

Education in Moral Perception

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Reading Barbara Applebaum's essay I was reminded of some research conducted in the early 1990s in which teachers were asked to scrupulously divide their classroom time equally between girls and boys.¹ Afterwards when the boys were asked if their teachers paid equal attention to female and male students, the vast majority reported that their teacher gave much more attention to girls. Having grown accustomed to receiving the lion's share of teachers' (and others') time, these boys perceived that they were being short-changed when they were actually being treated equally. In another phase of this study, researchers found that teachers—including those who were self-identified feminists and strong supporters of gender equity—*do* devote significantly more time to boys than girls, and that it is higher quality time at that. When the researchers revealed these facts, the teachers involved in the study were appalled that their perception of treating girls and boys "the same" was so inaccurate.

In light of Applebaum's analysis, one might explain the boys' and their teachers' perceptions along the following lines. In many respects, male elementary students and their adult female teachers are situated very differently; yet their situation is similar in that they both live in a society where, historically, males have enjoyed numerous prerogatives largely denied to females. Having commanded attention in so many venues for so long, when male students receive more attention from their teachers this will be perceived as normal and morally unproblematic to most onlookers, female and male alike.

As my reference to this particular decade-old study may suggest, this response focuses on one facet of moral agency, perception, and explores some of the elements of education in moral perception. I am convinced by Applebaum's argument that the enactment of moral agency, defined by her as "the capacity for moral choice and action," is significantly influenced by one's "situation" including one's social and historical context. By focusing on perception, which precedes choice and action, my hope is that this response will contribute in some way to Applebaum's larger project.

How one enacts moral agency, or whether one is moved to act at all, depends largely on one's perception. Whether one perceives a schoolyard scuffle as an unfortunate but innocuous argument or as a prelude to bloody noses will usually settle the question about whether to act. Assuming that response does appear the better course, what this response will entail depends, again, on how the situation is perceived. Perceptions about the likely causes of the altercation, potential for reconciliation, risk of different kinds of interventions, among many other considerations, will typically inform a person's actions.

Perception, like moral agency, is seemingly also "situated." The expression "there is no innocent eye" is a bit sinister in tone, but the basic idea underlying the

expression makes good sense. Not only philosophical arguments, but also experiences of cross cultural interaction lend support to the idea that we all see, or perceive, through lenses that are at least partly, and perhaps largely, shaped by such interacting factors as culture, class, gender, and ethnicity. But assuming that perception is *influenced* rather than determined by such factors provides some hope that this attribute is amenable to education.²

Now without the aid of any formal education at all, modes of perception will be acquired in the course of everyday life; and no doubt this acquisition begins in infancy. When an adult tells a baby to “see the nice, pretty kitten,” she is telling the child something about what (in our culture) is worth noticing and how it should be perceived; take notice of that and regard it in this way. A moment’s reflection may bring to mind how often conversations between children and adults entail informal instruction in perception. Just as adults are constantly directing children’s attention to particular aspects of their environment, children seem to practically beg for instruction in how to make sense of that to which their attention has been drawn.

Part of this informal instruction includes telling children what should *not* be noticed as well, as I was reminded the other day when I overheard a little boy demanding to know, “Where’s that guy’s legs!” (Of course, his mother’s “shush” provided a lesson of sorts in how to perceive people who use wheelchairs.) Informal instruction also equips children with an understanding of the range of possible responses to given perceptions. One learns, at a fairly early age, when an appropriate response to, say, a person slipping and falling, is laughter (as would be the case in a staged pratfall), or sympathy and an offer of help (as would be the case in a real accident).

In short, modes of perception will develop in the course of regular, everyday interactions. Assuming that perception can also be purposely honed through education, what might such an education include?

First, students can be provided opportunities for experiences that unsettle their habitual ways of seeing. Merely enabling student to appreciate the fact that “the same” phenomenon can look different from different perspectives undermines students’ assumption that their own perception is natural and right. Further, students can be helped to identify factors that, in all likelihood, have shaped their perception. For instance, internalized oppressions, white skin, and other privileges, deprivations, and prerogatives related to economic class can be analyzed in relation to students’ own lives and modes of perception.

Second, students can be offered different lenses through which to view the world. This goes beyond helping students to recognize that all seeing is perspectival and toward enabling them to consider a wider range of perspectives. As many have argued persuasively, the arts and literature provide such lenses. There are also a variety of multicultural and anti-racist curricula and pedagogies that can be used to encourage students to appreciate a wider range of perspectives. Service learning, study abroad, and other programs that immerse students in unfamiliar contexts can also serve this end. With growing maturity and experience, one may hope that

students are able to use alternative lenses, and that doing so allows them to act in ways that are less constrained by mere convention.

Third, students can be offered a broader view of “the moral” where choice and action are perceived as real possibilities. As Paulo Freire noted, when students see the world as fixed and finished, choice becomes severely constrained. I see the kind of resignation Freire described in my own students, when, for example, they complain about high stakes testing and yet comply with district mandates to administer the tests. It occurs to very few of these students that they might launch an anti-testing campaign in their district or even protest against the tests in their own school. By providing students with examples of cases where others have struggled successfully against the apparently inevitable we at least suggest outlets for students’ own oppositional inclinations. Admittedly, our class readings on the labor, feminist, and civil rights movements have not led to an anti-test revolution in Kansas, but I remain hopeful that the readings enlarge students’ perceptions about the possibility for change.

Helping students to adopt a more expansive view of “morality” also increases their ability to choose and act, in contrast to unreflectively following habit and convention. For many students “morality” consists of rules for conduct, and these rules typically apply to a relatively small part of human experience. An alternative view, such as John Dewey’s, is that potentially all conduct has moral significance. When this alternative is embraced, it encourages students to take more seriously choices and conduct that previously would have been viewed as morally neutral and unproblematic.

Perception is tied to how, and even whether, one can exercise moral agency. One can accept the idea that perception is “situated,” without concluding from this that it is immutable. At their best, educational efforts may serve to broaden the range of perspectives available to students, including their view of what constitutes “the moral.”

1. AAUW, *How Schools Shortchange Girls* (Washington D.C.: American Association of University Women, 1992).

2. Education for perception is discussed by several authors. See, for example, Nancy Sherman, *The Fabric of Character* (New York: Oxford, 1989) and Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (New York: Cambridge, 1986).