

Ethical Curriculum in Ireland: The Question of the Other

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The aim of this presentation is to explore the on-going process of establishing a national curriculum around ethical education in Ireland for primary school children. Framed as a necessary response to the increasing pluralist face of the Republic, I am particularly interested in how the ethics as presented here constructs certain forms of ethical knowledge. To do so, I explore the language within the consultation document, along with available consultation feedback, within a philosophical framework drawing on Emmanuel Levinas (1969; 1987) and feminist ethical perspectives of embodiment, discourse and narrative (Butler 2005; Cavarero 2000). Through these frameworks I analyse the documentation and discuss these in relation to 3 questions:

1. How does the ethical curriculum respond to questions of plurality?
2. To what degree is ethics conceived of as a lived embodied experience?
3. What kinds of educational institutions are required for a pluralist ethical curriculum to take hold?

The presentation begins with providing the specific context in which these curriculum changes are taking place and then moves on to exploring the implications of the title of the curriculum has for the development of its content – and subsequent response to it. I then present a theoretical frame that draws plurality and ethics together as a way of thinking about our social life and offer an analysis of the documentation. I conclude with some thoughts on how curriculum knowledge itself embodies an orientation to the other and to what degree the specific formation of knowledge in the proposal for a new curriculum actually suggests ways of rethinking our practices in schools.

An Irish Narrative: The Relation between Church, State and Education

Historically, curriculum reform in Ireland has had a complex relation to the State. The establishment of the Republic in 1922 saw the State hand over the management of schools to various patrons (Walsh 2016). This, in effect, means that schools are not *directly* run by national or municipal boards, as they are in other European countries, but are owned and operated by non-State agencies. However, the State nonetheless is responsible for payment of teachers' salaries in these schools; schools are also subject to regular State inspections and must meet curricular responsibilities determined by national State policy.

In reality, the Catholic Church is patron to approximately 93% of primary schools, with the other schools being run largely by Church of Ireland (protestant), Community National Schools (multi-denominational schools sponsored by the Department of Education and Skills [DES] through local Education Training Boards) and Educate Together (multi-denominational). Thus any change in curriculum has to contend with the historical power exercised by the Catholic Church in all educational matters. On the ground, this means that teachers, even though they are paid by the State, are beholden to the religious ethos of the school's patron, and by law are supposed to uphold the central role played by faith formation in the primary sector for approximately 96% of schools.

A Forum was commissioned by the DES in 2011 to investigate Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector. One of the tasks assigned to it (framed within the changing demographics of Ireland), was to explore divestment of schools by certain patrons, in particular the Catholic Church, in order to respond to the diverse needs of an increasingly pluralist country. At the same time, it was aware that children even in denominational schools required a more expansive sense

of Ireland's (and indeed the world's) religious diversity. One of the key recommendations made by the Forum's Advisory Group in its 2012 report was the creation of a new curriculum Education about Religion (in the singular) and Beliefs and Ethics at the primary level.

In 2015, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, which is an advisory arm to the DES, introduced a document for consultation. The proposed curriculum pluralised 'Religions' in its title, but otherwise kept the Forum's formulation. It aims to create opportunities for 'religious literacy' that more adequately meets the realities of an increasingly pluralist Ireland: one that is multi-religious, multi-cultural, and multi-lingual. Each patron has its own programme of 'religious education' or 'ethics', with the religious patrons focusing on confessional teaching.¹ The curriculum claims from the beginning that 'respect for the other and different is fundamental to living well together' (p. 5). However, heated debate has ensued since its inception, with the religious patrons taking issue with a 'universal' curriculum. The Catholic Bishops came out strongly against the curriculum in December of last year, despite the involvement of recognised Catholic representation within its development. Indeed, consultation was broad and seven case study schools were part of an in-depth set of discussions. [story of my own participation in one NCCA discussion group and then seminar to put forth ideas on Ethical Education – hijacked by discussions of religion]. Even though the consultation process ended in March 2016, with the final report emerging in February this year, there has been little development since. It remains to be seen what will happen to the curriculum – which might lead you to ask why write a paper on something that has not yet come to pass? There are, I think, a number of good reasons. First, is to trace the process of reform as it unfolds – through the media, patron bodies, and professional organisations. Secondly, I think it sheds light on how 'pluralism' is understood as it come into contact with 'ethics' – at least as it is formulated for children. That is, I am particularly interested in the casting of ethics as a subject and the kinds of relations to the Other it imagines, embodies and encourages. Moreover, both the proposed curriculum and the consultation documentation reveal certain narrative(s) about the relation between religions and beliefs, on the one hand, and ethics, on the other.

