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# Teaching and Teacher Education

# Should 'ought' be taught?

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### A B S T R A C T

The argument in this paper is that teachers and other education professionals could benefit from the opportunity to develop ethical understanding, in addition to other aspects of professional knowledge. Having first discussed the nature of ethics, the first main section of the paper establishes the case in favour of including ethical education in the initial or ongoing professional learning of teachers. The case focuses particularly on showing the negative effects of the fashionable claim that 'values are relative or subjective' which I argue is a key source of confusion for teachers. In the final part of the paper I discuss some of the kinds of consideration about values and ethics that teachers might find useful.

## 1. Introduction

This paper is about ethics, sometimes referred to as 'moral philosophy' or the 'philosophy of morality', and the benefits teachers and other educational professionals might gain from its inclusion in their initial preparation or ongoing learning. This could be (though it is not) part of a broader argument concerning the contribution that philosophy might make in general to 'capacity building' in the education of teachers. For example: epistemology (theory of knowledge) and philosophy of mind could provide enriched understandings of learning theory and curriculum; political philosophy could help frame questions we might ask about 'leadership' and the legitimate limits of the powers accruing to it; the study of logic could sharpen our wits in relation to judging the quality of argument underpinning policy initiatives, and branches of ethics not represented in this paper could provide perspectives on matters highly relevant to teacher education.[1] Interesting as these topics are, my purposes are more limited and much less ambitious: I try to illustrate how teachers might be supported to deal more confidently with the moral issues that they encounter in the course of their professional lives and in doing so I draw on a particular strand of ethical theory that challenges the claim that 'values are relative or

subjective', which I argue is a key source of confusion for teachers and teacher educators. Having first offered a clarification of terms, I go on to develop the argument, through examples drawn from the English context, that teachers need more by way of ethical education than they are currently offered in their professional preparation.[2]

## 2. The nature of ethics

Ethics deals, amongst other things, with right and wrong, ought and ought not, good and evil. Explorations into questions such as 'what ought I to do, how do I find out or know what I ought to do, and having found out, why should I do it?' form the substantive content of this branch of philosophy as do debates about what counts as moral judgement, how it can be distinguished from other kinds of value judgement, why this matters, and what kind of truth claims can be made in the moral sphere, if any[3]. As well as exploring the nature of the moral domain and clarifying the questions arising within it, philosophers occasionally attempt to provide answers to moral questions, at which point they become moral agents, entering the ring with no more authority than anyone else. Even though they have undoubtedly had more practice in moral reasoning than the

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[1] I am grateful to David Bridges for pointing out that work in the Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics could be highly relevant to teacher education and that adopting a virtue approach would yield different perspectives on what might be involved in 'ethical' teacher education. For example in the selection of people for teacher training we may want to pay attention to 'moral virtues such as integrity, sensitivity to the needs of others, passion for learning and fair mindedness' (Bridges, 2008).

[2] An earlier version of this paper was presented at Seminar 3 of the ESRC/TLRP seminar series, Learning to teach in post-devolution UK: The transition from initial teacher education through induction to early professional development in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The series was directed by Ian Menter (University of Glasgow) and the project team were Moira Hulme (University of Glasgow), Anne Moran (University of Ulster), Martin Jephcote (Cardiff University) and Pat Mahony (Roehampton University).

[3] There are different branches of ethics e.g., metaethics, normative ethics, applied ethics etc. which would allow for further categorisation of ethical questions, but for the purposes of this paper I only mark off the general domain of 'ethics'.

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general population, they are not necessarily experts in morality, either in the sense of being super-moral persons themselves or in claiming to know what others ought to do – they can only claim expertise in the philosophy of morality.

