Postmodern Openings

Volume 8, issue 1, June 2017, pp: 9-14

Ethics – Information or Giving-Form?

Valentin MUREŞAN

http://dx.doi.org/10.18662/po/2017.0801.01

Covered in:
EBSCO, ERIH PLUS, CEEOL, Ulrich Pro Quest, Cabell, Index Copernicus, Ideas RePeC, EconPapers, Socionet, Journalseek, Scipio

©2017 The Authors & LUMEN Publishing House.
Selection, peer review and publishing under the responsibility of LUMEN Publishing House.

How to cite: Muresan, V. (2017). Ethics – Information or Giving-Form?. Postmodern Openings, 8(1), 9-14, http://dx.doi.org/10.18662/po/2017.0801.01
Ethics – Information or Giving-Form?

Valentin MUREȘAN¹

Abstract: There are three ways of introducing and actually using ethics in schools: the informative one, the formative one and the institutional one. The first is theoretical teaching ethics. The second refers to character building. The third is related to the creation of “ethical infrastructures”. We shall advocate here for the second form and put it in contrast with the first which is considered today as the only one practicable in Romania. We refuse to admit that the role of the first years of human living is the most important period in the moral constitution of the child. In Romanian schools „character building” is almost inexistent. The profound root of this situation and the illusion that we did our best to change this state, is our incapacity to distinguish between giving a moral form to a human being and inform her on moral questions. The implications of adopting this distinction are vast: to reconsider the importance of kindergarten and of the initial learning as having a similar importance as higher education and therefore similar budgets and much more political support; rethinking the universities’ mission and the kind of relations they have with the secondary schools; the role of family, church, schools and local community in the formation of strong moral characters; and most difficult, to assure the convergence of all these factors.

Keywords: moral formation, moral information, outdoor pedagogy, ethics management, moral school.

Introduction

In the Romanian incipient capitalism everything goes slowly. People is looking for spectacular changes, but the real things seem to have their own, „natural” speed, which is impossible to modify. If we add the hesitations, the conservative mentality, the lack of capital etc. we understand why some demanding people claim that the reform of education did not even started. And it is true that, as a radical change of the whole school system, the education reform makes merely its first steps. A particular illustration of such a dangerous illusion (that we have completed the education reform- therefore we deserve a break) is the status of moral education in Romanian schools. The profound root of this illusion is the

¹ Professor PhD, University of Bucharest, Romania, muresan.valentin@gmail.com.
incapacity to distinguish between giving moral form to young human beings and keeping them informed on moral questions. The implications of adopting this distinction are vast: to reconceive the place of the first years of human life as the most important period in the moral formation of the child’s character; this requires a new kind of budgeting, i.e. a much greater budget allocated for the education at the first age; to allow the view of a much more diverse education, one associated with much greater political respect for the first seven years of life; the rethinking of the universities’ mission and of their relations with the secondary schools; the rehabilitation of the family and the local community roles in the formation of moral persons; and, most difficult of all, the smooth convergence of all these educational factors.

Issues in ethics’ education

One usually confuses the students information on ethical problems with the building of moral characters. Romania has some experience in informing secondary school pupils on problems of ethics and its history. Remember, for example, the courses of „ethics” or „applied ethics” and the chapters dedicated to ethics in courses of philosophy – an initiative which died after few years. This way of teaching ethics cultivates the illusion that one can make Kantian ethics easily understandable in a course of one hour by giving some abstract notions of history of ethics and ethical theory. One believes that this kind of course morally educates too. In fact, the impact of this kind of teaching on the students souls is insignificant. Their behaviour is not influenced by learning what the Formula of the law of nature means. Let’s take an example. During the last years, a lot of young men and women emigrated from Romania to the developed countries. There, a significant part of them robbed and killed to survive. They just graduated the Romanian secondary school system and had good marks to „ethics”. Where did they lose their ethical education? The explanation is simple: the school gives them notions of ethical theories, but totally ignore their moral formation. To repair this error, one needs to clarify what is „moral formation” and explore its consequences from the perspective of their institutional acceptability.

Another difficulty is that deriving from the old mentality that teaching ethics in secondary schools is the same as teaching ethics in a Faculty of philosophy. Only the scale differs. Or, teaching ethics in secondary schools means doing something quite different. The topics should be adapted to the age and perhaps the content should be borrowed mainly from applied ethics. „Daily ethics” is not the best place to discuss „metaphysical” issues. The pupils have to recognise themselves in the cases
debated. The illusion that we have to teach in high schools a simplified version of academic „ethics” is one of the roots of our failure to improve the status of humanistic disciplines and to adequately define the school’s mission. I don’t deny the importance of information on solving ethical dilemmas (e.g. „methods of decision making”), but I stress the maximal importance of building nice characters. This means to give importance and take into account the affective part of human soul together with its deliberative, rational-inductive part, even if, following the Kantian tradition, we prefer an a priori (i.e. universalistic) foundation of that theory. If teaching ethics in the classroom is a job practiced in our secondary schools, the character formation was completely forgotten by our school managers, by communities and parents. Even the scientific investigations evolved from the thesis that the purpose of school education is exclusively to increase knowledge to the view that it has a character-building role as well (Hill & Stewart, 1999, p. 180). While Max Weber spread the view that the role of schools, especially of universities, is to make knowledge, not to form characters, Derek Bok, president of Harvard University, claimed that the universities have the obligation to help students to lead an ethical, happy life. This later is the Aristotelian ideal. The first one is the Humboldtian one and is still ours. Although the dispute has a venerable age, the questions still persist. In a pluralistic society which virtues should be pursued? Who should define them? What pedagogical methods should be employed to habituate with them and to obtain coherent moral assessments? Are there universal moral virtues and duties? Kindness, honesty, loyalty and compassion are they really - as some researchers say - valued in all cultures?

