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The Ethical Nature of a Teacher's Work

By: **Rauni Räsänen**

Translation by Merita Passi

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Pentti Malaska states about the relationship between science and ethics as follows:

(But) science has closed its boundaries as regards values, consideration of the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly, the truthfulness and the dishonesty. Science is not fitted to lead the way in ethical matters, science does not develop ethical consciousness. It closes that outside and misleads into believing that is does not exist.

This statement of Malaska has often occupied my mind when making research and as a trainer of teachers. Is that so, and if it is, what is the reason? My own view is that this necessarily needs not be the case, it ought not to be, or even it were, not allowed to be so -it is of such an importance what ethical issues mean to human growth and development.

I concentrated on questions connected with ethics especially when I was writing my doctoral thesis "The Teacher Searching for Ethics; The developing process of the study passage on the teacher's ethics as an action research in teacher education". In the following I concentrate to study, on the basis of my doctoral thesis, three main fields: (1) definition of ethics, (2) connections between ethics and the teacher's work, and (3) ethical education.

DEFINING ETHICS

What in the first place does the word "ethics" mean and how it differs from the conception of morals. It could be argued that

those two words belong to conceptions which have been most needlessly used and wrongly understood in the world. They are used carelessly and they often are dominated by emotion without defining them - and thus it leads to a situation where differing things are discussed. A cynic could also state that it must be a question of a misunderstanding when the conflict between words and deeds is so evident in ethical questions.

The definition of words has not been easy even for the specialists in the field: the use of conceptions and the derivatives from them has varied during different time periods, in the conceptual systems of different researchers and schools. I give here some examples of Finnish definitions: Martti Lindqvist has stated that morals usually means the choices people make and the views connected with values which are the basis for them. Ethics on the other hand is according to his view theory and research of morals. Thus morals is something that finds expression in practical life and is committed as regards its point of view, whereas ethics strives for universal applicability, impartiality and theoretical justifiability (Lindqvist 1986, 38). Urpo Harva represents a conception which is near Lindqvist's view when he states that morals is life, making solutions in the real life, whereas ethics means research of morals, thinking. According to him, the basic difference between morals and ethics is that in the former the question is about practical solutions, in the latter about a reflecting attitude (Harva 1980, 13). Annika Takala also comes to the same kind of result (1976/9, 25) and complains that part of people do not assess their own and the society's morals at the level of ethics, in which case also the moral education may only aim at implanting the morals, but not teaching the ethical criteria above it. In practice it is, however, extremely difficult to differentiate these two conceptions.

The multiplicity of conceptions is still increased by the fact that, when professional morals is concerned, the internationally generalized custom is to use the concept ethics. This has been justified, among others, by the argument that an individual is not in his work only a private person but with the profession are connected tradition and responsibility, and the idea of the task of the job.

In the following, I have in the first place resulted in the use of the words ethics, ethical way of thinking and ethical. I avoid the word morals and words derivated from it if there is no special reason for their use. These kind of reasons are that the word in

question has been used in a cited text or it occurs in a certain established term, as for example in the word moral consciousness. In addition to this, I have used the words morals or moral if the question is of following a custom, or of an activity which is not connected with thinking, considering or assessing. To the Greek-based derivatives I have ended up in other cases for various reasons:

Firstly, in connection with professions it has become general to keep to the term ethics and the derivatives from it. Secondly, I have avoided the use of the word morals and the derivatives from it because they very generally are connected to the connotation of moralism and moralizing. Besides, I have wanted to emphasize that when teacher education is concerned, it is not possible to limit it to the teaching of norms, customs and habits connected with the profession but the target is also to consider and assess the values and practices of the profession - to study on which ethical principles the practices are based or whether they on the whole are based on a responsible view of good life and human growth.

Airaksinen states in his *Moral philosophy* (1988) that ethics is sailing like between *Skylla* and *Kharybdis*. In one direction there are blind prejudice and moralism threatening it, in the other snobbish mental acrobatics in official jargon. There is reason to be conscious of both dangers when planning the education of ethics.

The most covering question of ethics concerns each of us: What is a good life like and what are the preconditions for it? The question is often divided into two subquestions:

- What is valuable, i.e. which values does a good life contain?
- What has to be done and from which to keep aloof from, i.e. which norms shall an individual follow in his life? (Cf. e.g. Airaksinen & Kuusela 1989, 29; Peters 1970, 93-94; Strike & Soltis 1985, 7.)

