1 Ethics in Education

A Relational Perspective

Kenneth J. Gergen

'What is the Good?' For Plato this question is essential to the quest for knowledge. Within the public education systems of North America, Plato's concern lies moribund. Where issues of ethics, moral principles, and human values are concerned, there is a yawning silence, and this long-standing indifference now leads into perilous territory. We approach a global crisis in matters of the good, a crisis in which animosity and bloodshed play an integral role. Our institutions of public education are unique in their capacity to engender a broad moral consciousness. It is now essential to reconsider this capacity.

In what follows I will sketch out the grounds for my concern and open discussion on the implications for ethical education. As I shall propose, we approach the world's conditions in which there is simultaneously a receding interest in issues of the good and an intensification in commitments to *the Good*. To move beyond the impasse of what could be characterised as a thoughtless relativism and a suffocating foundationalism, I shall outline the rationale for a relational ethic. In this case the ultimate value is placed on the nourishment of the relational process, the original source of moral value. However, in the contemporary world of conflicting traditions, recognition, awareness, and talents are required for encouraging and sustaining this process. Herein lies the major challenge for education. Sweeping reform may not meet this demand, as ethically consequential education can and should be integrated into the daily practices of school life. Educational ethos, curriculum design, pedagogies, and evaluative practices are not simply techniques of knowledge transmission. When ethically informed, they hold the potential for life-giving transformation of global communities.

THE ETHICAL CRISIS: PASSION, PLURALISM, AND PRIVATE PURSUITS

As generally recognised, the recent history of Western cultural life is marked by continuous drift towards secularism. The drift is typically traced to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when the authority of the Catholic Church was challenged by what we now regard as the power of reason and observation (Taylor, 2007). As 'Enlightenment thinking', as we now call it, slowly became instantiated in institutions of science, government, industry, and education, questions of 'ought' became peripheral. 'Objectively' grounded knowledge tended to be advanced to reflect *the world as it is* and not *what it ought to be*. A trust in God-given foundational 'oughts' borders on a belief in ghosts, voodoo, or magic. At the same time, while the secular drift is evident within our major institutions, it is neither ubiquitous in the West nor shared in many other regions of the world. At this point, as a *Guardian* article summarises, over 84 per cent of the world's population still subscribes to a religious faith, and the number of religions is increasing (Sherwood, 2018). Furthermore, it seems that although religion is on the decline in Western Europe and North America, it continues to grow everywhere else.

In the early twentieth century this tension emerges as a struggle between a secular and largely materialistic orientation to life and deep investments in spirituality, human values, and traditions of the sacred. While this tension can be generative, it increasingly takes on a more sinister edge. The emerging plethora of globe-spanning technologies of communication radically intensified these differences. Values and beliefs leap from their geographical boundaries and are everywhere in conflict. Jet transportation enables one to re-locate to virtually any other corner of the earth in less than twenty-four hours. In virtue of the World Wide Web, one may locate the like-minded in any geographical location, near or far. One may remain in close and supportive contact with the like-minded, no matter where they are. In effect, anyone seeking security in a tradition of value or belief can potentially find around-the-clock support and throughout the world. Communities of belief may thus engage in continuous reinforcement of their views, strengthening, intensifying, and expanding them further. With this solidification, all that is outside the wall of belief becomes alien, a potential threat. As convictions spread and intensify, so does the world become more deadly.

Paradoxically, however, these technologies that intensify a world of conflict also lend themselves to the deterioration of moral relevance. For large segments of Western culture, they undermine commitments to any belief or

value whatsoever. Everywhere individuals and organisations can make strong claims to the moral high ground – in religion, politics, gender, race, and so on. All too often, such claims may result in the demeaning, oppression, imprisonment, and even murder of massive numbers of people. For those witnessing these effects, strong, passionate, or foundational claims to the good seem increasingly dangerous. Indeed, an inflexible commitment to any moral value seems childish or primitive.[1]