A good deal of philosophical deliberation about ethics does not obviously connect with the dilemmas that education professionals face everyday and I do not claim that there is an immediate way of reading moral philosophy across into a professional context. Rather, I argue that teachers might benefit from understanding some of the ethical dimensions of education and in the next section I give a number of examples in support of this view. I shall not suggest that we all need to become ethical theorists or jobbing moral philosophers, but there is good reason to suppose that increasing levels of ethical understanding might yield a number of benefits such as helping to reduce confusion and eliminating some rather silly current orthodoxies concerning moral relativism or moral subjectivism.[4] It might also strengthen the arguments of those who oppose current trends such as: defining education only in terms of the needs of the economy; conceptualising teaching solely as a matter of technical competence; claiming that governance and accountability can be adequately covered by contracts, targets and performance indicators and asserting the primacy of instrumental professional knowledge above other kinds of knowledge. Of course it is possible that the reverse might result, namely, that trying to improve ethical understanding would result in complete bewilderment, or worse, that educational professionals begin to claim a degree of moral certitude which renders them completely intolerant of the perspectives of others. These reservations can only be settled empirically and without actually experimenting with different ways of developing ethics for teachers and then undertaking a thorough evaluation of the results, we cannot know what the consequences would be. I now move on to outline four arguments in support of the claim that teacher education currently pays insufficient attention to teachers' ethical understanding as a necessary element of their professional knowledge. The first argument is based on interviews with teachers, the second concerns the origins and content of the English teaching standards, the third draws on the work of others on the ethical basis of education and the fourth compares teaching and research from an official point of view.

## 3. Arguments for including ethics in teacher education

### 3.1. Stories from the field

Some recent experiences arising from research interviews with teachers form the first of the four arguments for including ethics in teacher education. In my view these stories from the field suggest that school teachers are not adequately prepared to deal with the everyday situations in which they find themselves. In the first story a teacher (Agnes) was being interviewed in the context of an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded project (R 000 23 7382) on the National Professional Standards. Agnes was visibly upset about the implications of the mandatory 'Numeracy hour'[5]

which she believed was generally inappropriate, and in some cases positively damaging, for her class of children whose first language was not English:

> I actually didn't want to come back after the holiday because I was thinking, well here we go, Numeracy hour now … And it's made me quite depressed, you know. … It's the methodology that's at the root of my problems, the pace is too great for the children we've got and you're thinking, well hang on a minute, they haven't had like four years head start. They are coming into this cold, they can't cope it's frightening [them].

A colleague had advised her to put the official documentation 'in the bin' and attend to the children's needs but she felt torn between thinking, on the one hand, that she ought to comply with Government requirements and on the other, believing that she ought not to in the case of these particular children. Had she not been in tears, it might have been possible to have probed the nature of Agnes dilemma in more depth. Without this, we can only speculate that in a context where the school was about to be inspected, she did not want to jeopardise the good reputation of her school and her colleagues, but neither did she want the children in her class to suffer from what she perceived as the damaging effects of her compliance. Witnessing the level of distress that this dilemma provoked about what Agnes ought to do was one powerful influence on our subsequent call for a reflective critical space in teacher education and professional development where policy issues such as these could be contextualised and discussed (Mahony & Hextall, 2000).

In the another instance, examples of teachers' confusion emerged from interviews with teachers about their views on work around the theme of gender violence that was being 'delivered' within the Personal and Social Health Education (PSHE) programme (Mahony & Shaughnessy, 2007). Two teachers, Joan and Derek were expressing their concerns about how to sensitively manage class discussion on some of the issues arising from the work on gender violence, especially where parents' attitudes, cultures and behaviour could be interpreted as being implicitly criticised. The teachers seemed to be unsure about the legitimacy of making moral judgements at all, at the same time as acknowledging that this is inevitable:

> Derek    … but you don't make moral judgements.
> Joan     Well I try not to but I mean you're making this sort of assumption. You're saying things … without realising that you're putting across a point of view.
> Derek    I suppose the root of this [work on violence] is a moral judgement though isn't it? The fact that violence is wrong? But it's not always explicit is it? It's not something that's completely isolated because when you know you're relating it to History, if I get an opportunity to talk about racism and how it shouldn't happen or sexism and that, I do it anyway within History. Supposing you've got some values, you can't help but put them into your lessons.