What's in a Name?

The official title of the proposed curriculum is 'Education about Religions and Beliefs and Ethics' and its abbreviation is ERB and Ethics. There is therefore no confusion about the division between the two areas of study. Religions and Beliefs are bound together as being educationally significant, the 'and' functioning between them to establish a relationship of symmetry. Education 'about' these elements suggests an 'objective', non-faith orientation to the subject; the 'about' signalling an epistemological distance between the student and subject matter, which precludes confessional forms of teaching. Indeed, as Grenham and Kieran note, different prepositions have strong implications for pedagogies and practices: teaching **in** religion is formational, whilst learning **from** is transformational and **about** is informational. Whilst this in itself could be the basis of a presentation in its own right, my task here is to focus on the meanings, attributes and characterisation of the 'other side' of the curriculum: the 'and Ethics'.

The conjunction 'and' here is, to say the least, a curious formulation that can be read in (at least) two ways. On the one hand, it acts to join 'religions and beliefs' to 'ethics' in such a way as to frame ethical knowledge in a particular direction. For example, it has the effect of sidelining specifically *philosophical* approaches to life questions and dilemmas, and subsumes the ethical under the sign of 'worldviews', equating it to Religions and Beliefs. On the other hand, the 'and'

¹ Educate Together has an ethical education programme called *Learn Together*; the Community National Schools have *Goodness Me, Goodness You!*; the Church of Ireland has developed *Follow Me*; and the Catholic Church has *Grow in Love*.

can act to position ethics as an addendum, as something which is, if not an afterthought, an aside to the main task of 'Education about Religions and Beliefs'. Indeed, Education is not 'about' ethics in the grammar of the curriculum; 'ethics' stands alone, isolated from 'education'. That is, 'ethics' does not appear as part of a series (otherwise the Title would be Education about Religions, Beliefs and Ethics), but appears out of nowhere – a floating signifier waiting for meaning.

Whilst these two ways of reading the curriculum's title would seem to indicate diametrically opposed approaches to ethics – one coupled to Religions and Beliefs, the other free floating – the upshot in terms of critical – indeed negative – response to the curriculum proposal has largely been one of seeing ethics as always already tied to religious beliefs and values. It is, on these accounts, therefore deemed unworthy of inclusion into the curriculum unless it is an integral part of a particular religious belief or set of values. That is, because 'ethics' is ambiguously both free-floating and coupled with religions and beliefs, what counts as 'ethical knowledge' lacks a solid ground outside of religion upon which to base itself.

This 'naming', then, reveals a deeper division within Irish society, reflective of the shifting national identity – and the narratives that accompany it. That is, both in terms of formal policy directions and in the shifting zeitgeist of the nation toward more demands for a 'secular' (or at least a non-Catholic Church) approach to questions of gay marriage, the treatment of women, abortion and divorce, this curriculum (along with its critical commentary) embodies the tensions of this narrative shift. The curriculum moves away from the narrative of the rather monolithic culture that has singularised Irish identity, toward a narrative of a more inclusive and diverse nation. The curriculum, for instance, is framed as follows:

ERB and Ethics seeks to emphasise the societal worth of diversity, whether in religious beliefs, gender, ethnicity or other forms. However, with increasing diversity in [Irish] society comes the need for a sense of collective belonging and affinity, which joins individuals and groups together. The ERB curriculum seeks to develop a clear understanding of difference across belief systems, while also emphasising what is common and shared. (11)

Specifically the document outlines the overall vision:

The vision for a curriculum in ERB and Ethics is for a pluralist and values-based education which can enable teachers to support children in our schools to live in and contribute positively to a diverse world. (10)

