To What Extent Can Religious Education Help Shape Pupils' Practical Wisdom?

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Background: Aristotle's thought on wisdom

In the *Nichomachean Ethics,* Aristotle outlines his thoughts about *eudaimonia*,[1] a notion most accurately translated in English as "flourishing"[2] or the idea of fulfilling our potential.[3] For Aristotle, *eudaimonia* is "the activity of the soul in accord with reason or requiring reason"[4] and must accord with virtues,[5] the qualities of our character.

In the final chapter of the *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle links *eudaimonia* with *sophia* (theoretical wisdom).[6] For Aristotle, *phronesis* (practical wisdom) and *sophia* are two central intellectual virtues, whilst the former concerns itself with what is static or universal, the latter focuses on context-dependent human activity.[7]

The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues uses a neo-Aristotelian model, based on social scientific findings,[8] to conduct empirical research on topics surrounding human flourishing. In an earlier project, Harrison et al. explored how school subjects can contribute to the development of pupils' virtues; however, this omitted *phronesis.*[9] This discussion paper seeks to help fill this gap through addressing how Religious Education (RE), part of the basic curriculum in England and Wales,[10] can contribute to the building of pupils' *phronesis.* The decision to focus on RE in this paper is because the subject has historically held a close association with the moral and social aims of education.[11]

Several factors influence RE teaching in schools. These include, but are not limited to, teachers' pedagogical preferences, locally agreed RE syllabi, examination boards and non-statutory guidance documents. Additionally, RE in all schools faces limited teaching coverage,[12] with the most recent report showing that in 2016, 23.1% of all secondary schools did not offer RE at Key Stage 3 and 33.4% did not offer RE at Key Stage 4.[13] The provision was at its lowest in academies without a religious foundation, as 29.6% of these did not offer RE at Key Stage 3 and 41.6% did not offer RE at Key Stage 4.[14]

Recent work at the Jubilee Centre found there are four key components in *phronesis*: constitutive function, blueprint, integrative function and emotional regulation.[15] This discussion paper takes each of the four components of *phronesis* in turn, to examine the potential contribution that RE can make towards the development of pupils' practical wisdom, whilst referring to the factors that influence RE lessons.

Constitutive function

The first component of *phronesis* is the ability that enables an individual to perceive the most important features of an ethical situation and distinguish what is required within a given situation.[16] This component is similar to the concept of "virtue perception," the ability to notice when situations involve or require virtues.[17]

RE lessons can contribute to this component through engagement with a range of ethical issues, highlighted in many locally agreed RE syllabi.[18] Through engaging with ethical issues, pupils grow in their ability to discern the most important features of ethical situations and recognise which virtues are required to resolve ethical issues.

The extent that RE lessons focus on ethical issues varies between different types of schools. Non-statutory RE guidance, published for all schools, has often reiterated the importance of examining current moral issues,[19] ultimate questions and codes of practice.[20] Further, it has emphasised the need for RE to focus on the pertinent ethical issues identified by different religious worldviews and how these affect pupils at a personal and social level, in turn forming their own thoughts on ethical matters.[21]

However, academies and free schools are able to design RE curricula without reference to locally agreed RE syllabi or non-statutory guidance, but the *Academies Act 2010* states they must provide a "balanced and broadly based curriculum."[22] What this entails is unclear, as the Act fails to specify what constitutes a balanced or broadly based curriculum. This quote captures an intention to allow educators greater freedom when designing RE curricula; however, the wording of the Act permits educators to divert attention away from ethical issues in favour of other content.

RE lessons in schools with a faith foundation are more likely to contain reference to ethical issues. This is because most Anglican schools opted to become voluntary-controlled[23] and follow locally agreed RE syllabi. Other schools with faith foundations, notably Roman Catholic schools, opted to be voluntary-aided[24] and follow their own curriculum. The Roman Catholic RE curriculum refers to a wide range of ethical issues, including abortion, bioethics, euthanasia, respect for bodily integrity and the sacredness of human life amongst others.[25]

We must also consider the impact of RE examination boards, for when pupils go on to study at Key Stage 4, these boards will hold more influence over subject aims and content. Inspecting three prominent examination boards reveals a wide range of ethical content explicitly woven throughout their programmes.[26] Examining just one of these in more detail, AQA Specification A offers a range of six religious, philosophical and ethical themes for study. In this specification, five of these themes have overt reference to how ethical arguments arise in the theme; referring to ethical issues surrounding relationships, punishment, forgiveness, human rights, social justice and the sanctity of life.[27]

There have also been calls for RE to be taught free of moral values,[28] but this has been criticised because arguably teachers can never truly achieve neutrality in the classroom.[29] Further, Moulin-Stożek and Metcalfe identified three main approaches to moral development in RE rooted in virtues ethics or deontological frameworks.[30] RE will therefore engage with ethical issues and develop pupils' constitutive function across all types of schools, but the extent of this varies due to the surrounding context.