More problematic is a resistance to fundamentalism which also lends itself to moral indifference.[2] Righteous claims to the good pose a danger. If every group can make claims to 'the good' in its own terms, then no one's claims can have commanding force – this includes the claims of government, the law, the church, one's parents, and so on. Thus, 'whatever I declare as good is as legitimate as any other'. Indeed, why should one bother inquiring into the good at all? Just live life as it comes, fulfil oneself, and not bother with the rest. This is a world in which public lying, embezzlement, profiteering, fraud, intimidation, money laundering, tax evasion, and the like are not particularly shameful. The only significant problem is being caught. There is little debate about whether such actions are morally evil: to make such a proposal would only be the voice of another ungrounded preference.

We thus enter a period of history in which value commitments are moving in diametrically opposing ways. On the one hand, such commitments are moving towards an intense and globally threatening pitch; in contrasting enclaves of the world value commitments cease to be regarded as relevant. How are we thus to proceed? In the space below I explore the possibilities of a relational ethic. Here we may recognise the significance of all ethical traditions but move beyond the particulars of each tradition to consider the process that gives rise to ethics of any kind. It is this process of relating that calls out for nourishment and protection. With this sketch in place we may turn to the challenges of ethical education.

THE RELATIONAL ORIGINS OF GOOD AND EVIL

What is it to acknowledge the relational origins of good and evil?[3] The range of what humans have come to value over the centuries is virtually boundless – from the love of gods, community, nation, self-realisation, and equality, on the more sweeping side, to family, gun ownership, privacy, and football, on the more specific. One might even find values deeply insinuated into every movement of the day – from the hour of arising, to the choice of what one

eats, to whom one speaks with, to each of the websites visited as one traverses cyberspace. To be sure, we find many speculations about universal goods, including peace, benevolence, freedom, or justice. But for any value that one identifies in such efforts, there are people in various conditions and contexts who will find war more desirable than peace, self-satisfaction more appealing than benevolence, control more helpful than promoting freedom, and making money more fulfilling than fair trials. One is drawn, then, to the ineluctable conclusion that moral values are specific to various cultures or subcultures in various times and specific places.

Such a conclusion is no small matter because it reveals what may be viewed as the primary source of values: human relationships. Whether any activity is good in itself – possessing intrinsic value – remains conjectural. However, there is virtually no activity that some people at some time have not embraced. The value of an activity does not emerge, then, from the activity in itself but from the meaning it acquires in human interchange.[4] In this sense, values acquire their meaning in the same way as language: participation in a social process. Virtually all relationships will generate at least rudimentary understandings of 'what is good for us'. They are essential to sustaining patterns of coordination. It should not be surprising, then, that the term *ethics* is derived from the Greek *ethos*, or essentially the customs of the people, or that the term *morality* draws from the Latin root *mos*, or mores, thus equating morality with custom. Our constructions of reality walk hand in hand with our logics and our moralities.

Let us view this movement from rudimentary coordination among people to articulated values and ways of life in terms of *first-order morality*. To function within any viable relationship will require embracing, with or without articulation, the values inherent in its patterns. When I teach a class of students, for example, first-order morality is at work. We establish and perpetuate what has become the 'good for us'. There are no articulated rules in this case, no moral injunctions, no bill of rights for students and teachers. The rules are all implicit, but they touch virtually everything we do, from the tone and pitch of my voice, my posture, and the direction of my gaze to the intervals during which students may talk, the loudness of their voice, and the movement of their lips, legs, feet, and hands. With one false move, any of us can become the target of scorn. In effect, morality of the first order is essentially being sensible within a way of life.[5] In the same vein, most people do not deliberate about murdering their best friend, not because of some principle to which they were exposed in their early years nor because it is illegal. It is because such a deliberation is virtually unthinkable. Similarly, it would be totally unthinkable to break out in a tap

dance at a Holy Mass or to destroy a colleague's laboratory. To be sure, such ways of life may be solidified in our laws, sanctified by our religions, celebrated in our moral deliberations, and intensified by well-articulated ethical theories. In other words, we live our lives largely within the comfortable houses of first-order morality.