In a third story, Robert, another interviewee from the same project, talked about the challenges he faced in teaching the PSHE programme. In the course of the conversation he made the classic distinction between fact and value, exemplifying an approach to ethics that has enjoyed varying degrees of popularity throughout the history of moral philosophy. It has recently been given a boost by the recent outbreak of moral subjectivism, which states that moral judgements can in no sense be seen as rooted or located in any objective reality beyond personal opinion:

> Robert    And so I was challenged to re-look again at my own values and my own kind of prejudices that were in me. Because I had to get rid of those or least be aware of

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[4] In the examples cited, 'relativism' and 'subjectivism' were used interchangeably to mean 'it's all a matter of personal opinion'. However, there are differences between 'relativism' and 'subjectivism': moral relativists hold that no universal standard exists by which to assess the truth of an ethical proposition, whereas subjectivists believe that ethical sentences reduce to statements about the attitudes of individual people. What is at issue here is the status of moral judgements and whether there are any external or objective criteria by which to assess them.

[5] As part of its commitment to raising standards, the government introduced in September 1999 the National Numeracy Strategy in all English and Welsh primary schools. Every school was expected to provide a daily mathematics lesson for all pupils in which teachers were expected to undertake whole-class teaching for much of the time with a focus on oral and mental calculation.

them in me before I felt strong enough to teach those things. And if I was going to share a personal opinion, I would dress that up. This is a personal opinion, it isn't you know like maths, well it's all relative isn't it?

Int.     …. I'm not sure, because, is it just a personal opinion though [that violence is wrong]? Would it be OK for my personal opinion to be the opposite – that it's just fine?

Robert   Mmm, …. I don't know (laughs) I'm a maths teacher!

The consequence of moral subjectivism becomes very plain from this example. It leaves teachers such as Robert in the position of having to teach a programme of work containing messages about morality which he says are a matter of 'personal opinion'. His solution to 'dress that up' does not really help him since one might argue that this is a manipulative strategy that does not resolve the real problem, namely his confusion about the epistemological status of claims about right and wrong in the sphere of ethics. As he hints, moral values are not like mathematical propositions, but as I shall argue later, this does not entail that they are 'just a personal opinion'.

### 3.2. The nature of teaching and professional standards

Second, the claim that moral values are matters of personal opinion has had a significant impact on the development of the English *Professional Standards for the Award of Qualified Teacher Status* (TDA, 2007). The standards are important in defining the nature of teaching and in laying down the criteria which all those wishing to enter the profession are required to meet.

The English standards begin with an introduction which states that:

1. The framework of professional standards for teachers will form part of a wider framework of standards for the whole school workforce…
2. The framework … defines the characteristics of teachers at each career stage …
3. Professional standards are statements of a teacher's professional attributes, professional knowledge and understanding, and professional skills. They provide clarity of the expectations at each career stage. The standards are not to be confused with and do not replace the professional duties contained in the School Teachers' Pay and Conditions Document, which set out the roles and responsibilities of teachers. (p. 2)

As a statement of a government's vision of what matters in relation to teaching and learning, it is striking that this introduction contains no reference to the ethical basis of teachers' work. Contrast it with its equivalent from Northern Ireland:

The Council has sought to articulate the core mission of education and, as importantly, the ethical code underpinning our work as professionals. Teachers, in discharging their responsibilities, engage first and foremost as individuals with a sense of moral purpose and responsibility and it is in the interaction between mission, ethical understanding, and professional knowledge that the mystery that is never far from the heart of good teaching is to be found. … the ethical and value-based approach to teacher professionalism and professional identity is the hallmark of the Council's advocacy. (GTCNI, 2007 P. 5)

The Scottish and Welsh documents are also explicit in articulating 'benchmarks' (Scotland) or 'standards' (Wales) around moral and professional values. It is not that the English standards are value free but rather that there is no acknowledgement of the values being espoused within the standards, nor of the moral purposes of teaching. The question arises then of why the English

document is atypical. It appears that the answer lies in the early development of the English standards, when teachers' representatives argued strongly that the statement of professional values produced by the General Teaching Council for England, 'should not appear in the document on two grounds: first that values are not "progressive" (developmental) and second that they are essentially "subjective" and "relative"' (Jephcote, Hulme, Mahony, Menter, & Moran, 2007 p.14). There are a number of challenges that could be made to these claims, but for the purposes of this paper, the point being made is that the subjectivist/relativist position has had a significant influence on how teaching is officially framed and hence on what is included in teacher preparation and what is defined as lying beyond its parameters. We need look no further to see why ethical understanding does not currently figure in the education of teachers. That it should, follows from the kind of activity that teaching is. This is explored in the next section.

