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Normative Analysis and Moral Education: How May We Judge?

DAVID P. BURNS
University of Alberta, Canada

The viability of philosophy of education as a distinct and valued field of inquiry in educational research is under significant threat. While the debate over the proper role and value of philosophy of education continues, courses and faculty positions in philosophy of education become increasingly rare. I advance the view that this situation requires philosophers of education find new ways to bring their work to practicing educators. I propose a particular kind of normative analysis, within the context of moral education, as one way to bring valuable philosophic work to the daily practice of teaching. It is argued that the use of normative criteria, comprised of certain key characteristics for moral education, can serve not only as valuable analytic tools but may also draw practicing educators into conversations that generally take place between philosophers of education in the academy.

Finding New Ways

Significant shifts have taken place, and are continuing to take place, in the relationship between universities and the societies in which they sit. The commodification of knowledge, research, and education has changed the way institutions view both scholarship and the scholars who conduct it. For an aspiring philosopher of education this is a disheartening time to begin the long and arduous climb into the academy. It seems to many that contemporary students of the philosophy of education will need to find new and creative ways to discuss and advance their field if they have any hope of holding the ground this infinitely rich field of inquiry currently holds.

I would argue that one of the ways scholars might respond to the many crises facing philosophy of education is to author, or excavate, methods and approaches to philosophy of education that provide new pathways to influence the practice of teaching itself. This paper, in pursuit of this goal, will advance *normative analysis* as a new (or, perhaps, forgotten) method for philosophy of education. Specifically, I will discuss the use of normative analysis within the context of moral education. While many pitfalls arise, and there are significant ones, it will be shown that normative analysis provides a stimulating opportunity to draw valuable philosophic insight to specific pedagogical problems. Before this position may be introduced it is critical to be absolutely clear about what sort of problem we are facing so that the viability of the proposed solution might be better gauged.

The Crises in Philosophy of Education

Concern about the state, and likely decline, of philosophy of education in Canada has been traced back until at least 1994 (Vokey, 2006). This is surely an understatement, as scholars elsewhere have traced the current fears back until the early nineteen-seventies and beyond (Floden, 2005). What is certain is that there are fundamental issues that remain unresolved, and that appear to threaten philosophy of education's status as a viable, independent field of inquiry. These issues include a lack of academic positions (Floden, 2005), a marginal place for philosophy of education in B.Ed. programs (Clark, 2006), the long-term association of philosophy of education with narrowly analytic work (Clark, 2006), and an increasing focus on production in education (Laverty, 2006).

In this discussion I will focus on another element of the perceived crisis in philosophy of education, the problem of the proper role and contribution of philosophic work. Under this heading there are at least three key elements: the question of whether or not philosophy is "research," the question of what sort of methods philosophers employ, and the question of where philosophers of education ought to stand with respect to the rigor-relevance debate.

Bridges (2003) points out a very important element in this situation when he notes that contemporary "research" is seen as including "expensive equipment, large scale funding, international teams and half a page of collaborating authors in *Nature* " (Bridges, 2003, p. 21). In other words, research is now seen as the purview of a particular kind of natural or empirical science. As a result of this prejudice philosophers face the institutional assumption that their work is either a luxury (Clark, 2006), or a form of analytic consultancy for *real* researchers (Bridges, 2003). While it is difficult, and certainly outside the scope of this discussion, to ascertain the cause of this devaluing, it is important to note the perception that the "findings" or insights of philosophers of education are not taken fully seriously when compared to research which fits the more conventional form found in other areas of pedagogical inquiry.

One possible reason for this is that philosophers tend not to be exceptionally clear about the methods through which they arrive at their conclusions[1] (Bridges, 2003). David Bridges goes so far as to point out that the editors of a philosophy of education publication would likely instruct an author to remove a section on methodology should one be included in a submission. The introduction to the 2007 *Yearbook of the Philosophy of Education Society*, written by Barbara Stengel, captures this rather well when it compares the writing in that volume to artistic work. The popular image being that philosophy of education is more about creative expression than methodology or "research" per se.

