

THE INHERENT ETHICS AND INTEGRITY OF EDUCATION

Rafał Godoń

University of Warsaw, Poland

Pádraig Hogan

National University of Ireland Maynooth, Ireland

Abstract. The paper begins with some introductory remarks that explain why understanding education as a coherent human practice is necessary for a proper account of ethics in the field of education. The authors take three steps: presenting education as a practice in its own right, discussing the concept of thinking in the context of educational practice and finally revealing some practical consequences of the inherent ethics of education. The paper invites readers to further investigation rather than giving ready-at-hand answers. It challenges conventional approaches to ethics in education and seeks to provide a more adequate and appropriate context for pedagogical discourse on ethics.

INTRODUCTION

Some opening questions concerning ethics as a field of study in relation to education

We wish to argue the case that the ethics of education arise in the first place from the demands that are inherent to education itself as a coherent human practice. The argument we will be making stands in marked contrast to a widely held view that the ethical orientations of education are to be supplied by a body of superiors, such as a Church, or the current government, or other institutional power. The priority given to institutional political power in this common view consigns educational action mainly to the ranks of subordinates, but it also communicates an unexamined assumption that this is the natural order of things, notwithstanding major political changes. To take a prominent historical example, when Napoleon Bonaparte saw himself as emancipating French education from the control of the church, he did not promote the further step of enhancing the influence and decision-making capacities of educational practitioners. Rather, he left hierarchical assumptions and practices very much in place but his reforms

served to recast the entire order of values that the new centralised educational system would be called on to serve.

The argument we are keen to make contrasts not only with standpoints that make educational practice an essentially subordinate domain to the wielding of political-institutional power. It also contrasts with philosophical standpoints which hold that the ethics of education are to be supplied by one or other ethical *theory*, such as utilitarianism, a deontological ethics, a teleological ethics, or even an ethics of care. It is not that the insights yielded by such theories are devoid of relevance. It is rather that the priority given to theory and its formal conceptual demonstrations tends to eclipse the specific and many-sided nature of the ethical challenges that occur within educational practice itself. Something similar might be said of other practices, for instance, nursing or medicine; but as we shall see below, the case of education presents particular difficulties.

To get our enquiry under way we have identified three questions that arise from these introductory remarks.

1. Why is ethics a more problematic issue for education than for other fields?

One central reason is because education is widely viewed as ‘a highly contested field’. Let us simply call this ‘the contestation thesis’. That is to say, education is seen as an arena where competing values do battle. A national report on research in education in US in 2002 puts it succinctly: ‘People’s hopes and expectations for educating the young are integrally tied to their hopes and expectations about the direction of society and its development’ (Shavelson & Towne, 2002, p.17). Consider for a moment how this prevalent view – which promptly brings the plurality of human aspirations under macro questions about ‘the direction of society’ – influences the tenor of educational policy and practice at an institutional level. It is just this kind of ‘natural aspiration’ that fuels the assumption that the ethics of education are to receive their main orientation and character from some higher body, democratically elected or otherwise. The unvoiced assumption here is that education does not have inherent values – values that arise from education as coherent practice in its own right. Control over the conduct of educational undertakings thus becomes the prerogative of what Plato was pleased to call ‘the stronger party’. In totalitarian societies this can be readily perceived as indoctrination, but in democratic societies the possibility of periodically changing a government by popular ballot tends to lessen, if not quite remove such

concerns. But democratic societies are also ones where 'the direction of society' is rarely far from controversial debate or robust disagreement. Thus the habits of democratic life itself, when fuelled by dubious assumptions of long ancestry, allow the view of education as a primary arena of contestation to prevail.

We will not be suggesting that educational practice, or the leadership of such practice, can be made independent of powerful political influences. The history of education, West and East, is replete with examples of education being made the instrument of church, or of state, or of industry and commerce. What we hope to point out, rather, is that the coherence of education as a public undertaking requires at least some recognition that it is a practice with inherent purposes of its own: i.e. different from those of church, or state, or other powerful bodies in society. This recognition of the integrity (or integral-ness) of education involves public trust: an acknowledgement that in some key senses education is not a contested field.

2. Are there particular difficulties in finding application for the major ethical theories in the conduct of educational practice?