### 3.3. Teaching as a moral enterprise

This paper is one of a growing number that expresses concerns about the extent to which teachers' ethical understanding is adequate for our times. The ESRC funded Seminar Series *Changing Teacher Roles, Identities and Professionalism* (C_TRIP) (Gewirtz, Mahony, Cribb, & Hextall, 2007) included a number of contributors who made reference to the different ways in which moral values are at the heart of professional practice whether this be in school or university[6]. Their arguments add weight to the claim that something is missing from the professional preparation of teachers, given that teaching is an activity which is grounded in values and expressive of them.

By its very nature educating people is a moral enterprise in at least three ways. First, educating people is presumed to involve an attempt to engage persons in activities and ways of thinking that are deemed worthwhile. We ought not, for example, to teach children where to get drugs and how to inject them - at least in the normal run of things in an English classroom. Exceptions to this would necessitate telling a rather improbable story, to have any hope of being taken seriously. Perhaps the children are diabetic. Perhaps I am the only adult available to administer their insulin injections. Perhaps I faint every time I try. So to show them where the insulin is kept and how to use it is tantamount to saving their lives.

Second, there are moral restrictions in how such engagement can be achieved. Even if attentiveness in class could be improved through the targeted sprinkling of boiling oil, it would still be regarded as morally wrong to employ this as a classroom strategy. In general, and in the absence of another even more unlikely story, torturing people to improve their academic performance is morally wrong. This of course raises questions about the strategies that are currently employed to improve standards and the lengths to which it is legitimate to go to try to enhance student engagement and achievement.

Third, teachers and schools are held partly responsible for the moral behaviour of their pupils and this implies that there are restrictions on how they may themselves behave in the process. 'Do as I say not as I do' is generally not regarded as a defensible position not least because teachers' fitness to teach is partly judged on the basis of their own behaviour. Should this fall short of expectations, then disciplinary action may follow, with the possibility that teachers' transgressions are reported in the press. It is these kinds of consideration that led Gert Biesta (2005) to argue that teachers' understanding of the relationship between the ethical and technical bases

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[6] The C-Trip seminar Papers can be accessed at http://www.tlrp.org/themes/seminar/gewirtz/.

of professional practice should be an explicit feature of professional education. Alan Cribb (2005) agreed, arguing that the introduction of markets has led both to the growth of 'accounting logic' and to concerns about how markets and league tables are encouraging cheating, manipulation and the channelling of resources into impression-management. Teachers, he continued, are not passive in these processes of 'ethical drift' – they are active agents who continually have to reconcile conflicting moral commitments which are, 'chronic and serious because … there is no simple translation between institutional obligations and ethical obligations, between "doing my job" and "doing the right thing"' (2005: 7–8)[7]. Moreover, Cribb argued, 'many interventions that are entirely acceptable for a doctor (for example, dispensing drugs) would be inappropriate and sometimes straightforwardly unethical for a lawyer, teacher or accountant'. This led him to suggest that the role-specific nature of professional ethics needs to be taken seriously.

In the same seminar series, Mike Wallace identified three types of teacher response to policy: compliance; non-compliance and mediation. The mediators adopt a stance of what Wallace called 'principled infidelity':

> [I]nfidelity follows from not fully adhering to policy-makers' expectations, and principled follows from attempting to sustain their professional values instead of embracing the alternative values under-girding reforms' (Wallace, 2005: 12).

Added to this I would argue that teachers might benefit from support in knowing how to formulate the basis on which to articulate and sustain their 'principled' positions.