The building of characters supposes another kind of school program, supported not merely by professors, but by the family, the community, the mass-media and the church. This sui generis teaching is only half time intra murros. The formative role of the traditional theoretical teaching is not forgotten, the assimilation of various methods of ethical decision making being a part of the curriculum. The institutional framework of this form of ethics education is the expertise and practice of „ethics management” which helps us to build „ethical infrastructures” and create an institutional pro-ethics climate. The „case method” approach is a largely used procedure situated between the rational-deliberative approach and the „narrative”-psychological one, being practiced with the help of literature, movies and biographies of both the heroes and the devils of that profession. This outdoor pedagogy recognises the importance of modelling affectivity to form stable dispositions of character, being focused on interpersonal interaction and subjective communication.
Teaching ethics

What pedagogical methods should we use to reach these objectives? Some authors proposed to teach ethics in universities under a more literary form (M. Nussbaum). Especially for the first years of life the reading of didactic, traditional stories may contribute to the formation of desired virtuous dispositions. Violent cartoons on the contrary, generate opposed effects. Unfortunately, they are today dominant. There is also an ancient habit to use mentors in moral education. „Character mentoring”, the use of moral models, is still a method for the character formation of the young. The personal example of the tutor or top manager is decisive. To be proud of your heroes has a profound educative force. Another pedagogical method is „collaborating learning”, learning and deciding in group; one adds here the expert capacity to elaborate moral verdicts inside a pluralist assessment panel – as, for instance, the Ethical Delphi - as a result of a group deliberation. Self-reflection is also a capacity to build a harmonious character by criticizing and adapting our behaviour and feelings. The pupils must be encouraged to keep journals, to draft cases and think at them, to encourage moral discussions in the workspace, as well as to evaluate special ethical issues in which they are involved. School should organise summer camps with a special program focused on the character formation using collective games (how to survive in the forest, the first medical aid, sport competitions, why should we respect the ethical code etc.) Music was from ancient times a means able to give a subtle form to human soul and the young people were taught in elementary school to play a musical instrument, not only to learn abstract music like the harmony theory. And the list with the teaching methods does not stop here.

To introduce such a kind of training in kindergarten and elementary schools means to accept a set of radical changes as consequences. First of all, we should accept that the post-natal education (1-7 years) is decisive for what we shall be in the rest of our lives. Maximal importance should be given to the new and modern kindergarten and to the possibility to raise the children by their parents (not by grandpas or institutions); this is supposed to create conditions for a longer parenting and to improve the professional formation of the teachers for pre-school children. For the primary school the respect of the other, the sexual relations in early childhood, understanding of political life are important topics to be approached at the level of understanding and practice of each age. (Sexual relations, for example, have their specificity at different ages and have to be approached distinctly not only to the first period of life, but also for old people; the
difficulty to convince the old will be the same as the difficulty to convince teen parents). All these suppose a change of budgeting the system of education, another hierarchy of the learning stages.

The higher education institutions should not be too vocational, but institutions in which the modern men is built. This means that the complementary-humanistic and socio-political disciplines should be taught in the first years – from fundamental sciences to philosophy. The university should not prepare ready-made specialists, but balanced and self-determined men capable to specialize after graduating.

The cooperation between society, family, mass-media, local community and church is decisive for having outdoor program. The whole pedagogy should be modified and guided by these new objectives. The production and assimilation of knowledge (characteristic for research-universities) is as important as the basic impregnations which took place during the first years of life and the tacit skills which remain in us after applying a character building program.

Conclusions

To conclude. There are at least three ways of approaching ethical education. The first is the informative one: the transfer of information from tutor to student. This is something we already did, although in the high schools we do not have any courses of ethics, since they were substituted by 12 years of “religion” (for political reasons). The second is the formative one: the purpose is now to give form to a civilized man with a modern mind, living in a country still premodern. This is a more complicated task than that of learning ethics from handbooks, since it concerns the re-modelling of the human being. This does not suppose so much classroom activity, but a complex educational outdoor strategy, being rather a political problem. This really is a revolution. The reform of education cannot be reduced to the elimination of one subject from the high school graduation exams; it consists in adopting another way of conceiving education. This explains why the tutors oppose resistance. And the third way of seriously treating ethics in schools is the institutional one. This supposes to create functional “ethical infrastructures” (codes of ethics, ethics councils and offices, ethical training programs, ethical hotlines etc.) such that we can control the typical immoral behaviour in schools (e.g. plagiary, corruption, pupil-tutor tensed relations, institutional gifts etc.) and diminish the evil consequences generated by them.
Very shortly, we need also moral institutions, not only moral persons. Are they possible? How? In any case, we do not need only specialists in ethical theory, neither merely a moral man. We need also a moral school.

References