For some respondents to the consultation document, this narrative of pluralist education is simply an unacceptable basis for ethics (coming not out of an anti-immigrant stance, but out of a religious perspective):

The Ethics component endorses the morality of secular liberalism wherein individual moral autonomy is considered an ultimate end in itself. Such an approach is incompatible with the emphasis Christian moral theology places on theocentric personalism, objective moral goods and norms, the virtues, and the harmony between the individuals' good and the common good (6 teacher educators, written submission, Final Report, p. 26)

Such critiques as presented in the Final Report took issue with notions of religious pluralism (that all religions have equal validity), the constructivist approach to learning, and the concern that faith formation in schools would be weakened. (There were other respondents, of course, who supported the direction of the curriculum, particularly citing inclusion, tolerance and empathy as positive outcomes).

As feminists such as Judith Butler and Adriana Cavarero have pointed out, and as I will explore further below, such narratives (in both the curriculum and the critiques) are embedded within a certain relation to the Other; that is narrative identity is only possible as a relation with alterity,

whether that relation is characterised by inclusion, aversion or indifference. What is therefore interesting to explore is not so much *that* ethical curriculum ‘mirrors’ (a) specific identity/ies, but *how* it does so through a narrative trajectory that itself enacts an ethical relation. Thus, the very curriculum itself (as a document) as well as the informational knowledge it contains (the aims and content for children) enact narratives that are profoundly ethical and not only epistemological or political in nature.

Narrative, Ethics and the Other

The idea that identity is inextricably tied to a form of (existential) relationality with alterity finds unique expression in the work of Emmanuel Levinas, whose philosophy both Butler and Cavarero engage in conversation. Thus, I want to explore here the links between narrative, ethics and the Other as way of reading the ethical curriculum as both making and embodying certain assumptions about ethical social life.

For Levinas, our social life is based on two elements. The first is that self and other are radically separate terms and that what enables relationship to exist at all is the recognition that the other is ‘not me’. He writes,

But already, in the very heart of the relationship with the other that characterizes our social life, alterity appears as a nonreciprocal relationship.... The Other as Other is not only an alter ego: the Other is what I myself am not. The Other is this, not because of the Other’s character, or physiognomy, or psychology, but because of the Other’s very alterity. (83 TO)

This way of characterising the self becomes central to understanding that the self emerges in relation to this Other, as a subject that is questioned and challenged by the very difference the Other embodies. That is, the Other, since she is ‘not me’ necessarily acts upon me in ways over which I have no control. The encounter with the Other as Other, then, ‘persecutes’ me, in disrupting my sense of ‘self’ as Levinas would have it. As Butler explains, it is this ‘condition of *being impinged upon* [that] inaugurates who we are’ (90 TO). For Levinas, the ethical lies in the response the self has in this encounter with the Other; that is, born out of this impingement responsibility emerges as a non-reciprocal relationship.

We see this all the time in the social field, when a self’s responsibility to respond in the face of the other’s address is abrogated, ignored, or engaged. The existential impingement of the Other is not something to be ignored – as though the dis-ease and discomforts of encountering difference can be simply dismissed; rather, a responsible response emerges at the point where the Other is engaged as such and not as some avatar or projection of fear or desire. We have only to think of right wing populist responses to refugees to see how such projections onto a ‘group’ are fundamentally disavowals of the challenge that difference poses to a sense of self; instead, they are caught up in a violent gesture that seeks to foreclose the Other’s alterity as a legitimate form of being. Similarly, ethical education risks also creating conditions of relationality that are violent if it does not address the question of plurality as one of responding to difference through the difficulties in facing it.