Hence, to the research field of ethics belong such conceptions as the good and the bad, the right and the wrong, the rights, duties, responsibilities, values and norms. One of the derivatives of the conception ethics is also the idea ethical way of thinking which, too, is defined in many ways - if there on the whole has been a desire to present any final description. In the definitions have in

some cases been emphasized sense, in some feeling or action.

William Kay's (1975) definition of the ethical way of thinking is one of the most interesting. He has in his book *Moral education* (1975) prophesied that humankind has entered into a new phase in its cultural evolution where it is compelled (it is even a vital necessity for it) to advance also in the field of ethical way of thinking. As preconditions he has set four qualities: autonomy, rationality, altruism and responsibility. Autonomy is essential since such a thing which is done under compulsion is not considered to be ethical in the real sense of the word. And in general independence is essential if the ruling practice is going to be changed. Autonomy connected with the ethical way of thinking cannot, however, be any kind of spontaneity or independence but it has to be put under the scrutiny of intelligence. In addition, since our action and solutions affect other people, they involve as an essential part that people put themselves into another's position and take care of their welfare. That is the matter especially in the teacher's work. Alberoni and Veca (1990, 54-55) have expressed the idea in this way:

Intelligence without altruism is empty and cold, but altruism without intelligence is blind. When they are connected together they bring forth ethical action which is not only based on duty but also on joy and the desire to act for the good of another person.

A TEACHER'S WORK AND ETHICS

A teacher's profession and work have been understood in different ways at different times, and the ruling conceptions have in many ways been analysed. The work of a teacher has among other things been studied as a skill, an art, adapted science, ethical profession, as an approach of a teacher as a researcher of his own work. It is also partly for this reason that teacher education has been understood in many ways (e.g. Liston & Zeichner 1991; Tom 1984 & 1987, Zeichner 1983). In this context it has been considered whether the question is of 'teacher training', i.e. becoming limitedly competent for the profession or 'teacher education' which is linked with a cultural ideal and widening of consciousness (Beyer 1986, 37-41; Case et al. 1986, 39). It has been asked whether a teacher is merely a transmitter of culture or also a person who cherishes and assesses it. Is a teacher an officer who implements the things which authorities and the teaching plan obligate or has he courage and qualifications also to assess and question the ruling

structures in case the rights and growth of the child require it? Is it also his vision to aim at making the world for children and future generations a better place to live in?

In my doctoral thesis I have thus studied a teacher's work as an ethical profession and considered that ethics essentially belongs to the essence of education, to a teacher's work and thus to teacher education. This has been argued among other things as follows:

- Teaching and education are activities which are strongly tied with values since the idea is to make things better: growth, development, culture. The connection with values can at the school be seen from target questions to the last detail, such as how many hours at the school are used for each subject. The role of a teacher and autonomy in the educational and development process of the school can be outlined in many ways. The pedagogic freedom of a teacher is, however, considered to be relatively big; he can at least to some degree value and interpret targets, choose educational contents and especially the methods and forms of teaching (Strike 1990, 188-223).
- The thing which makes the teaching and educational situation ethically sensitive is if there is as another party a growing and developing child or youth who is sensitive to influences. A child cannot, like grown-up people, take care of his rights, and the school and the teacher have because of their position big power on the child's life, among other things, in the role of giving the marks and thus also e.g. as a former of the ego - and in that way the effects also move over to the child's future. The positive influences of a teacher can also be crucial: he can encourage, inspire and open new chances and views by means of various information and skills. He can be a safe and caring grown-up person and human being. A teacher's work is then continuous balancing between the supporting of an individual and individualism and the demands made to the life in a community (cf. e.g. Toukonen 1991).
- Besides, the work of a teacher is made to contain ethically more elements by the fact that there are several cooperation parties which have the right to define the direction of development. A teacher has in a way many fellow workers, clients, employers. A teacher has to think over what responsibilities he has towards children

and for children, towards parents, colleagues, community - without forgetting his own principles if he regards them as well-founded and good. It is not unusual that the values and norms from various quarters are conflicting with each other. Even the parents of one and the same child may have different opinions of questions which even may be very crucial in the child's life. There arises the question who has the right and who is competent to decide what is the best thing for the child.

- The forth argument for the thought that a teacher's work could be considered an ethical profession is that if education in general has influence on people, a teacher is very important socially when educating citizens of the future who apparently will in the future be more and more cosmopolitans. We probably do not have another professional group with which all people, e.g. in Finland, would work together such a long time of their life.

The ethical dimensions of a teacher's work are thus not limited to certain subjects, themes or passing subjects - or necessarily not even to his workin with the pupils of his own class, but they are at their widest questions which concern the whole school system and its historic-social context and future. One student of teacher education described the matter like this:

A teacher is also a instructor, director of the basis of values, also an explanaor and interpreter of value. At his best, a teacher is able to inspire his pupils to search such values which produce a big amount of happiness to as big a crowd as possible.

