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# The Question of Ethos in Schools

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Pádraig Hogan

Interview Board Member: *Now Miss Murphy, just one final question. I suppose you are aware that there has been a lot of talk recently about the values and ethos of a school and the need for teachers employed in the school to reflect that ethos in their lifestyle. What is your own view on this whole question?*

Miss Murphy: *Hm . . . well . . . Can I be frank?*

Interview Board Member: *By all means, please do!*

Miss Murphy: *I think it's an exceptionally complex question. As I see it, the school authorities have long standing rights which must be taken seriously and parents too have very important rights which are enshrined in our Constitution. But teachers and pupils also have rights which must be taken seriously and if this is the case then neither the rights of the parents nor of the school authorities are absolute. In other words, what I'm trying to say is that there is no easy answer to the question, but there is a clear need for the various parties to sit down and attempt to thrash out in open discussion some kind of code; the kind of code which might win a substantial and genuine commitment among the parties. Otherwise I think we have a recipe for smouldering dissatisfaction and recurring conflict. The real losers then are the pupils. I think they're very quick to sense the slightest tension in the atmosphere.*

Interview Board Member: *I see!*

## I

### SOME PREVAILING CONCEPTIONS OF ETHOS

I shall begin by asking the reader to consider whether Miss Murphy's forthrightness and style of argument should help in securing for her the post for which she was a candidate or whether her remarks identify her as a potential troublemaker of whom a prudent school manage-

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ment should be wary. The reader may well reply that the information supplied is too slight to provide the basis for a valid judgement. I am quite aware of this and I should stress that there is no attempt here to force the reader prematurely to nail his or her colours publicly to the mast. Reading, indeed, affords one the opportunity of a private and privileged conversation with a text. I say privileged because whereas the argument presented in the text is already publicly fixed in print, the response of the reader does not have to be public and can be revised and carefully considered in the privacy of one's own arm-chair or study before any public judgement on the argument is offered by the reader.

Now, although the short extract from the interview quoted above does not give a comprehensive picture of either the interview board or the candidate, it touches briefly on a very live issue; an issue which has been and continues to be of central importance in very many interviews for teaching posts in Ireland.<sup>1</sup> I am inclined to think that many readers may be familiar enough with the kind of question asked by the interview board member although I also suspect that the answer of the interviewee would generally be much more circumspect than that of our fictitious Miss Murphy. All the more reason then that the reader might take a few moments at this point to examine the character of his or her own reaction to Miss Murphy's remarks to the Board. Would we welcome the kind of thinking her remarks reveal? Would it make us vaguely uneasy? Would we find ourselves rejecting it?

Perhaps the dialogue at the start might evoke many more kinds of reaction than the three broad classes I have listed, but for the present, I shall confine myself to a brief examination of the three mentioned and how they bear on our perceptions of what constitutes the *ethos* of a school, or college or an educational ethos more generally. Taking the last reaction first, namely the standpoint which rejects the kind of thinking represented by Miss Murphy's remarks, what can be said about this standpoint? In answer to our question here it can be pointed out that this attitude is a coherent and logical one for any educational authority which sees the issue of school ethos primarily in terms of the compliance of all employed in the school with the officially sanctioned standards and requirements of the school authorities. This view of school ethos has perhaps been the most common one in Ireland where it has traditionally been associated

1. In the past, applicants for posts in schools under the ownership or the control of Catholic Church authorities were frequently asked explicit questions about their religious practices. The period after Vatican II, particularly the 1970's, saw a decline in the frequency of this type of question at interviews. Reports from numerous job applicants in recent months however, suggest that this practice has re-emerged on a large scale in recent times.

with the outlooks of religious or other school authorities.<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting however, that there is nothing particularly Irish about this conception of school ethos. For instance this view is the prevailing one in the Soviet Union, where the ruling party's version of Marxism supplies the officially sanctioned standard for schools. Paul Goodman, the distinguished American writer on education, has pointed out that a peculiar version of democracy was also sanctioned widely as an orthodox creed for schools in the United States in the nineteen fifties.<sup>3</sup> In West Germany moreover, all teachers have to make a pledge renouncing communism before they can be employed.