One could fairly rebut Bridges' assertion, though, with the statement that philosophy has always been about clarity of argument and that it is marked by precisely this quality. It seems to be that case, though, that there is more than one sense of clarity at work here. Take, for example, Howell's (2003) analysis of the discourse surrounding home schooling. His article is an excellent piece of education philosophy. He maps out key elements of the debate about home schooling, identifies the implications of relevant positions on the issue, and points out what sort lines of argumentation bear fruit for each side. This sort of exercise, mapping out the contours of a disagreement, is a common one among philosophers and to this end Howell is very clear. This is not, however, the sort of clarity that practicing teachers necessarily need. His contribution is to the academic discourse, not to the practice of education. Consequently, the clarity he provides is esoteric. That is, short of engaging with the article *as part of the academic discourse* it is not entirely clear what this means for educators. The debate he discusses between differing conceptions of equality, for example, is not one with particularly clear import for educators unless those educators are willing to become philosophers of education

[1] There are, of course, exceptions where philosophers of education clearly engage in a discussion of philosophic method or methodology. A notable example would be the relatively recent special issue of the *Journal of Philosophy of Education* (Bridges & Smith, 2006).

themselves. He is clear in the same way that formal logic is clear. That is, he is clear to those who speak the language and consider the issues of the philosopher.

There is certainly nothing wrong with this sort of contribution as, indeed, work like Howell's is central to the practice of education philosophy. But there is also a sense in which philosophers of education may have a role in a more direct, practice-oriented sense. This line of thought, however, pulls one into one of the key debates in education philosophy: the *rigor-relevance* or *education-philosophy* debate. Here the question is whether philosophers of education should focus on making their work applicable or more rigorous and likely esoteric. Higgins (2000) summarizes the issue best:

> If we attempt to salvage our value by "popularizing" our discourse, we lose our distinctive claim to philosophic rigor and seem like a needlessly arcane and clumsy curriculum theory. On the other hand, when we take refuge in our philosophical integrity and distance ourselves from concerns of educational relevance, we often come off worse, as a sort of ersatz philosophy. (Higgins, 2000, p. 275)

Excellent arguments have been made in favour of both sides of this debate. What is clear, though, is that there is a significant gulf between philosophers of education and teachers. At least part of the problem is historical, as the 1960s and 1970s saw a move towards more esoteric forms of analytic philosophy of education that pulled such scholars away from the kind of clearly relevant work teachers require (Clark, 2006). Part of the problem may very well be structural. Fenstermacher, (2005), for example, points out that the policy of publication-based promotion actively encourages philosophers of education to speak primarily to each other. While scholars like Clark, Fenstermacher and Higgins provide valuable warnings from within philosophy of education, concerns are being voiced outside of the field as well. The recent entry on philosophy of education in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Phillips, 2008) expressed deep reservations about the rigor of philosophy of education, noting that there is significant disparity within the field between rigorous instances of philosophy and less rigorous discussion of practical questions and issues.

Like many dichotomous disagreements this one is a rather permanent fixture, a problem amenable to compromise and middle ground but not conclusive resolution. These are questions that philosophers of education will always deal with, and that are worth this pursuit (Siegel, 2000). There is also, though, the legitimate position that "in the final analysis education is a practical activity and if philosophy of education is to justify its continuing existence and leave its mark on the world then it must also address pressing problems of practice" (Clark, 2006, p. 26).

I agree with Clark (2006) when he pushes philosophers to address pressing practical problems and to actively demonstrate their value. I do not believe, however, that this necessarily implies a lack of emphasis on rigor. Indeed, as I now move on to the main contribution of this discussion, I hope to show that normative analysis manages a rather effective balance of both. Indeed, this is the point at which normative analysis could make an effective entry into my discussion. But before such an entry is made, it is important to summarize the three key problems this analysis has identified in philosophy of education. These perceived problems, while not universally shared, are the concern of a significant group of philosophers of education.

1. The work of philosophers of education is often seen as secondary and unnecessary and is not given the status of academic research.

2. Philosophers of education are rarely transparent about the means or methods through which they have arrived at their conclusions.

3. Many philosophers feel that there is a dichotomous relationship between rigor and relevance in philosophy of education.

If one accepts that these three issues are indeed extant problems that require addressing, the question becomes what one might do to navigate through such difficulties while still preserving the integrity of one's educational philosophy. As introduced previously, I propose normative analysis as one way to navigate these delicate but critical issues.

What is Normative Analysis?

Normative analysis is a difficult method to research. It is most often discussed in introductory texts that deal with forms of analysis or as a brief reference in an applied normative analysis of a policy or program. Leslie Pal (2006), for example, outlines four types of reasoning in policy analysis: legal, logical, empirical and normative. Normative analysis, in her view, "measures some aspect of policy against an ethical standard" (Pal, 2006, p. 17). Pal's examples of such standards include constitutions, religious texts and international agreements and declarations. Using Pal's definition the normative analyst quite simply asks the question, *does the subject of this analysis meet the given norm*?

