

# Learning from Negativity of Experience in School Moral Education

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## Abstract

The paper attempts to answer the questions of what learning from negativity of experience perspective is and if it could become the right way of teaching and learning morality at school. It consists of three sections. The first one explains the fundamental distinction between negative moral experiences and negativity of moral experience. In the second section, the author's attention focuses on the possibility of didactic application of teaching and learning from negativity of experience. The last section contains J. F. Herbart's concept of educative guidance as a permanently valid theoretical framework for contemporary moral education at school.

## Keywords

negativity of experience; school moral education; teaching and learning morality; educative guidance; Johann F. Herbart

## Introduction

Terms used in the title – i.e., negativity of experience and school moral education – may seem unconnected with each other at first glance. Some may even consider presenting them next to each other as inappropriate, especially when talking about teaching and learning morality at school. Can school reach out with seemingly negative measures in order to teach morality? Is learning from negativity of experience the right way of transferring morality in school conditions? Can an ethics teacher use this approach as a method of conducting classes on moral education? I will attempt to answer these questions in the text presented.

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## Fundamental distinction

Contrary to appearances, a long tradition combines education and morality with negativity, so that it seems to be a blind spot of educational thinking (Stępkowski 2018, 2). Therefore, until

recently the notion of negativity of experience in relation to education and particularly moral education has not been addressed (Uljens 2023, 5–9). For this reason, before presenting (in the last section) how morality can be taught and learned from the negativity of experience, it requires clarification on what the difference is between negative moral experiences and negativity of moral experience.

Clues to clarify the above-mentioned issue have been found in the research by Fritz Oser (1998), a long-time colleague of Lawrence Kohlberg (1981), known around the world as the author of the structural-genetic concept of moral development. Oser, however, identified the limitations of Kohlberg's concept, particularly regarding negative moral experiences and through his own research extracted the forgotten negativity of moral experience (Benner et al. 2015, 176–181). In his study Oser (1998, 7) proved that in the processes of moral education it is not only about the levels and stages of development and its governing psychological regularities, but also about appropriate (good) and inappropriate (evil) moral activities which depend on educative-formative intervention. This intervention consists of three stages: 1) identification and verbalisation of an improper activity, 2) transparent discussion on its moral incorrectness, and 3) development of private and public corrections.

Oser's concept of modifying the moral judgement contains a pedagogic element which is rarely noticed by psychologists. Nevertheless, this element displays a fundamental drawback, and even a theoretical error. In fact, it is about the key assumption – from the educational point of view – that the possibility of learning from negative moral experiences is based on mirrored opposites of evil and good. The acceptance of this assumption effects in a situation that the recognition of a moral evil leads almost automatically to the knowing about of what is good. Having analysed one's own negative moral experiences in accordance with the previously mentioned three principles, the learner discovers without reflection what the good is.

The possibility of learning from negative moral experiences, indicated above, points towards the phenomenon of negativity of experience, but this possibility should not be equated with the latter. It is necessary to emphasise that negative experiences and negativity of experience – despite their linguistic similarity – are not one and the same. To explain what negativity of experience and the resulting specific teaching and learning are, I will refer to the findings of Andrea English (2013; 2023) on John Dewey's theory of education.

Having examined Dewey's didactic publications, English places negativity of experience in the concept of reflective experience. Her analysis reveals the image of Dewey, a theoretician-pedagogue, who has assigned negativity of experience with a central role both in the processes of reciprocal teaching–learning and individual learning at school. English (2013, 55–109) interprets excerpts of *Democracy and Education* – where Dewey writes about “uncertainty”, “doubt”, “perplexity” and “confusion” in the course of learning – as evidence confirming his awareness of the existence and significance of negativity of experience in educational processes. On this basis she claims that:

Dewey's theory of learning set the limits to a space between the interruption in experience and our arrival at a way out of a difficult encounter with the world, a space I refer to as the

“in-between realm” of learning. On this basis, discontinuity in experience proves to have vital meaning for the learning process: only by means of the learner’s own exploration within this opening – or in-between realm – can she identify and potentially change her relation to herself and the world. (English 2013, 65)