Perhaps the adjective 'custodial' best describes this conception of school ethos. In other words, the authorities of the school or educational system view themselves largely as custodians of a set of standards, which are to be preserved, defended and transmitted through the agency of schools and colleges. An important point arises from this and it calls for emphasis: *Insofar as an attitude of custodianship is uppermost in our minds we will tend continually to be on the lookout for infringements and to be suspicious also of an independent questioning attitude*, such as that shown by Miss Murphy. This custodial conception of ethos can rightly claim authoritative warrant from Plato's Republic, particularly books II and III, where a forceful argument is advanced for protecting youth from influences considered undesirable: from certain ideas and lifestyles which they might inevitably encounter during the course of their education, but for the maintenance of a vigilant and effective censorship by the educational authorities. Guardianship as an educational theme is extolled in the *Republic* and is central also in the enduring educational legacy of Plato; a legacy which has, in varying degrees, been embraced by different traditions of Western Christianity. As my purpose at this point is one of description rather than one of appraisal it would be an error to read either approval or disapproval of Plato or of the custodial conception of schools ethos into the foregoing observations. Before any appraisal is attempted one must first attempt to bring to light, within the limits of space and one's own ability, an accurate account of the conceptions one wishes to consider, together with an indication of the philosophical origins or antecedents of these conceptions.

Turning now to the second reaction, that of a certain *uneasiness* evoked by the views expressed by Miss Murphy, what can be said of this response? The first thing I would venture to say, although I am

2. The tendency here has been to identify ethos with the substance of the statutes or rules which officially govern the college or school. This point will be examined further in the text of the essay.

3. Paul Goodman *Compulsory Miseducation and The Community of Scholars*, Random House 1964.

guessing here, is that it is probably a much more widespread response nowadays than the former one. Uneasiness, ambiguity and a measure of confusion frequently attend the deliberations and decisions of educational authorities who regard school work as a community activity but who operate in a network of pressures and constraints which is very often inflexible, or authoritarian, or both. A second point for emphasis arises here and it is as follows: *Insofar as the accommodation of various educational pressure groups is uppermost in our minds we will tend to aim for an expedient settlement of the matter rather than a thorough tackling of the matter.* Thus, provocative suggestions for radical reappraisals of the *status quo*, such as that contained in Miss Murphy's statement, are likely to cause some unease. The extent of such unease will vary in accordance with the weight already given in one's mind to the viewpoints of the authorities, statutory or traditional, with which such a proposal is likely to clash.

This accommodating concept of ethos has its origins mainly in practical experience, or more precisely, in the effects of years of practice in the politics of educational administration. It is not to be confused with a democratic reconciliation of differences, unless one accepts that democracy is to be understood as the artful amassing of ingenuity, publicity and any available precedent behind the interests of a particular lobby. Reconciliation and accommodation are quite different matters, as we shall have reason to argue later, but suffice it to anticipate here that whereas reconciliation involves a *change of heart* properly so called, accommodation is a concept governed mainly by pragmatic, expedient or *ad hoc* considerations. By way of brief illustration of the kind of tendency inherent in the attitude of accommodation, it is worth recalling that Kierkegaard, in his famous *Attack Upon 'Christendom'*, was primarily exposing a Christianity which had *accommodated* itself to the sensibilities of self-regarding respectability in prominent 19th century Danish society and had thus ultimately given itself an *ethos* which was quite at odds with its own historical origins as a religion.<sup>4</sup> The kinds of school ethos brought about by a habit of accommodation have become increasingly prevalent in Ireland in recent decades, particularly with the rise of a variety of articulate interest groups in education.

The third reaction calling for our attention is that which welcomed the observations made by Miss Murphy in her reply to the final interview question. What conception of educational ethos might

4. Kierkegaard's critique of the 'accommodating' mentality is particularly severe in his *Attack Upon 'Christendom'*, translated by Walter Lowrie, Princeton University Press, 1943, 1968. See for instance pages 34 and 35. See also his *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, translated by Walter Lowrie and edited by Benjamin Nelson, Harper & Row Torchbooks, 1962, particularly pp. 22-27.

underlie this reaction? Reflecting on this question it soon becomes clear that the kind of outlook presupposed in this reaction is quite different from the other two. The main difference is as follows. Whereas the first two conceptions see ethos primarily in terms of implementing the standards of traditional authorities, or accommodating the demands of various interest groups, the third conception sees ethos primarily as the natural outcome of *what actually goes on* in school or college from day to day, perhaps regardless of what kind of standard the school is formally thought to represent. As in the two former cases a point also arises here for particular emphasis: *Insofar as dialogue, as a way of life, is uppermost in our thoughts and actions, we will tend to have a receptive ear – but a critically alert ear – for viewpoints different from our own; we will accordingly be willing to put the correctness of our own current viewpoint at risk in the disciplined life of dialogue.* The philosophical roots of this third conception can be found in the writings of Martin Buber and, in a particular way, in the life of Socrates.