Take, for example, the *Pareto efficiency*. Within the context of economic policy, the Pareto efficiency states that "those changes, and only those changes, which make at least one person better off while making nobody worse off should be made" (Jennings & Mclean, 2008, p. 62). This statement is the basis for a very common norm in economics. But what exactly does this norm enable an economist to do? It would seem that it performs at least two valuable functions. First, it serves to draw attention to a particular aspect of a policy, in this case the comparative position of relevant stakeholders. Second, it establishes a clear norm that can be used to make succinct evaluative judgments about particular policies. A policy either does, or does not, meet the norm. So in its most general form normative analysis involves being explicit about the norm being used in an analysis, using that norm to draw attention to particular aspects of the subject of analysis, and coming to an evaluative judgment about that subject based on the norm's criteria.

But political or economic examples can only take us so far. What sort of example could one draw from moral education, or philosophy of education in general? As was identified previously, this kind of transparency of method is not common in philosophy of education. It is, however, quite common in more popularized discussions of education. Indeed, one of the most famous documents of the popular character education movement (as opposed to the academic discourse) is itself a proposed norm.

After publishing his famous *Educating for Character* (Lickona, 1991), Thomas Lickona wrote a similarly important article, *Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education* (Lickona, 1996). In 2007 a second version was published by Lickona, Eric Schaps and Catherine Lewis (Lickona, Schaps & Lewis, 2007). This article outlines an eleven-point norm for character education and was written as something "schools and other groups can use to plan a character education effort and to evaluate existing character education programmes and materials" (Lickona, 1996, p. 95). One can see, even from this short explanation, how this norm functions in much the same way as I identified previously. It draws attention to particular aspects of character education programs and provides normative criteria with which to make judgments about what sort of program is "effective" and what sort is not.

A Proposed Structure for Normative Philosophic Studies

But what exactly might one do with such a norm in moral education? To properly explicate this point will require an expansive example of one such analysis. To fill this need I will use a normative study I conducted (Burns, 2007) on *Character Counts!*, a program inspired by the work of Thomas Lickona. In the case of this study I constructed a normative framework, comprised of eight normative statements,

through a literature review in philosophy of education. The norm was an eight-point list of characteristics deemed to be important for programs of moral education. These were largely selected from the work of prominent scholars in moral education, on the grounds that such arguments had endured substantial attention and scrutiny. As the norm below indicates, this review centered on such scholars as Callan (1995), Carr (1991), Ennis (1996), Galston (1991), Lickona (1996, 2007), Noddings (1988), Peters (1981), Scriven (1976), and Taylor (1989). I then applied this framework to a sample of five lessons from *Character Counts!* and asked if there was evidence of each normative criterion in each lesson. I then discussed the trends that emerged over the course of the analysis and came to the conclusion that *Character Counts!* largely ignored many of the key elements philosophers of moral education had argued were important.

A Sample Norm for Moral Education

A good normative analysis ought to include clear discussion of how the norm in question was created. Thus, I will now describe my normative framework, not in an effort to advance it as particularly useful or effective norm, but, rather, to provide an example of the kind of transparency normative analysis ought to involve. In pursuit of transparency, it is important to trace each element of the given norm back to its reasons and, if possible, its origins in the literature. Such an explanation is provided here with each normative statement numbered one through eight

1. *Moral reasoning should be fostered as a part of moral life.*

   The concept of moral reasoning used here draws on the concept of reasoning Ennis (1996) advances with respect to critical thinking. The development of critical thinking was found to be very widely advocated, though the concept was differently defined by competing theorists. It is included here as a general commitment to decision-making capacity.

2. *A good moral education program ought to foster autonomy through the employment of critical reasoning.*

   I use the term "autonomy" here in the fashion in which Peters (1981) defines it, as the capacity to apply and amend one's thinking in light of new circumstances or information. Autonomy is included here to draw attention to the capacity of the student to experience moral growth in the absence of moral authority.

3. *Students should, even within a highly philosophic or skeptical context, be taught the basic value of mutual respect.*

   The Galston (1991) and Noddings (1988) critiques of conventional moral reasoning have become well established and widely discussed. Mutual respect is included here in an attempt to balance liberal-rationality with a relational emphasis.

4. *Moral education should involve mutual growth, between students and teachers, and should avoid static transmission of moral values.*

   Contemporary philosophy of education strongly emphasizes mutual growth between the student and the teacher. This is most clearly present in the literature on caring (Noddings, 1988) but it is also emphasized in other approaches to moral education.

Lickona, Schapps, & Lewis (2007), for example, emphasize the importance of adult character growth in the process of student character education.