It is at this point that we may join hands with writers who argue for moral or value pluralism, such as Isaiah Berlin (1991). In value pluralism, we recognise the possibility of a range of fundamentally different, incommensurable, and potentially conflicting traditions of morality (see also MacIntyre, 2007). While value pluralism can sometimes be equated with political liberalism – standing against fascism or absolutism of any kind – less is said about 'origins of evil'. But consider: whenever people come into coordination first-order morality is in the making. As we strive to find mutually satisfactory ways of going on together, we begin to establish a local good, which is based on 'the way we do it'. Simultaneously, the emergence of 'the good' creates an alternative of the less-than-good. With the demarcation of 'the good' and 'the less-than-good', a new range of actions are now invited, some are off limits, others forbidden – a door behind which lies mystery. All children know the joy of breaking the rules, whispering in class, laughing at a prank, and stealing a cookie. And what is forbidden always invites the curiosity of 'what if . . .'. Further, there is rebellion against the tyranny of the enforcer: 'Why can't I . . .?', 'Who says I can't!', and 'I don't take orders from you . . .'.

The potential for immorality is furthered by the fact that most cultural traditions carry multiple values, variously important or emphasised depending on context. We place a value on working hard and on playing; on freedom and on responsibility; on obedience and on disobedience; on fitting in and on being unique; on pleasing others and on autonomy; and so on. Thus, the stage is set for choosing the good and simultaneously being scorned or punished for being bad. One should care for one's family but may be jailed for stealing to fill their needs; women should have the right to abort but be ostracised for doing so; a president should not lie but will be protected by his colleagues if the lie enhances the power of their party. A 'bad' act may always seem to be a 'good' idea at the moment. And, of course, we now confront the clashes of civilisations, as deeply entrenched traditions of the good come face to face, often finding a threatening evil in the other.

RELATIONAL PROCESS: THE ETHICAL INVITATION

As proposed, as people coordinate their actions, they are in the process of generating both a nourishing way of life and a companionate sense of moral right. This also left us with a paradox: the very production of first-order moralities establishes the conditions for immorality. But whatever is immoral for one may be valued by another. In this sense, conflicting goods will always be with us. The challenge is not that of achieving a conflict-free existence but of locating ways of approaching conflict that do not bend towards mutual extermination. And, given the challenge of moral apathy, are there means of inspiring moral engagement without the demands of singular commitment?

It is just here that we can return to the original source of moral commitment and, indeed, meaning of any kind: coordinated action. The value of harmonious relationships is scarcely new to ethical inquiry. However, almost invariably the ethic has reiterated a fundamental assumption of separation. The ethically informed person acts towards others in a way that harmony will ensue: '*I* do unto *others*', '*I* am compassionate towards *others*', '*I* am caring for *others*', and so on. By focusing on the emergence of human meaning we shift from this traditional concern with individuals to the more fundamental process of relating. It is out of this process that the very idea of individuals is created. Human communication is essentially the process of coordination among persons. Like language, moral leanings are not the product of any single person. They depend on relational processes. Without these processes we have no religion, science, political institutions, commerce, education, or organisations. There is nothing to care about or live for – big or small. Regardless of tradition – existing or in the making – the positive potentials of this process are vital. If we all draw life from this process, then it demands our collective attention. Here we may speak of what should be a universal concern, the grounding for a relational ethic.

Now consider the consequences of the paradoxical relation between 'good and evil'. Most typically, challenges to a moral order are met with resistance. As children we are encouraged to 'be good' through rewards, and our failures are met with irritation, lectures, correction, penalties, and even physical punishment. In each case a space of alienation emerges between the parties. Then there are the more heinous actions – robbery, extortion, rape, drug dealing, or murder. It is here we find a dangerous regression in the quest for *the good*. In the case of these more threatening actions, an impulse towards elimination is often unleashed. This is typically accomplished through

various forms of defence (e.g. surveillance, policing), curtailment (e.g. imprisonment, torture), or, more radically, extermination (e.g. death penalty, invasion, suicidal bombing). Often this shift from alienation to elimination can be accompanied by a sense of deep virtue.