Dewey’s description of five stages of learning does not allow us to deduce through reflective experience a symmetrical theory of teaching, where the teacher’s activities could be correlated with the learner’s experience. English backs up this correlation with the argument that the process of learning takes place in a specific realm, which is referred to as in-between. On the one hand this space is unavailable for teacher’s direct intervention, and on the other it determines learner’s effectiveness of learning. The latter, located in the in-between realm, without the support of educators, is not able to transform its experiences, i.e., uncertainty, doubt, perplexity and confusion, into reflective experience understood as pedagogical self-formation. Speaking illustratively, these experiences do not indicate to the learner a way out of the current situation. Therefore, the teacher’s duty is to provide the learner with support regarding drawing their attention to feedback dependencies between the negative and positive sides of their experience and finding a solution to their problems. This support is artificial in the sense that its foundation is composed of “common” learning from life and through life but must be arranged by the teacher in a special environment which is school.

### **Didactic application of negativity of experience**

Provided that negativity of experience plays such a great role in the teaching and learning process at school, according to English it is necessary for school education to become interested in this specific type of teaching and learning and incorporate it in order to support learning as deepened self-education. As regards the didactic use of negativity of experience, it is worth noting the remarks made by Mitgutsch (2009, 83–189), who stresses that learning from negativity of experience is not the only way of teacher-guided learning. In view of its highly reflective characteristic, this kind of learning can be used only at higher levels of school education.

On the basis of the understanding of negativity of experience presented in the previous section, English (2013, 142–146) has developed a model of a reflective learning process with negativity of experience, which consists of six stages. Their main objective is the productive transformation of educative reciprocal interaction, which is prepared and carried out by the teacher, into pedagogical self-education, i.e., students learning on their own. For this purpose the author distinguishes two key moments which she calls points of engagement. The first of these covers activities performed by the educator, who, after having prepared a learning situation, observes the learner’s reactions and takes the next steps accordingly. The second point of engagement occurs inside the learner, who – unless he or she is open to taking the challenge set by the teacher – becomes aware of his or her current way of thinking and/or actions and provides a verbal or non-verbal answer. Thus, this model results in transforming the pre-reflexive beginning of learning into the reflective-transformative one.

Worthy to emphasise is the limitation concerning the concept of English which results from the specificity of learning from negativity of experience in school conditions. This specificity is aptly reflected by Dewey's elaboration titled *How We Think*. He wrote:

The essence of critical thinking is the deferral of the judgement; and the nature of this deferral is investigation in order to determine the nature of the problem before attempting to resolve it. (Dewey 2008, 105)

On the basis of the above quotation it can be concluded that a person learning from negativity of experience is placed somewhere between knowledge and ignorance. On the one hand, the educator cannot leave the learner on his/her own, on the other hand he or she will help them only by facilitating the way out of the circle of the currently obtained knowledge and views, just as in the case in the Plato's cave metaphor (Benner & Stępkowski 2011). In line with this, it should be stated that educational causality (Benner 2023, 45) has its clearly marked boundaries, which on the one hand result from the learner undertaking his/her own activity, and on the other hand from the didactically appropriate ways of arousing this activity by the teacher. An example of what I believe to be a successful integration of these two requirements is presented in the next section.

### **Educative guidance as example for school moral education**

How to create educational practice in the situation of discontinuity of experience and learning morality from negativity of experience was thoroughly analysed and resolved by Herbart in the concept of educative guidance (Germ. *Zucht*) two hundred years ago, which was recalled in recent times by several authors (Benner 1993, 119–136; English 2013, 30–34; Benner et al. 2015, 106–123; Stępkowski 2018, 3–5). This concept is the third and final stage developed by the German classic of educational practice theory, which combines educative-formative interaction and deepened self-education (Germ. *Bildung*). It is worth stressing that learners being on the third stage will become independent in thinking, which can be obtained with the help of teaching through “education by instruction” (Herbart 1902, 106–132; see also English 2013, 23–27). At the edge of adulthood, the learner should be able to make moral decisions and, more specifically, should become capable to decide to act towards the good.