Blueprint

Another component of *phronesis* is the idea of personal moral identity in relation to what constitutes a good life. This means that individuals who have *phronesis* possess a general conception of the good life and adjust their moral identity accordingly, adding drive and motivation.[31]

The blueprint component relates to "virtue knowledge and understanding", where we understand the meaning and importance of virtues as part of a flourishing life and apply these in our lives accordingly.[32] However, blueprint also relates to "virtue identity", to be strongly committed to the virtues, and "virtue motivation", a strong desire to act on the virtues.[33]

All religious traditions have ideas of what may constitute a good life, Smart referred to this as the ethical dimension.[34] The *Education Reform Act 1988* states that RE must take account of teachings and practices of the other principal religions in Great Britain,[35] which would include religious beliefs about what constitutes living a good life. Recent changes to GCSE content now require pupils to study at least two religions;[36] there have been further calls to rename the subject "religion and worldviews,"[37] to guarantee that a range of ideas about what constitutes a good life are encapsulated.

There is also the widespread assumption, present in most locally agreed RE syllabi[38] and government guidance, that we can learn about and from religion.[39] By learning from religion, we mean that pupils can "develop and communicate their own ideas, particularly in relation to questions of identity and belonging, meaning and purpose."[40]

This sounds similar to the concept of a blueprint and there is some evidence that it is occurring within the RE classroom. Arweck and Nesbitt established that through interaction with different religious opinions on ethical issues, such as abortion and euthanasia, pupils from mixed-faith families participated in classroom discussions. This led them to discover what they believe in relation to others, reinforcing the "situational aspect of religious identity formation."[41] Though this research focused on pupils from mixed-faith backgrounds, all forms of RE interact with different religious ideas about what constitutes a good life, providing similar opportunities for all pupils. This could lead to the formation of their worldviews and the development of their blueprint.

Integrative function

This component requires a person to integrate different components of the good life in dilemmatic situations where different ethically salient considerations or virtues appear to oppose or conflict.[42] This component is similar to "virtue reasoning", where we discern and take deliberate action about virtues, even when they would seem to collide or conflict. [43] The integrative function logically follows the component of constitutive function but also relies on the idea of a blueprint.

Through engaging with ethical ideas and a range of worldviews, pupils grow in their understanding of the different decisions that religiously affiliated people take in ethical situations. Through this engagement, pupils gain awareness into how religious followers reach conclusions and grow in their own knowledge of how to integrate components of the good life in ethical situations.

Discussion through interfaith dialogue leads to a reciprocal process[44] and debates in RE provide an opportunity for a knowledge transfer, informing their skills and character by making a bridge between parties. Through interacting with other worldviews, pupils evaluate strengths and weaknesses, in turn forming their own beliefs and moral identity.[45]

Emotional regulation

The last of the four components focuses on the requirement and contribution of an agent's emotions concurring with a given situation, their moral judgement and decisions.[46] This relates closely to "virtue motivation" but also "action and practice", which is doing the right action in the right way.[47]

RE contributes to this component through exploring the reasons why faith holders undertake actions in their lives, for instance charity or service. Through an understanding of these actions, pupils "eschew the extremes of narrow rationalism and superficial emotivism [because] wisdom demands both sense and sensibility, thought and feeling."[48] In other words, pupils will improve their understanding of the emotional connection that religious adherents experience when undertaking ethical decisions. Teachers who administer a critical realist pedagogy in their RE lessons assert that through interrogating religious belief systems and worldviews, pupils become more "attentive, intelligent, reasonable and responsible," which in turn leads to practical wisdom.[49]

Concluding remarks

RE can positively contribute to each of the four components of *phronesis*, through engaging pupils with ethical issues and examining religious perspectives on these matters. However, the contribution that RE makes to the development of pupils' *phronesis* varies between different types of schools due to the surrounding factors addressed in this paper. Though we have focused on RE in this paper due to the close alignment with the moral and social educational aims,[50] all school subjects have something to offer towards the development of pupils' *phronesis,* but to varying extents that are not yet fully understood.