## II

### AN APPRAISAL AND A RECOMMENDATION

Let us now attempt a review or an appraisal of the various conceptions of educational ethos outlined. In regard to the first one, the custodial conception, I have suggested that this has been the most prevalent understanding of ethos in educational circles in Ireland in the past. It is a conception which is still widespread, and, from judgements recently handed down by the Courts it would seem to be the *only* conception of ethos acknowledged by the judiciary.<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting in this connection that unlike other Western countries, the practice of legal hermeneutics, as distinct from custodianship of the letter of the original statute, has not been a prominent feature of Irish law in the last decade or so.

### THE CUSTODIAL CONCEPTION

To call the custodial conception of educational ethos a conservative one would not, however, be accurate, unless one adds to Michael Oakeshott's description of conservatism – 'a disposition appropriate to a man who is acutely aware of having something to lose which he

5. See reports of two law cases in recent years where dismissals of teachers by Church authorities were appealed and lost (i) Maynooth dismissals; Supreme Court judgement delivered on 1 November 1979, and reported in daily papers of November 2. The full text of the High Court judgement in this case was printed in *The Irish Times*, 15 August 1978. (ii) New Ross dismissal. Circuit Court judgement delivered on 4 July 1984 and reported in daily papers of July 5.

has learned to care for<sup>6</sup> – the following qualification. What one has learned to care for has largely become fixed in an officially sanctioned pattern of interpretation. This qualification calls to mind once again the strict requirements which Plato insisted the Guardians of his educational state should meet in interpreting for the young the works of Homer and Hesiod, and the cultural accomplishments of Attic civilization more generally. So perverse indeed did Plato regard the ethos in the degenerate Attic democracy of his day that he would allow the Guardians of the purified state outlined in the *Republic* to employ *pseudos*, or deceit inspired by noble sentiment, in their efforts to implement the ethos he envisaged.<sup>7</sup> It emerges clearly from the *Republic* that Plato saw ethos primarily in terms of the implementation of precept and the acquiescence of all in this event.

From these observations it should not be thought that custodial conceptions of educational ethos necessarily involve ‘justified deceitfulness’. What is more significant about a custodial mentality in educational matters is its un-historical character, despite its declared concern for the welfare of succeeding generations. An unyielding attachment to a fixed outlook on the world fails, almost invariably, to appreciate the nature of historical change or to respond appropriately to the challenges thrown up by an irreversible and even frenetic march of events. Where social changes are particularly marked, a custodianship which is austere, or fastidious, or otherwise rigid in disposition, can rapidly become partisan. There are important lessons to be learned in this matter from the history of education, not least in our own country in the last century-and-a-half, down to the present day. The more unfortunate effects of a custodial concept of educational ethos are brought home to the enquirer in any serious study of this period.<sup>8</sup>

6. Michael Oakshott: ‘On Being Conserverative’ in his *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, Methuen, 1962, p. 169.

7. *Republic*, Book III; 389 b, c, and 414 d to 415 d.

8. For an examination of the enmity and mutual mistrust which regularly attended the growth of the educational system in Ireland since its formal origins at primary level in 1831 see the following texts:

- (i) D. H. Akenson. *The Irish Education Experiment: the National System of Education in the 19th century*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970.
- (ii) D. H. Akenson. *Education and Enmity: The Control of Schooling in Northern Ireland 1920-1950*, Newton Abbott, David & Charles, 1973.
- (iii) T. J. O’Connell. *One Hundred Years of Progress – The History of the INTO*, INTO, 1968.
- (iv) P. J. Corish (ed.) *A History of Irish Catholicism*, Gill & McMillan, Vol. 5, 1971, Chapter 6. *Catholic Education*: See contributions of I. Murphy and S. V. Ó Súilleabháin.
- (v) J. Coolahan *Irish Education: history and structure*, Institute of Public Administration, 1981.

## THE ATTITUDE OF ACCOMMODATION

The second conception to be considered is the one which views ethos as the accommodation of various interests. It is difficult to distinguish this kind of ethos from that of politics at local or parliamentary, shop-floor or board-room level. Though this may well be disputed, a strong argument can be made that the primary practical concern of this kind of politics — unlike the Politics of Aristotle — is the achievement and exercise of power. That is not to say that this is its only concern. Clearly, important goals of a social, economic, commercial or other nature are put forward and pursued, but such goals characteristically become modified or distorted in response to various pressures which must be accommodated if the incumbent's hold on the office of power is not to become jeopardised. Well-known terms such as 'horse trading', 'sniffing the wind', 'jockeying for position', 'going for the jugular', etc, which are part of the everyday language of political and commercial life, reveal the pervasive influence of the opportunistic and the expedient as the presuppositions of this kind of discourse and action.