The second element of social life is characterised precisely by this plurality. Levinas claims that pluralist society is not simply composed of multiple ‘I’s who are just like me. “The collectivity in which I say “you” or “we” is not a plural of the “I.”” (39 T&I). That is, the social fabric of ‘we’ suggests instead that there are unique ‘I’s who come together through their differences to construct a ‘we’. This move means viewing plurality on another register than either accretion or sameness. Instead, ‘pluralism implies a radical alterity of the Other, who I do not simply *conceive* by relation to myself, but *confront* out of my egoism. The alterity of the Other is in him and is not relative to me; it *reveals* itself’ (121 T&I). Thus the social relation itself ‘reveals’ the Other’s

otherness – and is not conditional upon who *I* am, in the existential sense. That is, before otherness is socially designated along racial, religious, or gendered lines, for example, (designations used to name or recognise those who are ‘other’ relative to ‘me’), there is an acknowledgement of an ontological difference – a difference in the structure of being itself which constitutes the plurality of society. Simply put, my existence is not and can never be yours. We might share certain aspects of our lives, but our existences remain utterly singular. Thus, plurality – unlike terms such as diversity – indicates an ontological condition and not simply a social one. Plurality, on this view, is not simply a matter of tallying up or seeing the intersections across our social identities, but is fundamentally rooted in an ontological separation that makes any relationship possible.

When we look at the curriculum, ethics is rooted in a core idea of ‘pluralism’, understood, largely, from the perspective of social diversity: ‘Pluralism places value on a range of views rather than a single approach or method of interpretation of life’ (20). Whilst such views of pluralism are relatively commonplace, when using it as a ground for ethical education, it gets re-routed down a path of social or religious differences that ultimately undoes the specifically ‘existential’ difficulties of facing otherness and turns instead to conversation and discussion:

Authentic pluralism fosters a culture that honours religious difference. It affirms the right of all human beings to believe and practice their faith, not only in their private lives but also in the public space. Authentic pluralism does not minimise religious differences by saying that ‘all religions are ultimately the same’ instead it encourages conversations and discussions across divides of difference. (footnote 1, 20)

Whilst I do not wish to suggest that conversation and discussion are unimportant, the point is that this view of pluralism can too easily fall back into a form of naïve relativism, which is precisely the bone of contention for the critics of the curriculum. It doesn’t allow for questioning how we come to make relations across those differences and instead offers up ‘discussion’ as an end in itself.

Butler highlights the difficulties involved in the self-other relation, since such relations are primarily, for her, about discourse and narrative. She is particularly sensitive to how the ontological condition that Levinas is speaking of, and the responsibility it engenders, is also imbricated in a field of storytelling. That is, in ‘giving an account of oneself’ how is one to think about responsibility to/for the Other? Thus, when we narrate ourselves – and here one can think of how the ERB and Ethics curriculum acts as a narrator, both of ethics and of nation – to whom are we responsible and how does this responsibility factor into our identifications with that narrative? For Butler, some of the difficulty lies in not being able to access any originary ‘truth’ – even of our own personal stories. She writes,

The ‘I’ can tell neither the story of its own emergence nor the conditions of its own possibility without bearing witness to a state of affairs to which one could not have been present, which are prior to one’s own emergence as a subject who can know, and so constitute a set of origins that one can narrate only at the expense of authoritative knowledge. (37 GAO)

Thus, as I read it, there is both a strong imaginary dimension to the stories we tell (national as well as individual) and a relational aspect to those stories – the narratives are necessarily caught up in others’ memories of events we could not have witnessed ourselves.

This relational quality of the self is what Cavarero (2000) conceives of as the narratable self – that is, a self who is not the author of her own story, in its entirety, but who is dependent upon others to give her a story – her name, the conditions of her birth, her sexed and gendered being.

The web of relationality which the self is part of is not incidental to the narrator, but is an essential element contributing to the partiality of her own life narrative. Indeed Cavarero, like Levinas, roots this narratable self in a sociality that is founded on our individual uniqueness – however, for Cavarero that uniqueness is less about ontological separateness than it is about the singular, embodied self. A self which is not, however, composed of essential characteristics that inhere in that body; it is ‘content-less’. As Butler sees it, ‘this does not mean we are all the same, but only that we are bound to one another by what differentiates us, namely, our singularity’ (34). Thus, even if my story can never be fully ‘true’, or correspond to some ‘authentic’ self, what is ethical lies in the sense in which I am nonetheless responsible for the Other through that narrative – determined by the extent to which that narrative can remain open to a singular Other who is not me. ‘There is that in me and of me for which I can give no account. But does this mean that I am not, in the moral sense, accountable for who I am and for what I do?’ (40 GAO).