In shifting from alienation to elimination, the potentials of any coordinated action are undermined. Particularly placed in jeopardy is the relational process from which reality, rationality, and a sense of the good are derived. As the eliminative impulse is set in motion, and we move towards mutual annihilation, we also approach the end of meaning. It is precisely here that a relational ethic becomes imperative. Required is participation in a process that can restore, sustain, and strengthen the possibility of morality making. In the embrace of a relational ethic we sustain the possibility of morality of any kind (see also Tracy, 1987, 1991).

From the standpoint of a relational ethic, there are no individual acts of evil, for the meaning of all action is derived from relationship. Holding individuals responsible for untoward actions is not only misguided but also results in alienation and retaliation. In the case of a relational ethic, individual responsibility is replaced by relational responsibility, or a responsibility for sustaining the potential for coordinating. To be responsible for relationships is to devote attention and effort to processes of sustaining the potential for co-creating meaning. When the wheels of individual responsibility are set in motion, relationships typically go off track. Blame is followed by excuses and counter-blame. In being responsible for relationships we step outside this tradition, and care for the relationship becomes primary. In relational responsibility we avoid the narcissism implicit in ethical calls for 'care of the self' and as well the self-negation resulting from the imperative to 'care for the other.'[6]

One may object by suggesting that this proposal for a relational ethic simply reconstitutes the problems inherent in foundational ethics. Is this not equivalent to declaring that people *ought* to be responsible for the process of sustaining coordinated relationships? And if so, is this not another hierarchy of the good in which the irresponsible are deemed inferior and in need of correction? Such a critique presumes, however, that lying beneath a relational ethic is some kind of moral authority, a bedrock on which it is established. Therefore, the response to this objection is that there are no such foundations. The logics put forward here are themselves issuing from traditions of the good, no less socially constructed than all others. To be sure, the account provides a form of meta-ethic, but in the end, it can only invite participation. It is not an authoritative pronouncement but an invitation to nurture and sustain a meaningful and viable world.

THE EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGE

While aims of education have been widely debated over the years, many would agree with John Dewey's vision of education as facilitating full participation in society. Yet however much one subscribes to this vision we might also be concerned with its progressive trivialisation. Dewey himself envisioned, for example, practices through which education paved the way for future citizens' participation in democracy and for pursuit of the public good. However, in practice, the aims of public education have become increasingly tied to the economy and to the preparation of students for successful competition in the job market. This shift is also congenial with the increased emphasis on science- and technology-rich curricula (e.g. STEM education), along with the receding investments in the arts. Issues of values, morality, or ethics simply fail to appear on the agenda. 'Education and moral purpose have parted ways'.[7]

While there is broad critique of this progressive narrowing in vision, the inattention to issues of ethics is of particular concern. A century ago, one could assume that ethically relevant education would be provided by family and religion – often in tandem. Yet the influence of both these institutions has diminished dramatically over the years. In the case of family, both parents must frequently work, leaving little time for child-centred activities. The steady increase in single-parent households has much the same effect. With the proliferation of smartphones, adolescents increasingly unite with their peers against parental values. In the case of religion, as discussed, the general secularisation and commercialisation of culture has brought with it a decline in religious participation. Given the now perilous condition of the ethical investments, a substantial case can be made for reconsidering the goal of public education. If education is to contribute to the flourishing of society, it seems incumbent at this point for schools to take on the responsibility for ethically relevant education. There are no alternative institutions capable of achieving such ends.