Our answer to this question is that there are. There are many theories which seek to shed light on ethics – including theories of deontological ethics, consequentialist ethics, virtue ethics, utilitarian ethics, care ethics and so on. But none of these theories in itself provides a satisfactory approach for the ethics of specific practices: for instance, the ethics of medical practice, the ethics of engineering practice, the ethics of educational practice. In these instances the ethics for the conduct of the practice must arise firstly from the particular nature and purposes of the practice in question. Where there is a large measure of agreement on such purposes, or at least on some core purposes, the ethics of the practice can be articulated in a fairly coherent way, albeit that disagreements and difficulties will still arise. Where the practice of medicine is concerned, earlier and subsequent versions of the Hippocratic Oath provide an example of what is involved here. Such examples show moreover that ethical disagreements are not laid to rest for good, even in practices where core purposes command wide assent. But things are more thorny if the practice in question is regarded as a 'highly contested field', and if large numbers of practitioners themselves acquiesce in this view. In such circumstances it is hard to see how significant progress can be made in articulating a coherent and defensible practitioner ethics.

3. What then is really problematic in the relationship between ethics and education?

A historical perspective is important for any adequate approach to this question. Such a perspective allows us to see just how influential the infusion, or more critically the imposition, of a body of values on educational practitioners from above has been. This infusion has been characteristically accomplished by one or other institutionalized power, chiefly those of a church or state, though more recently forces of a more commercial kind have been jostling for such power. Such infusion, or imposition, fails to acknowledge that education is or could be a coherent practice in its own right; a practice that has its own inherent ethical imperatives. The record of effective influences in the history of Western education shows that the strategy of using education to advance the influence of ascendant powers has a long ancestry. On the face of it, it looks like a problem that could be traced to the paternalistic design for education in Plato's *Republic*; or to the political control of education that Aristotle argued for in books 7 and 8 of his *Politics*. In fact however, the historically effective origins lie less with Plato and Aristotle than with the Neoplatonism of Augustine and other early Christian thinkers from the fourth century onwards. The decisive event here was not just the adoption of Christianity as the religion of the Roman Empire. Also crucial was the transformation of Christianity itself from a religion of spiritual aspiration for individuals and communities into forms of paternalism and custodianship that were to become powerful beyond all precedent.

These initial explorations of our three opening questions provide the background to our main investigation, which we will now begin.

PART ONE

Education as a practice in its own right: first steps

There are ethical imperatives that arise from the distinct purposes of education itself, when education is considered *as a practice in its own right*. To speak of education as a practice in its own right is not to suggest that it should enjoy an absolute form of independence. Every practice that aims at some distinct benefits must be answerable for its progress, or lack of progress, in promoting and sharing these benefits. Every practice is also affected to a greater or lesser degree by social and historical influences in the context in which the practice is

carried on. To regard education as a practice in its own right moreover is not to regard it as a uniform kind of action, far less a monolithic form of action. Rather, it is to call attention to a *range* of practices of learning that share some recognisable features, such as the following for instance:

- practices that are not harnessed in advance to the goals of one or other institution;
- practices that continually seek to identify the particular range of potentialities native to each learner;
- practices that endeavour to nourish such potentialities through forms of learning that bring benefits of mind and heart to others as much as to oneself;
- practices that take human differences seriously and seek to promote more a profusion of human flourishing than any alignment of capacities and commitments to one or other 'ism'.

Underlying such practices of learning is an important acknowledgement that illuminates the 'integrity' mentioned in our title: namely the ethical orientations, and the tenor of action, of education itself as a distinct human undertaking. This is an acknowledgement of the limitations that attend even the most advanced achievements of human understanding: a recognition that the fruits of such achievements (knowledge, skills, theories etc) are still only *partial*, and in both senses of that word: they are (a) incomplete; (b) influenced by the previous interpretations and judgements that one has internalised.

Such an acknowledgement is implicit in a suggestive way in those learning communities disclosed in the early (though not the later) dialogues of Plato; dialogues like *Euthyphro*, *Gorgias*, *Protagoras*, and Bk 1 of the *Republic*. In these instances the pedagogical action of Socrates carries the most fertile suggestiveness, while also giving pause for a more searching kind of thinking. In the early dialogues the outcome of the encounters is usually some decisive advance in ethical insight, not just for those present, but also for today's readers of the dialogues. But such advance characteristically lacks the certainty of an authoritative final word. Rather, it discloses at the same time a deeper understanding of the nature of the issue under enquiry *and* of one's own and others' limitations in relation to that issue. One could rightly call it a more educated sense of one's own ignorance, and of the relative ignorance of humankind more widely.