Throughout the C-TRIP seminar series many examples were provided of teachers trying to reconcile the conflicts between the performative demands of monitoring and accountability systems and what they felt to be in their students' interests (Gleeson, Davies, & Wheeler, 2005). Such concerns are not just prevalent in the compulsory schooling sector. Jon Nixon (2005:250) reflecting on the contemporary role of universities also draws attention to the ways in which:

> Research, scholarship and teaching … are dependent upon, and at the same time help sustain, a moral framework the pivotal points of which are truthfulness (accuracy/sincerity), respect (attentiveness/honesty), authenticity (courage/compassion), and magnanimity (autonomy/care).

Yet these values, he argues are under threat from the business-orientated pre-occupation with 'cost-efficiency, value for money, productivity, effectiveness, outcome-delivery, target-setting, and auditing' (p. 245). David Bridges (2007) also notes that these market-orientated processes undermine the ethical purpose and core values of universities to the extent that, 'the question 'what is a university for?' is being asked with increasing frequency and answered with perhaps an increasing variety of responses' (p.3).

These different perspectives on ways in which teaching is a moral enterprise lends weight to the case for providing the opportunity for teachers to develop their ethical understanding. That such a case has to be argued at all begins to seem rather bizarre especially when other education professionals such as researchers, are explicitly recognised as operating within a field which is infused with ethical concerns. Whether the 'training' that researchers receive is always adequate to the task is another matter, the point is, why are researchers and not teachers identified as needing to consider the ethical dimensions of their work? Is this not inconsistent? Before moving on to consider this point, I am not claiming that the 'consistency' argument is the strongest of all in the case for including ethics in teacher education. One could resolve the inconsistency by simply treating research like teaching rather than vice versa as suggested here.

## 3.4. Ethics and research

The ethical concerns commonly identified as occurring within qualitative research include: issues of consent, confidentiality and anonymity; tensions that may arise between the researcher's insider/outsider positioning; diverse accountabilities that may lead to conflicts in reconciling the needs of various constituencies; decisions about whether to fully and truthfully report findings even though to do so may be damaging to a person, an organisation or the profession and establishing the parameters of the selection of research participants. The latter can pose particularly tricky problems where the research is in the field of teacher education. For example, in exploring the experiences of 'trainee' teachers, one inevitably stumbles across information about people who have not consented to be involved, such as school staff and children. Ethical issues become more urgent if such information reveals, for example, that staff or children are being subjected to or are involved in illegal or immoral behaviour.

As already noted, ethical considerations within research are dealt with far more explicitly than is the case for teaching. As well as an abundance of academic literature (see Bridges, Gingell, Suissa, Watts, & Winch, 2007), Research Associations and Research Councils provide guidelines aimed at encouraging researchers to think about the ethical dimensions of their enquiries. For example, the underpinning aim of the British Educational Research Association's guidelines (BERA, 2004) is to:

> … enable educational researchers to weigh up all aspects of the process of conducting educational research within any given context … and to reach an ethically acceptable position in which their actions are considered justifiable and sound. (p.4)

The guidelines go on to emphasise the importance of researchers conducting themselves according to an 'ethic of respect', a commitment to truthfulness and the avoidance of actions that 'cause emotional or other harm' (BERA, 2004). Similarly, the Association of Social Anthropologists' (1999), the British Sociological Association's (2002) ethical guidelines and the ESRC's Research Ethics Framework (2005) all acknowledge that undertaking research is an activity laden with ethical issues[8]. This is a marked improvement on the situation in teaching where as we have seen, the recent policy emphasis on the role of school to service the economy, the rise in the culture of performativity and the populist view that 'morals are subjective' have all combined to virtually remove from debate the ethical basis of teaching. Even so, the research guidelines do not deal with how one might go about actually approaching or resolving ethical issues and researchers too could probably benefit from 'capacity building' in the area of ethical understanding.

So far, a number of arguments have been advanced aimed at establishing a case in favour of providing teachers and other educational professionals with something that would support them in improving their ethical understanding, in an occupational context where the moral dimensions of the job are inescapable, whether those be teaching or research. Obviously, what that 'something' might be is at this stage highly speculative. Even if I were able (which I am not) to adequately summarise the history of

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[7] It is precisely this dilemma that the teacher is struggling with in relation to teaching the numeracy hour to children recently arrived in the country.