A case can also be made that the contemporary direction in education is ethically corrosive. This is so in at least two ways: first is the *instrumental* orientation implicit in educational aims. The value of learning, for example, rests almost solely on attainment (e.g. test scores, graduation certificate, job placement). Other interests in the subject matter, including their moral implications, are subverted. For example, in science education students typically learn that the aim of science is to predict and control events. Eliminated are the valuational and ethical implications of such a view. It is precisely this orientation, for example, that encourages the development of weapons and the drilling

for oil, without regard to how the weapons may be used and the effects of oil consumption on planetary well-being. In addition, contemporary education relies primarily on *rule-based ethics*. There is good and bad, right and wrong, proper and improper comportment within educational settings. Students are taught that they must obey teachers, not cheat, not plagiarise, not fight, and so on, and these demands are made manifest purely in rules and regulations. Such an ethic essentially permits anything that is not covered by the demands. One may demean, disregard, deceive, or exploit, for example, so long as there is no rule against it. A rule-based orientation is not only ethically thin but dangerous to the well-being of society.[7]

What would ethically rich education look like from a relational perspective?

Relational Ethic in Educational Practice

It is one thing to develop a relational orientation to ethics; it is another to propose the kind of actions that would realise the implications of such a view. What is it to 'act ethically' from a relational standpoint? While this question may seem transparent enough, preliminary attention is required. As we shall see, the traditional relationship between ethical theory and practice – with abstract formulations dictating action – is problematic. Simultaneously, the relational orientation outlined here throws into critical relief the concept of moral agency.

The philosophy of ethics has primarily been an exercise in language. Inquiries into 'What is the Good?' are fundamentally discursive, commonly directed towards the articulation of an ideal condition of ethical consciousness. An ethically informed consciousness, in turn, should provide the grounds for ethical action. Yet there is a major problem inherent in these attempts, one that threatens their relevance to our cultural life. This is the challenge of deduction: how is one to derive from a general category of the good or an ethical consciousness, a set of particular actions. The ideal category of the good provides no rules as to what counts as an instantiation. If one seeks to be kind, compassionate, tolerant, or appreciative, for example, what precisely is entailed in the form of action? What does one say, with what tone of voice, in which direction of one's gaze, and through what posture or movements of the arms and hands? We may all agree that it is good to 'love one another', but what it means to love in terms of concrete actions varies dramatically – from a simple smile, to restricting a child's behaviour, to smothering another in kisses, to smothering them with a pillow.

The relational account developed here adds a further level of complexity. One's actions in themselves do not count as kind, compassionate, or loving, for

example. One's actions come into these meanings through coordinated action with others. If one's self-considered action is 'compassionate' and another reacts to it as 'condescension', it ceases for the moment to be compassion. Attention thus shifts from the traditional assumption of the 'moral agent' who engages in 'moral action' to morally rich processes of relating.

In this light, an ethically oriented education would be constituted primarily within processes and practices of relating. In the same way that first-order moralities emerge within relationships, so are the second-order practices of coordination. Rather than the traditional emphasis on *learning about* ethical behaviour, the focus shifts to learning within an ongoing community of practice. Or to extend Wittgenstein's (1962) philosophy of language, one becomes ethical by participating within a 'form of life'. Our terms for what is moral or immoral are thus linked to ongoing actions within specific contexts. The language of values becomes a language in use. Ethical knowledge is thus not something that one has but what one does with others. This does not eliminate dialogue *about* ethics but would integrate such dialogue into ongoing processes of relating.

Educational Practices for an Ethically Engaged Society

Let us revisit Dewey's vision of education in the context of a relational ethic. Here we may see education as enabling participation in the generative process of relating – creating and sustaining intelligible action across the global community. Education would thus encourage and facilitate positive participation in (1) singular or multiple ethical traditions (first-order ethics), and (2) processes of balancing, integrating, hybridising, and restoring in the context of multiple traditions (second-order ethics). To be sure, all forms of education are exercises in relational participation. However, the forms of relationship can vary dramatically, and whether they favour the development of a relational ethic is a central question. Let us consider several sites of ethical education.