This twofold acknowledgement (a deeper understanding of human finitude and limitation and the unsettling of a self-assured certainty in relation to

knowledge) constitutes the heart of a Socratic educational legacy, properly so called. Such a legacy is a stranger to most forms of metaphysics and epistemology, as understood and carried out in Western traditions of philosophy. But from the middle of the first millennium the conduct of schools, and later colleges and universities, became deeply influenced by institutionalised and prevalent forms of both metaphysics and epistemology: – of metaphysics in earlier centuries and of epistemology in more recent ones. All too rarely is it noticed that these developments mark the enduring eclipse of a distinctly Socratic educational legacy, including the powerful ethical-pedagogical orientations native to that legacy.

But one should not conclude here that there has been an irrevocable loss. Some of the most probing philosophical researches of the twentieth century have made explicit, and progressively more so, what remained implicit in the Socratic learning communities. We can for instance, evidence decisive contributions from widely different philosophers: from Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Arendt, Dewey, Popper, Gadamer, Patočka, Tischner that share in one way or another the Socratic insight expressed in provocative terms by Gadamer: 'It is not so much our judgements as it is our prejudices that constitute our being' (Gadamer, 1976, p.9).

This kind of insight, when correctly understood as an inescapable feature of human understanding itself, opens in new ways the kind of eclipsed suggestiveness we mentioned above. It uncovers certain kind of ethical orientations rather than others where defensible practices of teaching and learning are concerned. Accordingly it also helps to highlight the particular kinds of thinking that are appropriate to actions that are properly educational. To a closer investigation of such thinking and action we now turn our attention.

PART TWO

Thinking and action in education

For centuries philosophers have dreamt of finding one conclusive, objective way of understanding all that the universe holds, including the world that humans inhabit. For centuries also others have retained vestiges of a largely eclipsed Socratic inheritance by challenging this dream of a conclusive grasp of finite things and ultimate reality. The latter efforts have tried to show that such a dream is dangerous, and seriously so, for human flourishing: that the epistemological quest for certainty needs to yield to other, more open, more democratic and dialogical ways of understanding all that human experience encounters, not least the world

as our place of living. The history of ideas tells us that the tension between these contrasting tendencies has had a huge influence on European culture, particularly on philosophical thinking. This has led to many conflicts and disagreements, not only in intellectual life but also and in the conduct of professions in everyday life, including educational professions. Edmund Husserl's 1935 Vienna lecture, 'Philosophy in the Crisis of European Mankind', serves as a philosophical landmark in establishing a critical consciousness of this tension (Husserl, 1965). In identifying key obstacles to the kind of thinking that is most appropriate to truth-seeking enquiries in sciences and humanities, Husserl's 'crisis' reflections mark a watershed; one between the objectivism of epistemologies informed by Enlightenment rationalism and the more inclusive reach of subsequent philosophical efforts that rejected objectivism. The tension between a strict objectivity stance on the one hand and a more dialogical style of reflection on the other has a significant impact on the way educational practice comes to be understood. It is a tension that adds a further layer of difficulties to the long-established ones arising from acrimonies between contesting parties in the field of public education. So it is all the more necessary to clarify here the kind of thinking that belongs to education as a practice in its own right. Without such clarity it may be futile to talk, as we do in our title, of the inherent ethics and integrity of education.

Not every kind of thinking that is practised in education is helpful for understanding this integrity. Even the more 'professional' forms of thinking in education might serve to becloud rather than reveal the kind of integrity at issue. Everyday 'professional' thinking in education is often a kind of cognitive psychology, or psychology of learning, constrained by taxonomies that reside in certain forms of psychology. By contrast, educational thinking – that which informs the actions of genuine practitioners – is a really complex and reflective *experience*. To seek to capture its characteristics properly we will need some philosophical figures or metaphors. Here we will identify and differentiate between four features of such thinking: (a) personal engagement, (b) being in jeopardy, (c) encountering the otherness and (d) opening new horizons.