[8] Harry Torrance (2007) argues that the main focus of the ESRC document is on research governance and the management of risk.

moral philosophy, including all the fine detail of many complex debates, it is clearly not possible within the confines of this paper to fully specify a course in ethics for beginning or experienced teachers. Rather, what I hope to do is illustrate the kinds of areas that might usefully be employed to clear up some confusions about the nature of values, including moral values and at the same time to provide a substantive counter to the subjectivist leanings that have become a common currency, at least in the English context.

## 4. In search of a solution

Having argued that there is a case for supporting teachers to develop their ethical understanding, the next question concerns how this might be done. The first consideration could be to help teachers to grasp the slippery nature of some of our evaluative discourses, both in relation to the different kinds of value judgement there are and how their logical grammars operate. Not all value judgements are moral judgements and some of the confusion around their status may originate here. For example, if I say 'this book is good', I could be making an aesthetic judgement by referring to the quality of the writing. Alternatively, I might be indicating that it contains information (epistemic value) on a subject in which you have an interest (instrumental value). Or perhaps I mean that it will show you how to check your roof so that it does not leak (prudential value). Or perhaps I mean all of them. Without further explanation, and given the variety of value judgements it is possible to make, it would be entirely reasonable for you to ask, 'in what way is the book good?'. The same could be said of ought statements. Why I ought to read this book is that perhaps it will teach me something (epistemic value), on a subject in which I'm interested (instrumental value) because it is in my interests to be so (prudential value). In all these examples there is not a moral imperative in sight.

Secondly, as Peter Geach (1956) argued, 'good' is relational like other attributive adjectives such as 'big' and 'small'. Just as a large cat would be judged small if it were a lion, a talking book that is good for putting me to sleep would be deemed bad for keeping me awake. Similarly, I ought only to start to listen to the story if what I want to do is sleep. In these cases of non-moral uses of 'good' and 'ought' truth claims are being made, the status of which is partly dependant on the relational nature of the evaluative terms (ie, in relation to its status as a lion, it is not true that the animal which I mistook for a cat, is large and in relation to my wish to sleep, it is true that the talking book is good and hence to get to sleep I ought to read it). In these non-moral uses of 'good' and 'ought' one can already see that there is much more involved in the nature of the reasoning being undertaken than 'personal opinion'. Put baldly, just because the words 'in relation to' are used does not imply that the judgements being made are 'relative' if that is taken to mean 'only a matter of personal opinion'.

Of course there are evaluative judgements that are entirely matters of personal opinion. If I judge that 'this mango tastes good', for example, then I am stating a personal opinion and it makes no sense to challenge it as false or wrong. All you can do is to state that you do not find the taste good, that is to say, you do not like it. There is no problem in acknowledging that these kinds of evaluation are subjective, or matters of individual preference. The problems come in not understanding what kind of evaluative exercise one is engaged in. Perhaps understanding the logical grammar of some non-moral uses of 'good' and 'ought' helps us to think more clearly about their uses in the moral sphere and in particular about the claim that 'morals are relative/subjective'. Before moving on to discuss this view, it could be that understanding its recent origin would be one way of encouraging teachers to discuss the nature of the moral domain in order to clarify their own thinking. This would be a non-threatening attempt to improve ethical understanding in

a field where a good deal of contemporary moral philosophy has treated moral judgements precisely as matters of opinion and in this respect the teachers quoted earlier are in exalted company.