Whatever may be said about the merits or demerits of this kind of thought and procedure in the spheres of commerce and politics — and such an appraisal is not our purpose here — I would argue that as far as the conduct of education is concerned the ethos engendered by the attitude of accommodation is largely an unhealthy one. It is unhealthy chiefly for the reason that it promotes a widespread misunderstanding of what the enterprise of education is about, and accordingly, imports procedural and administrative concepts from the spheres of politics and commerce which are quite inappropriate. If the essential business of education were the pursuit of some very tangible objective such as a higher index for profits or a lower index for inflation, then one could perhaps see how an attitude of accommodation might seek to make a plausible case for itself, for in such an instance the person who stays in power or gets promoted is generally the person who can simply claim to have delivered the goods and to have pacified or contained objectors along the way.

Where 'the goods' in education come to be regarded primarily as tangibles such as grades or scores in public examinations, the stage is then set for the kind of administrative style we have just been considering, and perspectives which are distinctively educational tend to get obscured. The attitude of accommodation resists any fundamental questioning of the *status quo* which it seeks to maintain, even if it is a *status quo* to which few are deeply committed. In any case, educational ideas and procedures which are qualitatively different (such as we shall examine next) tend to get redefined in terms of the values of the prevailing system and thus lose their distinctive flavour and challenge. Failing that, they are often accorded a conciliatory

dignity as 'interesting alternatives' or 'ideas good in principle'. Only occasionally nowadays are they rejected out of hand as ridiculous or crazy.

An impressive performance in a competitive examination, whatever about its acclaimed 'index' value, is not a reliable indication of a person's enrichment as a result of education. Where the competition is particularly intense the demands of such a performance and the climate in which it is achieved may often have quite injurious consequences from an educational viewpoint. Whereas a policy of accommodation may succeed in keeping overt conflict at bay for long periods it tends nevertheless to engender an ethos where an insidious estrangement (self-alienation) of those affected by that ethos can become a widespread but unacknowledged occurrence. In this sense, despite the most impressive delivery of goods, this type of ethos often succeeds in promoting an ascendancy of the unremarkable or the mediocre.<sup>9</sup>

#### THE ETHOS OF WHAT ACTUALLY GOES ON

The third conception now calls for our attention. I have identified the roots of this conception with Buber and Socrates, but before exploring what they have to say, I would like to recall a thought of Aristotle's which once arrested my attention and which penetrated my own thinking with remarkable force the more I dwelt upon it. In Book II of his *Ethics* Aristotle points out that, fundamentally, what constitutes an ethos arises spontaneously from natural habit, i.e. from what has become habitual, or second nature, in one's daily dealings with one's associates.<sup>10</sup> We have become so accustomed to thinking of ethos as something imposed from above or as the embodiment of some officially sanctioned code of behaviour that Aristotle's illumination of the original sense of the word may strike us strangely at first. So let us elucidate the point with an example from some notable political conflicts in the world at present. When we think of Poland, or of many Latin American countries, we initially think of a *totalitarian* ethos of one kind or another. (The ideological genesis of the totalitarianism is not the issue here.) Yet when we think of the manner in which the spirit of so many downtrodden people in such countries *spontaneously* and *habitually* manifests itself, we see the emergence of a different and perhaps much more significant ethos.

Returning to the question of educational ethos, we can now clearly see that there can be more than one ethos in a school or college. It

9. I have explored this issue of mediocrity, or averageness from a slightly different perspective in an article in *The Crane Bag — The Forum Issue*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 1984, pp. 41-50. The article deals with secondary education in Ireland in the modern period. The title which appears over it is: 'An Overview of the Educational Ethos'.

10. *Ethics*, Book II; particularly sections (i) and (ii).



may even be the case that the official ethos might sometimes command the respect of only a minority of the staff and students. Competition, for example, builds its own ethos, to an extent which may be infectious, sometimes even overwhelming. So do suspicion, enmity and resentment. So indeed does the spirit of fraternity and reconciliation. The important question here is not so much: does the actual ethos among staff and students reflect the standards of the school authorities or, can it be brought into line with, or somehow accommodated to, such a standard? Such questions would bring us back to the second conception considered, and perhaps even to the first. Rather the questions which need to be asked seem to me to be as follows: Is the ethos which *actually prevails* among staff and students generally such that it engenders a fruitful cultivation of intellect and a fluency in some art or skill? Does it achieve a liberation of imagination to value the possible more than the actual? or a deepening of self-understanding, vis-a-vis others who are differently circumstanced? Does it communicate a grasp of what responding to a spiritual inheritance actually involves? Bearing in mind these questions let us explore more closely the notion of dialogue.