5. *Students, in addition to coming to autonomous judgments, must be provided with opportunities to deliberate collectively.*

   This criterion draws, in particular, on the discussion provided by Scriven (1976) and Taylor (1989). It was included to reflect the need to foster collective discussion of key issues.

6. *Moral education should allow for confrontation and conflict over morals, provided that these opportunities are provided within a framework of respect.*

   Eamonn Callan's (1995) critique of caring education provides the basis for this criterion of the framework. He warns against avoiding highly contentious issues, which he claims Noddings does, because such avoidance promotes the acceptance of unacceptable views. While it is a delicate balance, moral conflict was included in this framework as an attempt to emphasize the necessity of at least some conflict over morals.

7. *Moral education must be an approach to living for teachers and those teachers must encourage students to view it as such, as well.*

   Wide agreement was found for the position that teachers and students need to view morality as an approach to living. Lickona, Schapps and Lewis (2007) emphasize this point heavily. Similar discussion can be found in the literature on virtue and education, as in Carr (1991).

8. *Moral education should involve an analysis of where ideas come from and what perspectives they are rooted in.*

   This point draws on Ennis's (1996) conception of the contextual nature of belief and decision-making. It is included here to reflect the growing acceptance of the need to critically reflect upon moral lessons and to understand that moral education is deeply influenced by tradition and perspective.

During the application stage of this study I closely examined the five selected lessons and judged whether there was evidence of each of the characteristics being met in each lesson in question. In the end several key conclusions were made about *Character Counts!* based on the persistent absence of certain characteristics given in the norm. It was found, for example, that this program failed to produce growth in reasoning, failed to give students an active role in their learning, and failed to prepare students for morally ambiguous situations.

Examining the Method

How can the sort of problems that are presented by this study caution one against such use of normative analysis? It would seem at least two issues arise here which serve as a warning against the possible weaknesses of normative analysis: the strength of the given norm, and the likelihood of reductive thinking.

First, the strength of the given norm. The norm I have presented here is neither comprehensive nor particularly representative. It was an early attempt at coming to grips with a large body of literature. Indeed, in previous discussions of this study one of the points on which my interlocutors have been most critical has been the strength of the norm on which this study was based. This criticism raises an important question, is it possible to construct a norm that is strong enough to make such a study meaningful?

Stepping aside from the weaknesses in this particular example, this seems to be a fundamental question for a proponent of normative analysis. In the end, one must avoid two extremes. If the norm is overly vague or ambiguous, in an attempt to garner popular acceptance, its power as tool of critique and analysis will surely be eroded. On the other hand, the greater the specificity of the normative criterion the greater the likelihood that such a criterion will be taken as inappropriate by other scholars or educators. But before we become mired in another dichotomy it is useful to step back and ask if this is even a useful line to take. Does it matter if the given norm is widely acceptable or even particularly defensible?

The answer to this question would depend on what function researchers are hoping to serve with their analysis. In my analysis of *Character Counts!* I concluded that there were severe limitations in this program, that many key elements were missing, and that, ultimately, it ought not be used in its current form. Acceptance of my final judgment against the program would surely rest on previous acceptance of the norm with which I came to such a judgment. The logic of this sort of normative analysis could be expressed in the form shown below.

1. If P is accepted as a norm,
2. and program C fails to meet P,
3. then C is undesirable.

If one accepts a given norm (because it is particularly philosophically defensible, for instance), and the narrative in a particular study shows that the program in question fails to meet the norm, then it may be concluded that the program is normatively undesirable. It may be the case that the program meets another norm, but with respect to the norm in question it does not pass. In the event that the norm itself is deemed unacceptable, any conclusion based upon it is, of course, unfounded. This does not mean, however, that the study is not valuable. Indeed, it could still serve two valuable purposes. First, it could draw attention to particular elements of the program that might deserve attention apart from the normative lens used to arrive at that attention. Imagine that I am wrong in positing moral conflict as a necessary part of moral education, as some certainly would. Does this mean that a study that discusses the degree to which such conflict is present in a given program is no longer valuable? Certainly not.

This issue also speaks directly to the kind of methodological transparency which normative analysis can offer. If one were to use the construct proposed here, and include a discussion of the norm, a narrative about its application, and a discussion of conclusions, the audience would be provided with the information needed to make appropriate use of the philosopher's findings. If the reader were to take issue with one of the points on my framework, or even several of them, the method of analysis is transparent enough to afford the reader the ability to gain insight into this program from the other elements the reader does agree with. As was introduced earlier in this discussion, even if the entire normative framework is unacceptable to the reader such a position only functions to undermine the final evaluative judgment being made. The value of focused and transparent analysis, on the other hand, does not depend on the norm's acceptance.