A thumbnail sketch of the kinds of positions that might provoke debate could, for example, begin with G.E. Moore (1903), the father of 'Intuitionism', who maintained that the logical grammar of 'good' is similar to 'yellow', in that it cannot be further reduced, explained or defined to anybody who does not already know what it is. As Moore famously said, 'If I am asked "What is good?" my answer is that good is good and that is the end of the matter' (p. 6). Once the detritus of moral argument is removed, claimed Moore, one will just see or intuit 'good' in much the same way as one sees yellow. C.L. Stevenson (1944), provided one of the more sophisticated defences of 'Emotivism' in the post-war period, and similarly isolated moral judgements from any kind of evidence or factual base. His distinction between facts and values, was expressed in terms of beliefs (relating to 'facts') and attitudes (pertaining to psychological states of approval or disapproval). Statements that express a person's moral judgement, according to Stevenson, do nothing more than express a personal like or dislike and are intended to persuade others to adopt the same attitude as the speaker. 'X is good' or 'you ought to do x' means no more, according to the emotivist, than 'I like × - like it too'. R.M. Hare (1981), provided a more recent version of this tradition with his theory of 'Prescriptivism'. He argued that when I ask what I ought to do I am in fact asking for a guide to conduct. Once I have accepted the answer, then on grounds of logical consistency I must commit to the universalisability of the judgement for all acts of a similar kind. The language of morals is essentially prescriptive and involves a commitment to conduct, with reasoning entering the ethical situation in relation to the principle of universality. What all these subjectivist theorists have in common is an acceptance of a position clearly articulated by David Hume in 1888:

> In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remark'd, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary ways of reasoning ...; when all of a sudden I am surpriz'd to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is*, and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or an *ought not*. ... For as this *ought*, or *ought not*, that expresses some new relation or affirmation, 'tis necessary that it shou'd be observ'd and explain'd; and at the same time that a reason should be given; for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it. (p.469)

Subsequently the (im)possibility of deriving 'ought' from 'is' became one of the central debates within ethical theory. It is a subject on which passions can run high, with the proponents of the 'naturalistic fallacy' upholding the is/ought distinction wrought by Hume's guillotine and the other side denouncing the naturalistic fallacy as itself a fallacy. The latter group of philosophers tend to espouse different versions of a naturalistic theory of ethics. They reject the rigid distinction between fact and value and in arguing against their separation, they revisit the logical relations between them. In my view these naturalistic theories help us to understand the kinds of matters which need to be taken into consideration when making moral judgements. They are also useful in providing some guidelines for what is involved in moral reasoning and what is at issue in claiming something to be moral, immoral or even non-moral. They seem to me to provide a plausible alternative to subjectivist theories that teachers might find illuminating.

The first step in understanding a naturalistic theory of ethics is to ask whether the distinction between fact and value is quite as Hume made out. Consider this reference for a job:

To sum up, Harriet **is** extremely conscientious, reliable, able to work independently and **is** a popular team member who goes out of her way to help others and ensure that the job gets done. I therefore recommend in the strongest possible terms that you **ought not** to consider her for the post.

The only way that this would make sense is if the referee has been informed that the company was seeking to appoint the most incompetent person possible (perhaps they seek an employee from hell who will unwittingly star in a 'reality' television show). Otherwise, the conclusion simply does not follow from the account of Harriet. The point here is that the strict separation of fact from value is not sustainable and a good deal of language that is apparently descriptive already contains within it evaluations which constitute reasons for acting in a particular way. Those who propose a naturalistic theory of ethics such as Mary Midgley (1995) and Philippa Foot (2001) begin from the premise that we are living things with particular physical and mental characteristics. It is this that constitutes the defining characteristic of moral judgement and what marks it off from other types of value judgement. As Foot puts it, '… the grounding of a moral argument is ultimately in facts about human life' (p. 24). Her account of these is complex as it surely must be given that, as social creatures, the nature of human life is complex. However, at its most fundamental such facts must surely include our capacity to experience harm. Not anything counts as harm and actions which cause it enter the moral domain and become subject to moral questions. That an action causes harm is, **all things considered** (see below for what has to be considered), a reason for not doing it. Foot however notes that reasons do not *cause* people to act in any mechanical way. To say that moral judgements are action guiding in that they impose reasons for acting, is compatible with acknowledging that we may not act. Doing wrong, whilst knowing it is wrong, is so commonplace that philosophers have tended to expend a good deal of ink on trying to understand the relationship between moral judgement and action. Foot argues that the problem is not that of deriving 'ought' from 'is', but as the subjectivists rightly note, in the move from 'ought' to 'do' and she goes on to acknowledge David Wiggins' (2006) work in rehabilitating Hume's account of the role of 'sentiments' in motivating people to act virtuously.