This discussion paper is the second in a series of five for the *Life of the RE Teacher Project.* Our ongoing research into the perspectives of RE teachers in England and Wales will explore the contribution that RE makes to the development of pupils' *phronesis*. We hope you are keen to follow the developments of the project on the Jubilee Centre website. For any further inquiries, please contact the researchers of this project: Jason Metcalfe (J.M.Metcalfe@Bham.ac.uk) and Dr Daniel Moulin-Stożek (D.P.J.Moulin-Stozek@Bham.ac.uk).

Notes

[1] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* trans. Terrence Irwin (USA: Hackett Publishing Company Inc, 1999), 1098a.

[2] Kristján Kristjánsson, *Aristotelian Character Education* (London: Routledge, 2015), 13.

[3] The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, *Framework for Character Education* (Birmingham, UK: The University of Birmingham, 2017), 1.

[4] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* trans. Terrence Irwin (USA: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 1999), 1098a6-7.

[5] *ibid,* 1098a16-18.

[6] David Bostock, *Aristotle's Ethics* (UK: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[7] Catherine Darnell, Liz Gulliford, Kristján Kristjánsson and Panos Paris, "Phronesis and the Knowledge-Action Gap in Moral Psychology and Moral Education: A New Synthesis?," *Human Development* (2018): 1-29.

[8] Kristján Kristjánsson, "What is Character Education?" In *Teaching Character Through Subjects,* Edited by Tom Harrison, Matt Bawden and Lee Rogerson (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 2016), 5.

[9] Tom Harrison, Matt Bawden and Lee Rogerson, *Teaching Character Through Subjects* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 2016).

[10] Her Majesty's Stationery Office (HMSO), *Education Reform Act 1988* (HMSO: London, 1988).

[11] Office of Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), *Religious Education and Collective Worship* (Manchester: Ofsted, 1993).

[12] Commission for Religious Education (CORE), *Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward, A National Plan for RE* (Religious Education Council of England & Wales: London, 2018).

[13] *ibid,* 9.

[14] *ibid*.

[15] Catherine Darnell, Liz Gulliford, Kristján Kristjánsson and Panos Paris, "Phronesis and the Knowledge-Action Gap in Moral Psychology and Moral Education: A New Synthesis?" *Human Development* (2018), 1-29.

[16] *ibid*.

[17] The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, *Framework for Character Education,* Birmingham (UK: The University of Birmingham, 2017).

[18] See Birmingham City Council, *Locally Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education*, (Birmingham City Council: UK, 2007).; Hampshire County Council/Portsmouth City Council/Southampton City Council/Isle of Wight Council, *Living Difference III The Agreed Syllabus for Hampshire, Portsmouth, Southampton and the Isle of Wight* (UK: Hampshire County Council/Portsmouth City Council/Southampton City Council/ Isle of Wight Council, 2016).; Oxfordshire County Council, *The Oxfordshire Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education* (Oxford: Oxfordshire County Council, 2015); Solihull Metropolitan Council, *Locally Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education* (UK: Solihull Metropolitan Council, 2018).

[19] Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), Religious Education: *Non-Statutory Guidance on RE* (HMSO: London, 2000).

[20] Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), *The Non-Statutory National Framework* (HMSO: London, 2004).

[21] Department for Children, Schools and Families, *Religious Education in English Schools: Non-Statutory Guidance 2010* (Department for Children, Schools and Families: Nottingham, 2010).

[22] Her Majesty's Stationery Office (HMSO), *Academies Act 2010* (HMSO: London, 2010).

[23] Terrence Copley, *Teaching Religion: Sixty Years of Religious Education in England, New Updated Edition* (University of Exeter Press: Great Britain, 2008), 28.

[24] *ibid.*

[25] Department for Catholic Education, *Religious Education Curriculum Directory for Catholic Schools and Colleges in England and Wales* (London: Department of Catholic Education, 2012), 47.

[26] See Assessments and Qualification Alliance (AQA), *GCSE Religious Studies A: 8062* (Manchester: AQA, 2017a).; Assessments and Qualification Alliance (AQA), *GCSE Religious Studies B: 8063* (Manchester: AQA, 2017b).; Edexcel, *GCSE (9-1) Religious Studies A: Faith in Practice in the 21st Century* (London: Pearson Education Limited, 2016a).; Edexcel, *GCSE (9-1) Religious Studies B: Beliefs in Action* (London: Pearson Education Limited, 2016b).; Oxford, Cambridge and RSA Examinations (OCR), *Religious Studies GCSE (9-1) Specification J625* (Cambridge: OCR, 2018).