The issues raised by these philosophers suggest that ethical education cannot simply be about informational knowledge, but involves a profound understanding of relationality and our own unique responsibility within it. Indeed, the curriculum seems to acknowledge as much in promoting the idea that ethical knowledge is not enough:

The teaching of ethics includes the formation and the promotion of a personal commitment to the dignity and freedom of all human beings, the importance of human rights and responsibilities, the place of justice within society, and the service of the common good. These are all essential to education for citizenship and the proper functioning of democracy. Learning about ethics is important for all but developing modes of ethical behaviour is of central importance to children’s development. (6)

Thus, if ethical behaviour – or perhaps, more appropriately, ethical ways of living – is to be central then it means having an ethical understanding that incorporates the realities of children’s lives and their relations to others. Taking a relational approach, as suggested by Butler and Cavarero, seems to me to put ethics back on the ground of our social life, away from a realm of abstraction about character, ideals, and virtues. Insofar as ethical education seeks to involve children in ‘real life’ encounters with others, their ideas, their values and the dilemmas, discomforts and pleasures these can bring, then it would seem that it needs to have some idea of the quality of relations it is promoting in ethics’ name.

Moving Toward the Other?

It has not been my intent here to evaluate whether or to what extent the proposed ethical curriculum ‘measures up’ to some philosophical standard of what ethics *is*; rather what this philosophical framework helps us to identify is the kind and quality of relationships that are presumed in and through the curriculum. And this is particularly important given how the ethical part of the curriculum seems to have become at least partially absorbed into worries about religion, on the one hand, and the denuding of ethics as belonging to a rich tradition of thought about existence and the treatment of others, on the other.

Thus my concern with ethical education is how it can narrate a form of knowledge that itself promotes a relation to the Other beyond the social categories of diversity. Taking relationality and plurality seriously as conditions of ethical education means having to rethink not only what we teach but how we teach it, and the kinds of schools we want to create. This, to my mind, is not simply a question based on choosing between a ‘secular’ or ‘religious’ perspective, but questioning of what we do requiring a reimagining of the quality of our relationships in schools necessary to bring about change – alongside, I would argue, structural changes to the patronage system itself.

Thus, by way of conclusion, I wish to outline a few key elements for creating change that recognise the complexity of facing otherness and the difficult demands this places on educational

institutions. I think it is important to think about change as encompassing both the people who live in schools and the practices that constitute these spaces *as* institutions in the first place. In this light, while institutions are *governed* by rules, regulations, policies, legal frameworks and organisational structures, they *institute themselves* as such through cultures, which are composed of relationships, practices, experiences and shared imaginaries. As Cornelius Castoriadis (1987) understood, institutions operate *as* institutions through the on-going imaginary investment in the practices that make up institutional life. Within formal educational institutions, these practices are not only cognitive or intellectual but also embodied, sensate and phenomenal. This means it is not enough to alter the regulatory frameworks in which schools operate, be these curriculum policy or organisational arrangements (although this structural component is also necessary), but to alter the conditions – and expectations – in which teachers and students live their lives in schools. Thus, the kind of change that is necessary to support an ethical curriculum committed to both plurality and relationality requires creating conditions that allow for a movement toward the Other. This means designing not only opportunities for the *expression* of conflict, tensions and discomfort but also strategies for *living well with* disagreement and dissensus – alongside acknowledging the relative ease that modes of contentment and pleasure in shared activities and ideas bring. An ethical education, then, would be about enabling narratives – both on the national and individual scale – that recognise their own partiality and interdependence. If Ireland is to embrace an ethical curriculum, then it needs more than an appeal to diverse identities and interests – as if this narrative can simply bring about a movement toward the Other that is required; it needs instead a story of the deeper, existential dimensions of our social life that moves beyond the religious/secular divide. The challenge here is to create narratives that speak not of lives in multiplicity, but that speak to the multiplicity in living a singular life with others.

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