(a) Personal engagement

The first feature of a distinctly educational kind of thinking that we can identify concerns the kind of reflexivity present in the practitioner's efforts to deal with problematic issues or predicaments. All too often here the practitioner relies chiefly on established routines and procedures while neglecting to relate

the issue at hand to a probing critical reflection. To illustrate with an example, in addressing a misconduct issue in a classroom a teacher draws on professional knowledge and objective expertise mastered during training and continual professional development courses. But in doing so she may habitually relegate or overlook valuable insights that a critical reflection on her own experiences as a teacher, and those of colleagues, might have to offer. While acknowledging that professional expertise in teaching makes available many promising possibilities, we would stress that it is a serious mistake not to include in such possibilities those that are more deeply rooted in the teacher's own life. To neglect to do so is to bypass the core of the ethical issues that arise from within educational practice itself. Dewey remarks perceptively on this in *Experience and Education*: 'The mature person, to put it in moral terms, has no right to withhold from the young on given occasions whatever capacity for sympathetic understanding his own experience has given him.' (Dewey, 1938/1997, p. 38). In short, personally engaged thinking in education involves the whole of one's questioning experience. This distinguishes it from a thinking that takes its orientation merely or mainly from institutionalised professional habits, not least those connected with school rules, and with examination and test routines.

(b) Being in jeopardy

When any person, not just a teacher, reflects critically on issues that originate in one's personal experience, that experience receives a 'second reading', but now in a reflective and questioning mode. Limitations, missed opportunities and wrong turnings come to light, as well as accomplishments in which one can take an enduring satisfaction. Such reflection also helps to uncover previously undetected prejudices and to bring before oneself the unknown or even perilous aspects of one's life. The desire for a safe or cosy place in the world is thus confronted by the necessities of living in an unpredictable reality. Only with this kind of questioning experience is the person really ready to start the journey called for in educational thinking. This is a kind of thinking that puts one's self-understanding and one's understanding of the world in jeopardy, so to speak; it is a thinking that unsettles the settled tenor of one's outlooks; a thinking that accepts responsibility for building learning environments that seek to provide a rich quality of educational experience. It involves a willingness to experience risky situations as a part of one's *practice*, not just of one's research.

(c) The other as a stranger

We began our analysis of thinking with 'personal engagement' and then we moved to the reflection on being ready to experience the risky side of any serious questioning. An important consequence of the latter is the attitude that presupposes openness to the experience of the unfamiliar. This involves a shift of perspective on the part of both interlocutors, the one who poses the question and the listener who in turn reacts to the question. Thus, when we pinpointed the experience of risky situations as a necessary part of educational thinking, we shifted from the position of 'I' to the position of 'Thou' (Gadamer, 1975, p. 321 ff.). From that moment on, the other cannot be understood as a mere object of cognition, as a resource to be used, or as an event to be endured. To experience the other means first of all to accept the situation when 'Thou' surprises us with her unfamiliarity or strangeness. It is not possible to foresee the other in her fullness, or to reduce her to our presuppositions. Thinking, when it is the kind of educational experience that we are exploring here, takes from the outset the form of encountering. Good teachers genuinely encounter their students in their otherness, even though they must experience the unexpected and sometimes even distressing consequences.

(d) The power to change

In everyday educational practice routine is almost unavoidable. Notwithstanding the fact that teachers and educators try to avoid repetitiveness and to bring freshness to their work, teaching and learning are frequently dominated by reproduction and by rote. It is often said that education should be innovative. But is it really possible to become creative in an atmosphere of learning by rote and rehearsing for tests? Educational thinking, it must be emphasised, not only embraces the situations when we meet something new. From the start it includes the expectation that it leads to new standards of understanding and acting, to new ways of solving problems, both theoretical and practical. This why in European culture thinking, from its beginning in its Greek philosophical modes, is understood as a good way of changing the world for the better. That is not to say that words have a mainly performative function and when we pronounce them they transform objects with magical power. The real power of any transformative thinking comes not from any magic but from the inter-subjective dimension of any real understanding. In that sense educational thinking, understood as a kind of

personal practice, always changes the world since it offers its participants the new horizons of seeing and acting upon the matter at issue. In other words, as distinct from something merely cognitive or preparatory, educational thinking is itself from the start a form of thinking-in-action as well as a form of thinking-on-action.