Dialogue, as a way of life, is not something one encounters very often, despite the fact that the word has become almost banal in everyday discourse. Dialogue, properly understood, is not a strategy for resolving crises at meetings of conflicting interest groups. Such a conception reveals a singularly impoverished understanding of dialogue. Much more profoundly, dialogue is a disciplined, enduring disposition in one's heart and in one's outlook. Its effort is to be deeply and universally fraternal. Accordingly, dialogue cannot be dogmatic or artfully accommodating. What therefore, one may ask, is the attitude of dialogue to tradition or to a network of conflicting demands? Dialogue has a profound sense of indebtedness to tradition. Unlike the custodial standpoint which attempts to apply a fixed picture of the Good to the circumstances of the present, dialogue *listens* to tradition and asks: in what way might the wisdom which resides in tradition shed light on the different circumstances thrown up by the present? This indeed is no empty formula. Rather it is quite a demanding task. For instance, the tackling of an issue of social justice in modern society may require one to read deeply into Classical, Christian, Marxist or other traditions, not in search of some expedient compromise, but rather for an adequate understanding of the nature of the points at issue. It is worth remembering that every literature which has *become* a tradition, originally saw itself as an attempt to put forward a valid claim to truth, and this has not altered with history. The study of tradition illustrates moreover that the intention of truth often became distorted or imprisoned in one or other institutionalized form, and as a result, contrary traditions were

sometimes born in a spirit, or *ethos* of indignation. Thus, it becomes clear that dialogue, as a passionate interest in the fraternity and reconciliation of mankind, cannot permit itself to be dogmatic. Dialogue builds a distinct ethos of its own.

Dialogue, contrary to popular conception, may be marked by long periods of silence; an alert, listening silence, on the part of the person who actually lives it. One is silent but alert when one is seriously reading. One then has questions to put to the author one has read, arising from what the book has said to one's self-understanding. The answers may be slow in coming from the book or from the tradition in which one was reading, and they may come in the form of further questions, but rarely do they fail to come. If one says to a book 'I take your point' and thinks no more of it, then it is difficult to see how this can be anything but a failure to hear what the book sought to say. Yet, what is achieved in much of what regularly passes for dialogue is something of this kind. In every encounter with tradition, a voice from tradition seeks to say something *to* us and asks a *genuine response from* us. Similarly in our encounters with other people. Traditions of various kinds, including *avant-garde* ones, continually address us in our everyday dealings with each other. They invariably provoke a response in us. Recalling the analogy of the text however I should prefer to say: they *seek* a response from us. In making such a response, one's personal culture, including one's critical faculties come into play.

The exercise of one's critical faculties reveals in effect, much about the character of one's personal culture and disposition. What needs attention here, therefore, is the *manner* of one's response, just as much as, or even more than, the *substance* of one's response. This is particularly so wherever it is a case of a response in interpersonal affairs, rather than a response to a text by a remote or deceased author. The *manner* of one's response in an interpersonal exchange influences directly the ethos which thereby arises, and influences accordingly the attitude which others will take to the substance of one's response. The manner of a response may often reveal a disposition where petulance, indignation, self-righteousness, partisanship, non-committal custodianship or other uninviting attribute is to the fore. In such circumstances the *substance* of one's observations, contained in the response, is unlikely to win much by way of acceptance or sympathy. The ethos brought into being by the *manner* of the response is simply the wrong kind of ethos for the advancement of mutual understanding. This is equally true of classroom, staffroom, or boardroom.

In the conduct of our daily affairs, and not least in the conduct of education, there may often appear to be compelling reasons for the vindication of responses such as those listed. As far as dialogue is

concerned however, the exercise of its own critical faculties — though in no way dismissive of the substance of any response — yet detects in all such *manners* of response the death-knell of trust and the eclipse of community in human intercourse. With this awareness, we begin to see more clearly the uniqueness and the *vulnerability* of the ethos which dialogue brings into being. The proper elucidation of this ethos is a task for sustained and disciplined thinking. It indicates in a preliminary way a pathway which any thinking genuinely described as educational might fruitfully explore.

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