So the kind of discussion that could be had about moral judgement that might help teachers to feel more confident, less confused, more focussed in how they articulate their dilemmas and clearer about what is involved in teaching value perspectives to children, is one in which some of the muddles that currently abound and the parameters of moral reasoning are unpacked. For a start, understanding the characteristics of moral reasoning as elucidated by Foot and utilising her suggestions for judging the validity of particular moral judgements might at least ensure that teachers listen carefully to the accounts that children give of their behaviour before rushing to judgement (and punishment). That, as children constantly tell us is only fair.

To exemplify Foot's arguments on these matters, let us suppose that Jane pushes John over in the playground. Is her act wrong, has she acted immorally? The kind of moral reasoning that would need to be employed, in Foot's view, includes considering: the action itself; a person's intended purposes or ends; and the person's beliefs about the consequences of the action. In judging Jane or her action, the argument might go like this. In general, deliberately pushing children over is morally wrong – the child who has been pushed may suffer harm and inflicting harm is what locates action within the moral domain. So far it looks as though Jane's action is morally wrong and she ought not to have pushed John. But suppose that, although Jane did push John, it emerges that she did so in order to remove him from the flight path of a stray javelin which, but for her

act, would have surely split his head in two. In this case, having found out a little more about what Jane was trying to do, we would surely not say that her action was morally wrong. Her purpose or intended end, to save John's life, transforms an act which would otherwise be wrong into one that is right or good. Third, Jane's beliefs are also relevant. She believed that she would save John's life by pushing him out of the way and did not anticipate the tragic end that befell him. Sadly, although he escaped from being skewered by the javelin, John fell awkwardly and suffered a fatal blow to the head. Again, we surely would not judge Jane to have acted wrongly or immorally, rather we would probably judge John's fate to have been a terrible accident. In these ways, naturalistic theories of ethics seem to me to steer a very sensible course between subjectivism/relativism on the one hand (it is clearly not just a matter of personal opinion as to whether pushing children over is right or wrong) and moral absolutism on the other. Moral absolutism is often cited as the only (heinous) alternative to subjectivism, a position that the naturalistic theorist might also reject. For what grounds the judgement in something beyond personal opinion, is not God, or a government or some universal moral law but the 'facts' of human life and the nature of moral reasoning. It is these that provide the necessary elements of objectivity that the subjectivists/relativists deny. In the light of these considerations it is very clear why (supposing Jane to be a child) teachers need to talk with children before rushing to punishment, even though it takes time that many feel they do not have.

## 5. Conclusion

I have raised an agenda of concerns about the absence of opportunities for teachers and other education professionals to develop greater ethical literacy and noted how bizarre it is, that in a domain such as education, which is so intimately interwoven with ethical matters, teacher preparation has become predominantly focussed on the technical and instrumental. I have given examples of teachers struggling with confusion and uncertainty as a consequence of their inadequate preparation and shown how a nation's vision of what is involved in teaching lacks any reference to its moral purposes because of a confusion about the status of values. I have argued that these examples establish a case for including in their professional preparation, opportunities for teachers and other education professionals to address the ethical elements of their work. In exemplifying what such opportunities might include, I have simultaneously engaged with arguments that suggest that moral relativism and subjectivism rest on a mistake.

However the question arises whether such a programme would have the desired effect. In a former time when teacher education included contributions from the foundation disciplines (of which Philosophy was one), we might surmise that courses such as that outlined above actually occurred. Despite considerable collective experience gained from this phase of teacher education, we seem not to know what sorts of courses based on which philosophical approaches were taught nor their effects on teachers. One might wish that in an ideal world policy makers would be keen to establish alternative curricula which were then subject to systematic evaluation. Only then could we determine which programmes, in the context of classroom pressures, were helpful in improving ethical understanding and whether teachers' capacity to act confidently and sensitively on the basis of this aspect of their professional knowledge was strengthened. Moving from an ideal world to the real one, where at least in England, 'current policies are squeezing out the time, space and resources for teachers to sharpen their capacities in valuing values' (Mahony, Hextall, Gewirtz, & Cribb, 2006 p. 7), the challenge is to find a space in the education of teachers where these matters can be taken forward.

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