PART THREE

The Inherent Ethics of Education – Some practical consequences

The import for educational practice of the kind of thinking we have been considering can be explored in the main *domains* of action of pedagogy itself. We have identified four such domains here, not as an exhaustive list, but rather as four central and interweaving aspects of educational relationships which highlight the nature of the kind of ethics involved in educational practice. The four domains are: (a) the teacher's relationship to the subject or material being taught; (b) the teacher's relationship to his/her students; (c) the teacher's relationship to colleagues, parents, educational authorities and a wider range of others; (d) the teacher's relationship to him/herself, within which the ethical significance of the other three relationships is decided.

(a) The teacher's relationship to the subject or material being studied

Where the teacher's relationship with a subject is concerned – e.g. economics, physics, history – it bypasses the heart of the matter if one regards this as a matter of competence in a body of knowledge and skills that is ready and waiting for transmission. If the subject in question is not alive and communicative *within* the teacher's ongoing relationships to it, it's unlikely that students will experience the worlds of possibility, challenge and discovery to be opened up by the subject in question. That's to say, the teacher needs to build a relationship to the subject as to a *neighbourhood*, or range of neighbourhoods, in which she has become at home; but not in the sense of a cosy repose for thought and action. Such neighbourhoods contain not only their own harmonies, but also their own long-standing acrimonies. Moreover, they are not neighbourhoods characterised by horizons that are everywhere familiar. Rather, they are characterised by invitations that beckon and demands that lead quite beyond such horizons. Yet, they remain neighbourhoods into which students must be invited ever anew, and in ways that evoke and sustain the students' genuine potentials and energies. This

gives a new understanding of the notion of fluency, not just in languages but in all subjects of study. Fluency now becomes understood less as a skill available for deployment and more as the ever renewed fruits of a vibrant personal relationship to one or more inheritances of learning. The ethical core of this relationship lies in embracing the challenges involved in its own renewal and enhancement. But it also lies in becoming more mindful of the biases as well as the benefits that are continually encountered in inheritances of learning themselves, from the most ancient to the most recent. From an ethical standpoint then, when the subject comes to voice in one's teaching it seeks to address the students in the manner of an invitation, if sometimes a challenging one. This distinguishes it from any action that makes a proprietorial claim, overt or implicit, on students' minds and hearts. These references to students bring us now to the second domain of relationship.

(b) The teacher's relationship to his/her students

When viewed from any adequate pedagogical perspective, teachers' relations with students are more accurately conceived of as an ongoing *interplay* than as a transmission of any kind. Crucial to the purpose of such relations is that they seek to enable students to become active and responsible participants in their own learning. For students this kind of enablement means taking unforced steps toward the discovery of their own potentialities and limitations, in response to the voices that engage them in a buoyant community of learning – e.g. in maths, in music, in Polish, and so on. It's important to add that it is the reciprocal *realisation* of such relations, among students themselves as well as with their teachers, that allows environments of learning to become properly fruitful. This realisation involves continually renewed efforts from the teacher, but also from students, and it remains invariably incomplete. It is properly to be viewed as a progressive attainment of an aim-in-view, yet an ever-partial one, rather than any final accomplishment. It remains vulnerable moreover to setbacks, distortions, and even collapse. Recognition of the importance of this reciprocal dimension identifies a range of ethical responsibilities on the teacher's part that are rarely enough in evidence in more customary conceptions of teaching. These ethical responsibilities embody the kinds of thinking investigated in the previous section. They include, for instance, the moral insight and perseverance necessary to draw learners as active and responsible participants into a vibrant learning environment; or the courage to put one's own truth claims at risk in front of one's students; or the

foresight to envisage promising pathways for diverse kinds of learners and the commitment to explore these pathways anew with one's students. Pedagogical virtues such as these – the examples could run to a long list – also help to restrain impulses in the teacher-student interplay that tend more to a rule of domination and submission, or of recurring acrimony.