Educative guidance was considered by Herbart (1902, 200–268) in the third book of his *Science of Education*. Of course, it is difficult to give a short summary of Herbart's complex concept of creating a moral character.

Herbart distinguishes between objective and subjective parts of character. By the objective part he understands a character which every human being creates by his/her own acts; the subjective part involves the intrinsic personality, which helps the acting subject judge the objective part. While the first part of the character is a natural phenomenon that arises spontaneously and largely without any reflection, the second part is of an ethical nature, i.e., it implies self-reflection on behaviour-determining principles.

The architectonics of the objective part of character consists of two components: “memory of the will” and “choice”. The memory of the will includes past acts of willing and activities resulting from them. The remaining traces determine the direction for subsequent decisions. The choices made by the subject and his/her subsequent activities are reflected in the features of the objective part of character. According to Herbart (1902, 201–205), what a person will do in a particular situation does not result only from the inclinations perpetuated in the objective part of character, but is simultaneously dependent upon the subjective part of character, which also consists of two components: “principles” and “conflict”. The principles constitute a criterion, which helps the subject conduct self-evaluation. If this evaluation ends up in a disapproval, we deal with a conflict between the two parts of character. The result of the inner struggle (“conflict”) determines whether the objective part will remain the same or will be modified by the acting subject. If the second alternative happens, we may speak of learning as pedagogical self-formation of morality.

English defines Herbart’s concept of educative guidance with the term “dialogue” because it is not about the teacher telling the learner simply what to do.

Through moral guidance, the teacher has the task of helping the learner attend to her/his own moral learning process by problematizing past experience, understanding the limits of her/his own knowledge and ability, and making new decision for action on that basis. (English 2013, 33)

Herbart developed four forms of educative-formative interaction. The above-mentioned author describes them using the contemporary language as follows:

(1) “*gives pause*” [...] to the learner, so she/he does not act impulsively and so she/he remembers her/his past choices, good and bad, and remains consistent with past decisions insofar as these were representative of recognition of others; (2) helps the learner “*determine*” [...] present choices compatible with a “warmth for the good”; (3) requires that the learner “*creates rules*” [...] for future action on the basis of such choices; and (4) “*supports*” [...] the learner’s inner struggle [...] by supporting her/his act of self-restraint – that is, of opposing her/his initial self-serving interest and following through with actions that are based in a new understanding of the good or right thing to do. (English 2013, 34)

The above-drafted programme of moral education is, as a whole, based on teaching and learning morality from the negativity of experience. What makes this programme special is that in order to achieve moral education, which is self-determination and capability of moral critique, it does not only refer to negativity of experience but also gives an outline of an educative-formative interaction between the teacher and the learner culminating in self-education. To fulfil its purpose, this connection must be transformative (Benner et al. 2015, 193–197). So it seems that the concept of educative guidance by Herbart is worth a reminder and can be used in contemporary moral education at school.

## Conclusion

Although the forming of morality has long been one of the fundamental tasks of the education system understood as the introduction of the young generation into adulthood, only recently has it taken the form of ethics lessons, which are conducted under the conditions and in the manner appropriate to the school as an educational institution. A growing number of European countries include moral education as an autonomous subject in their school systems. The urgent need to teach morality in the form of traditional lessons is often justified by such facts as a spreading insensitivity to common good among the young generation, a drastically decreasing level of moral and ethical competence which may lead to a moral anomie among the young people, and a discontinuity in the intergenerational transmission of values and moral norms (Benner & Nikolova 2016, 18–23).

In order to teach morality in a school setting and at the same time to meet the challenges indicated, it is necessary to think deeply about the possibilities and limitations of school moral education. This is what has been undertaken in the above article in relation to the phenomenon of negativity of experience as a basis for learner self-education with the support of the teacher. It seems that this phenomenon can provide an effective reference point for the conceptualisation of school “morality lessons”.

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