efficacy of Schoolwide Programs to Promote Social and Character Development and Reduce Problem Behavior in Elementary Schools* (Washington, DC: Institute for Education Sciences, 2010), <https://ies.ed.gov/ncer/pubs/20112001/pdf/20112001.pdf> (accessed February 28, 2014).
11. Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration*, 129–131.
12. David E. Meens, “Myth 30: Character Education Will Save America’s Youth and Strengthen Our Moral Fiber,” in David C. Berliner, Gene V. Glass, and Associates, *50 Myths and Lies that Threaten America’s Public Schools: The Real Crisis in Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2014), 146–149.
13. Michael E. Morrell, *Empathy and Democracy: Feeling, Thinking, and Deliberation* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010).