You cannot find happiness unless you are not able to show the defects prevailing in the world. You cannot find happiness if you are not willing to omit the defects. Therefore it is in my opinion important that a teacher is in his work ready to fight against ignorance, cruelty, famine, racial discrimination, prejudices ... It would, by the way, be interesting to develop the thought of a teacher from the role of a national school teacher to the role of international school teacher. By this I mean that the globe is really small and belongs to all of us.

ETHICAL EDUCATION

Ethical education is part of the ethical dimensions of a teacher's work and it has a long history behind it. Traditionally it has been regarded as one of the oldest tasks of the school system but its nature, target, contents and importance have varied from one

period to another (Hersh et al. 1980, 13-25; Purpel & Ryan 1976, 3-10). There has, as a rule, been general agreement that ethical education is important, even though also opponents to ethical education given at compulsory schools. The sceptics have not formed any common group but represent very different views on people, society and education. Most usual has been that there has in the background been the fear that ethical education would become a means of using power and of infringing on the freedom of thought.

As a counterargument has, on the other hand, been presented that education and school system always transmits values and norms. It has been stated that ethical education is inevitable: it takes place all the time, whether we wanted it or not. Instead of letting hidden and haphazard factors take care of value education, it would be important to take the ethical questions as a subject of common scrutiny, assessment and consideration.

Also among those people who have considered ethical education to be a central task of schools there have been differing opinions about what that ethical growth or education could be: there are numerous schools and approaches (Chazan 1985; Hersh et al. 1980; Lipman et al. 1980; McPhail et al. 1975; Noddings 1987 and 1988; Power et al; Pring 1987; Purpel & Ryan 1976; Rathes et al. 1978; Scharf 1978; Straughan 1988; Wilson et al. 1967; Wilson 1973 and 1990). It can for instance be understood as a transmission of values and norms to future generations, as clarification of each one's own values or as a common information and problem solution process.

There are many ways to justify the transmission of certain values and norms. Firstly, it can be thought that there are universal ethical principles which are always valid, or values which the people who bear responsibility for other people and life agree upon. These kind of principles have considered to be, among others, the golden rule of ethics and declarations of human rights. One argument for the transmission of values has also been that although there would not exist universal ethical principles, it is good for children to learn the values and norms of a certain society. Herewith can be argued that the present values are important and they have validity even in the future.

The school of clarifying values was born as a strong protest to the thinking of transmitting values. The approach does not teach certain collection of values but it involves making up situations and tasks where the pupils come face to face with their own

values, are compelled to consider and assess them. In this approach it is believed that an individual has the ability to grow and develop through self-knowledge and own experiences. The advocates of this school argue that values which have not been internalized and have been taught by other people have not borne fruit but have often led to a double standard of morality. The advocates of the school emphasize that the whole world is changing all the time, it is not possible to give a ready-made list of values and norms; they stress the personal nature of values and an individual's own, active action when trying to find them. Hence it is important to guide the pupil to a life-long road of continuing choices between values.

The advocates of the school of clarification of values have been accused of value relativism as well as of simplifying the relationship between an individual and the society - the behaviour in it is as if individuals would act in a vacuum, as if they would carry out their process of value selection apart from social context. Also the weak theoretical base of the approach as regards the ethics has been criticized. It has been questioned whether it at all is ethical education that is concerned but a general educational way of approach.

The individualcentric approach of the commission of clarification of values has obtained besides its schools which have emphasized, besides individual process, knowledge of ethics and testing of ethical principles, values and norms through an open dialogue.

In my doctoral thesis I have combined principles of different schools when searching an approach suitable for teacher education. In the development process the conclusion has been that a society of individuals who are widely and deeply conscious of ethical questions and are studying them is the target and means of the ethical growth in teacher education. In order to become conscious of this, the necessary elements are knowledge, experience, ability to put oneself in another's position, open and safe dialogue - and, most of all, that ethical issues become significant and important. A teacher needs in his work ability to read in the field of ethics. He also needs ability to read those hidden marks which prevent ethical action at individual, community and society level.

I started my article with Pentti Malaska's argument in which he questions the ability and willingness of science to create ethical consciousness. The argument is a challenge to science, and

especially pedagogics and teacher education. When the ethics in my study have grown the reply to that challenge is: an attempt to prove that it does not have to be so, an attempt to combine the research of a teacher's ethics tightly with practical action and its development.

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