(c) The teacher's relationship to colleagues, parents and others

Where relations with colleagues, parents, educational authorities and others in wider society are concerned, this, like the former two domains, could readily be subdivided. Critical analysis of this domain moreover, and of its sub-spheres, can illustrate how pervasive the forces of domination and coercion can become. The history of education in Western civilisation is replete with examples of unequal power relations as an institutionalised norm: between older and younger teachers, between teachers and school managements, between teachers and parents, between teachers and policy authorities, and so on. In fact such analyses have contributed in no small way to the idea that educational thought and action is essentially a field of contestation, or even a battleground for ideologies. But critical analyses of this kind fall short of their own best purposes if they fail to make explicit the question implied in all critique of human practices: Critique for the sake of what? Recall here that education is a deliberate human practice, as distinct from a natural phenomenon, or biological process. It's when this practical question is engaged with that the real educational-ethical possibilities of this third domain of relations comes properly into view. To capture this view succinctly: one's teaching colleagues are prized as sources of constructive criticism and ideas; parents and guardians are properly regarded as supportive partners; educational authorities as potential sources of coherent and soundly based policy; and the public mainly as a body whose trust is necessary, but earned. This, it should be stressed, is less a *theory* of professional relationships than an unveiling of the kind of sustained pedagogical-ethical work that actually needs to be done in the everyday conduct of professional practice. Some might argue that ethical orientations like those just outlined may be all fine in theory, but that they are too idealistic for practice. To such an argument it is necessary to point out a fundamental error: the difficulties here are simply not difficulties of a theoretical character. Indeed the very practical character of the orientations called for in this third domain of relationships highlights the real nature of the difficulties involved. The ethical tensions that have

to be negotiated here are inescapably rooted in the specific challenges that the various parties – teachers, school leaderships, parents/guardians – have to face in seeking to make educational practice itself fruitful.

(d) The teacher's relationship to himself or herself

This is the fourth domain of relationship we have identified. More simply, we can describe this as the teacher's self-understanding. This is where the other three relationships come together – profitably or otherwise – to orient in one way or another the teacher's thinking and actions. For instance, my relationship as a teacher to the subjects I teach might be a cherished one that continually attracts me to new and invigorating encounters within these subjects. But I might be disposed in a different way towards my students, frequently resenting their lack of appreciation of my efforts. My relations with my students might indeed be fraught with difficulties that remain largely unaddressed, and possibly intractable. One might call this a lack of 'know how' or of 'pedagogical content knowledge', to use a common technical phrase. Rather than the possession of a 'know-how' or competence, however, what is at issue is more a lack of attunement to the kind of ethical insight that orients one's attitudes and actions as a practitioner. It is less a matter of having this or that competence and more a question of a way of being and relating.

In any case this kind of shortfall could be an enduring feature of a practitioner's capability, or more precisely incapability, in one or more of the domains of relationship that combine to give learning environments their particular character. In fact one might be seeking refuge from unaddressed difficulties in one domain by an excessive preoccupation with another. Such mis-perceptions in one's self-understanding as a teacher can have quite distorting consequences for the professional attitudes and practices that flow from that understanding. These consequences become very concrete ones when they affect the quality of learning experiences among students and the quality of the learning environment where these experiences take place. It is crucial therefore to develop an ethical approach that keeps the intermingling domains of coherent educational action itself constantly in the foreground.

Conclusion

We believe that these briefly-sketched points identify many promising paths for ethical enquiry in the field of education. But they cannot do so in any ample way if educational practice itself is already effectively harnessed to the imperatives of one or more powerful institutions in society. That is why we have emphasised from the start the importance of understanding education as a practice in its own right. The paths we have been trying to uncover moreover cannot be clearly discerned if ethical enquiry in education begins with borrowings from this or that ethical theory, insightful though many of the insights from such theory can be. These paths can only be sketched in outline in an essay of this scope. But we trust that our arguments reveal something central about the nature of the work that needs to be undertaken and renewed if it is to render educational ethics itself coherent as a field of thought and action.

Correspondence

Rafał Godoń, Faculty of Education, Warsaw University, ul. Mokotowska 16/20, 00-561 Warsaw, Poland; e-mail: r.p.godon@uw.edu.pl; Pádraig Hogan, Education Department, National University of Ireland Maynooth, Maynooth County Kildare, Ireland; e-mail: padraig.hogan@nuim.ie

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