[27] Assessments and Qualification Alliance (AQA), *GCSE Religious Studies A: 8062* (Manchester: AQA, 2017a).

[28] Schools Council Working Paper 36, *Religious Education in Secondary Schools* (London: Evans Brothers and Methuen Educational, 1971).

[29] Andrew Wright, "The Spiritual Education Project: Cultivating Spiritual and Religious Literacy through a Critical Pedagogy of Religious Education," in *Pedagogies of Religious Education, Case Studies in the Research and Development of Good Pedagogic practice in RE, Edited by Michael Grimmitt, 2nd Edition,* (Essex: McCrimmons, 2007).

[30] Daniel Moulin-Stożek and Jason Metcalfe, "Mapping the Moral Assumptions of Multi-Faith Religious Education," *British Journal of Religious Education* (2018), Accessed April 18, 2019, DOI: 10.1080/01416200.2018.1556605.

[31] Catherine Darnell, Liz Gulliford, Kristján Kristjánsson and Panos Paris, "Phronesis and the Knowledge-Action Gap in Moral Psychology and Moral Education: A New Synthesis?" *Human Development* (2018), 1-29.

[32] The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, *Framework for Character Education,* Birmingham, UK: The University of Birmingham, 2017, 8.

[33] *ibid.*

[34]Office of Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), Religious *Education and Collective Worship,* Manchester: Ofsted, 1993.

[35] Her Majesty's Stationery Office (HMSO), *Education Reform Act 1988,* HMSO: London, 1988, 8.3.

[36] Department for Education (DfE), *Reformed GCSE and A Level Subject Content: Government Consultation Response,* London: Department for Education, 2015, Accessed 25th April 2019, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/403347/Reformed_GCSE_and_A_level_subject_content_Government_response.pdf.

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[39] See Birmingham City Council, *Locally Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education*, Birmingham City Council: UK, 2007; Oxfordshire County Council, *The Oxfordshire Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education,* Oxford: Oxfordshire County Council, 2015.; Solihull Metropolitan Council, *Locally Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education,* UK,: Solihull Metropolitan Council, 2018.; Office of Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), *Transforming Religious Education,* Manchester: Ofsted, 2010.; School Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA), *Model Syllabuses for Religious Education: Model 1, Living Faiths Today*, SCAA: London, 1994a.; School Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA), *Model Syllabuses for Religious Education: Model 2, Questions and Teachings*, SCAA: London, 1994b.; Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), Religious Education: *Non-Statutory Guidance on RE,* HMSO: London, 2000.; Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), *The Non-Statutory National Framework,* HMSO: London, 2004.

[40] Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), *Religious Education: Non-Statutory Guidance on RE,* HMSO: London, 2000, 11.

[41] Elisabeth Arweck and Eleanor Nesbitt, "Religious Education In The Experience Of Young People From Mixed-Faith Families," *British Journal of Religious Education* 33, no.1 (2011): 39.

[42] Catherine Darnell, Liz Gulliford, Kristján Kristjánsson and Panos Paris, "Phronesis and the Knowledge-Action Gap in Moral Psychology and Moral Education: A New Synthesis?" *Human Development* (2018), 1-29.

[43] The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, *Framework for Character Education,* Birmingham, UK: The University of Birmingham, 2017.

[44] Neil McKain, "Religious Education As a Safe Space For Discussing Unsafe Ideas," in *We Need to Talk about Religious Education: Manifestos for the future of RE,* edited by Mark Chater and Michael Castelli, 169-184, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2017.

[45] Phil Champain, "Facing the Strange," in *We Need to Talk about Religious Education: Manifestos for the future of RE,* edited by Mark Chater and Michael Castelli, 155-168, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2017.

[46] Catherine Darnell, Liz Gulliford, Kristján Kristjánsson and Panos Paris, "Phronesis and the Knowledge-Action Gap in Moral Psychology and Moral Education: A New Synthesis?" *Human Development* (2018), 1-29.

[47] The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, *Framework for Character Education,* Birmingham, UK: The University of Birmingham, 2017.

[48] L. Phillip Barnes and Andrew Wright, "Romanticism, Representations of Religion and Critical Religious Education," *British Journal of Religious Education* 28, no.1 (2006): 65-77. Brackets mine.

[49] *ibid.*

[50] Office of Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), *Religious Education and Collective Worship,* Manchester: Ofsted, 1993.

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