It is important, though, to ask on what grounds such judgments about norms themselves could be made? Here the answer is a difficult one, as the project of deciding exactly what counts in philosophic analysis is an eternal one. One could plausibly say, though, that certain key characteristics are important for philosophically derived norms. Such norms ought to, for example, be internally

consistent. One element should not preclude another, nor should they be based on conflicting premises. One could also say that such norms ought to be based upon arguments and explanations that are themselves soundly argued. Indeed, in a full normative analysis (unlike the example given here) it is vital that such arguments be fully presented. Extraordinary care must be taken to construct defensible norms, but it is important to note that normative analysis does not entirely depend on public acceptance of such norms. A clear evaluative judgment, on the other hand, certainly does.

A second problem also arises. Given that the norm I have used as an example is a collection of eight single sentences, it appears quite possible that such a method would lead to superficially reductive analysis. This is a serious issue, as one can hardly argue that normative analysis transcends the rigor-relevance debate if it is simply a reductive use of rigorous philosophy. In the case of a single philosopher authoring a normative framework for a single study this is a likely risk. What is needed, then, is a series of open debates and interchanges about what norms should be used in areas like moral education. Norms like the ones Lickona proposes need to be more commonly discussed if normative analysis is to be truly valuable to philosophers of education.

This process opens the way for a philosopher of education to use normative analysis to escape many of the pitfalls of the rigor-relevance dichotomy. An openly debated, publicly vetted, and philosophically sound normative framework applied to a specific program of moral education has the potential to bring the most rigorous philosophical analysis to the most practical of pedagogical questions. Such an endeavor would surely require more attention than my own attempt, but is surely worth the effort. Normative frameworks, if transparently applied, have the potential to draw teachers into philosophical dialogue. If teachers are uninterested in taking part in these dialogues, normative frameworks could allow them to enlist the philosophic expertise that is often left to conversations *between* philosophers. My analysis of *Character Counts!*, while certainly flawed, is an attempt to draw a wide discourse of philosophy of education into an analysis that teachers can use. The transparent discussion of where the norm came from enables teachers, if they so choose, to enter into the philosophy itself. If they do not choose to do so, they are still left with a set of valuable insights drawn from that philosophy and a discussion of what those insights mean to a program they are likely familiar with. Providing teachers with good critical analysis, that is clear about the norms it draws on, can empower those teachers to adopt programs according to their own philosophic and pedagogical dispositions. To put it succinctly, philosophers might not be able to say a great deal about the day-to-day reality of a particular program of moral education, but they can help teachers become philosophers of their own moral teaching.

In this way philosophy of education can be constructed as a kind of "research" that teachers ought to be familiar with before proceeding to adopt a particular program or approach. The philosopher is using a clear methodology, with a discussion of key assumptions, to create new insight about teaching practice using the best conclusions available to them. This might not involve the traditional tools of research, such as those Bridges (2003) identified, but it certainly does produce a kind of research valuable to teaching and learning.

Conclusion

I began this discussion by pointing out a number of issues facing philosophy of education, and focused on three of particular relevance. Philosophers face the charges that they do not conduct "research," that they are often unclear about the methods of their analysis, and that they are often mired in a seemingly dichotomous battle between rigor and relevance. Normative analysis has been advanced as one possible way to manage these three concerns within the context of the examination of programs of moral education. Such work produces valuable insight that could quite plausibly be labeled "research." Insofar as a given norm is referenced and tied to the wider literature, it provides a clear and critical discussion of the methods and assumptions of the philosopher's analysis. Perhaps most importantly,

though, it provides a way for philosophers to make the most rigorous of their discussions practically relevant to teachers.

This promise is mediated by the difficulty inherent to the construction of defensible norms, and by the danger of reductivism. It was proposed that a thoroughly considered, publicly vetted, and philosophically sound normative framework has the potential to transcend these risks and empower teachers to engage in philosophy meaningful to their daily practice. In the end, despite the possible pitfalls, the potential for normative analysis in philosophy of education is significant. At the very least, it is a way for philosophers interested in applied work to demonstrate their value.

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About the Author

David P. Burns is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Alberta. His interests include moral education and the philosophy of education. David currently teaches undergraduate courses in education law and ethics and the philosophy of moral education.

David P. Burns, 5-181a Education North, University of Alberta, Canada, T6G-2G5; e-mail: dburns@ualberta.ca