Pedagogy as Relationship

Teaching is primarily a practice of relating, but the traditional hierarchical relationship in which the knowing teacher transfers knowledge to the ignorant student is poor preparation for ethical relating. Students are essentially confronted with a monologue and thus prevented from taking part in the coactive process of meaning making. They are not invited into the reality and values of the teacher so much as examined on their capacity to mirror what has been said. Because the hero in the monologued form of relating is the teacher or knower, students might

well come to model this hierarchical form of relating into their way of life. There is pride and honour to be had in becoming a monologic authority, but a relational ethic is subverted.

By contrast, an ethically rich education will prefer forms of dialogic and collaborative learning. When classrooms are sites of coactive participation, discussion can be open to multiple standpoints, reflect mutual respect in the face of disagreement, and invite the co-creation of new ideas and action. Such classrooms are not just preparatory sites for ethical being, they are the actual sites for developing and living out ethical relations. Favoured then is a range of emerging pedagogical practices, such as collaborative learning, dialogical learning, strengths-based learning, relational-oriented learning, project-based learning, and unison reading (see Gergen & Gill, 2020). All immerse students in the positive and generative process of relating, thus preparing them for participation in the relational flows of the world while simultaneously placing a value on the process of relating itself.

Curricula and Community

Standardised curricula, imposed by governing bodies of various kinds, are similar to monologic pedagogies: they represent ethically thin (and arguably corrosive) forms of relational practice. The greater the distance between those who determine curricula requirements and those designated as students, the greater the danger of alienated relationships. When students' interests, enthusiasms, curiosities, and ideals fail to be recognised within the curriculum, the classroom relationship resembles one of master and slave. What is required instead are innovations in, for instance, emergent curricula, co-created curricula, and tailored curricula, all the fruit of dialogic endeavours between teachers and students. Importantly, as curricula become more dialogically derived, the role of the teacher also shifts. Rather than driving student outcomes, the teacher becomes a participant in and partner to the student's learning. When the teacher is no longer the master, but a learning partner, generative relationships blossom.

Educational Evaluation in a Relational Key

Traditional practices of assessment, including exams, grades, and national testing, are corrosive in many ways, especially in their detrimental impact on relationships. Children entering school slowly learn they are alone in a competition of all against all. Teachers become defined as agents of control, surveillance, and judgement. There is little trust at all levels, between

students, between students and teachers, and between teachers and administrators. Parents, ambitious for their offspring to 'achieve', also become alienated – demanding, scrutinising, and threatening. These are the kinds of conditions that undermine the development of a relational ethic.

Elsewhere we have made a proposal for a *relational approach to educational evaluation* (Gergen & Gill, 2020), that is forms of evaluation that simultaneously enhance the learning process, engage students in ongoing learning, and enrich the relational process. In the place of exams, for example, we have pointed to collaborative learning reviews, co-created portfolios, and formative feedback as meaningful for inspiring and sustaining the learning process. Contributing particularly to generative relations, there are practices of circle time reflection, dialogic inquiry, and project exhibition. In all these cases, students not only appreciate and value the contents and processes of learning, they also become more skilled in the arts of relating.

School Culture

Ethically formative experiences are scarcely limited to the classroom. They are insinuated into all aspects of school life – in what takes place between classes, during break time and lunch intervals, in the counsellor's office, in after-school activities, and so on. Collectively, these contribute to the character of school culture, and here too we may attend to practices of ethical relevance. School leadership can be a major factor in setting the tone for school relations at all levels. In terms of relational ethic, a shift is essential from the kind of hierarchical and authoritarian leadership of the past to newly developing forms of shared, distributed, and invitational leading. At the same time, there is also an array of conflict-transforming and peace- and harmony-oriented practices especially relevant to the challenge of ethical tensions. Peer-based programmes in addressing bullying and restorative practices within and without the school community to sustain relational resilience are especially impressive. Practices of appreciative inquiry and narrative mediation have also been adapted to building solidarity within the context of pluralism.

We find then, that on every front, there emerge educational practices that are relationally generative. Herein lies the potential for our institutions of public education to respond to the critical need for ethically relevant learning.