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ON EDUCATION FROM A MORAL STANDPOINT: CONTEMPORAR EDUCATION AND ETHICS

Abstract

Virtue ethics is an ethical theory that, when taken as a system, has to include an elaboration of the purpose of education itself. The main goal of this theory is to show in which ways education forms our characters and prescribes the moral and intellectual values of one culture. This thought originates all the way back from Aristotle, who argued that the goal of the state is to make its people educated, and by doing so, virtuous. Keeping that in mind, this paper analyzes contemporary views on the distinction of normativity of educational institutions and their actuality; that is to say, it goes from the normative standpoint in which it begs the question of what education should be, to the point which is concerned with the question of what education actually is. The paper presupposes an ethical theory, such as theory of virtue, as playing a role in this, which allows the topic to have a normative ground that could hold a metaethical model of the self and the other. Upon giving the principles of education, my purpose is to show that the education we have today does not completely answer all of the criteria set by the normativity aspect. Simply put, ethical ground leaves place for its applicability; thus, from this ground I would like to conclude that the education that is based on institutions which are governed by ideology will prove to be against the goal of education itself, and that is the forming of the excellence in character.

Key words: Actuality, Education, Institution, Normativity, Virtue

"Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace." (Nations, 2015, p. 15)

CONSTRUCTING THE BASIS

If we assume ethics as a position from which this critique is based, we need to assume the prescriptive aspect which dictates what *should be*. Let us call this an aspect of normativity; that is to say, a position from which we derive prescriptive principles to build something upon. On the other hand, let us assume that we need something to be an object of this critique, a descriptive aspect. Now, we shall consider this aspect as actuality, or, something that *is*. Also, having in mind these two aspects, I would like to illustrate the very basis for this paper, that is, what education is and what education should be. Of course, one also needs to base this prescription upon certain system of ethics; a certain normative theory which assumes all the theoretical legacy held within it. The theory I am opting for is the contemporary theory of virtue.

I also believe that I would need to stress out some important aspects of this theory, having in mind that I would be assuming it throughout the rest of this paper.

"... This is confirmed by what happens in states; for legislators make citizens good by forming habits in them, and this is the wish of every legislator, and those who do not effect it miss their mark, and it is in this that the good constitution differs from the bad one." (Aristotle, 2017, p. 24)

I would like to begin this section by referencing Aristotle, who is often credited as being the first theorist to coherently constitute one system of virtue ethics. The quote stated above is, what I believe, the very core upon Aristotle builds his theory which is between the spheres of social ethics, political philosophy and normative ethics. In short, Aristotle presupposes that our character determines our moral deliberation, our moral compass which enables us to derive what is right and what is wrong. Now, how are our characters formed; or better yet, how are our characters formed in such a way that it enables us to be considered virtuous? The answer that Aristotle gives us is a fixed one; he states that one just society, under the just principles of education and practice, can and will prescribe us certain norms that will become ethimos, habits. For example, Robert Merrihew Adams argues that a given ethical practice is a responsive power, that is to say, the certain set of practices that we have derived from our education and formed into norms held by our character, respond to given circumstances that are unpredictable and unconventional. (Adams, 2006, p. 215). Hence, it can easily be concluded that the role of education takes the central place inside the system of ethical theory of virtue. Now, as it is mentioned, education that we have in mind is institutionalized, thus, this critique is inevitably concerned trough the political sphere as well. Therefore, the stage is set for me to provide the content of this very paper. Firstly, I shall provide a philosophical model which I believe can be used in the sense of describing contemporary education; secondly, I shall give consequences which follow from it. By having the descriptive part at hand, third part will be concerned with the normative critique of the first model that was given and provide the prescriptive stance on what should be changed.

METAETHICAL MODEL OF PHENOMENOLOGICAL SUBSTANCE

Consider the following claim – every *self*¹ has a desire for *the other*². By contextualizing this claim in the context of this paper, it would hold the same meaning as that famous quote from *Politics*; "...a man is, by nature, a political animal." (Aristotle, 1999, p. 5) Of course, this would need further elaboration. Aristotle's main goal is to show that we, as human beings, are coded to socialize with one another. That is to say, if nature, according to Aristotle, coded us differently so that we didn't need one another, we would be either gods, or animals. Therefore, I believe that Levinas was correct when he assumed that we have a certain kind of hunger, thirst, desire for *the other*. (Levinas, 1979, p. 34)

Levinas commits his whole metaphysical position to address the correlation between the self and the other, however, having in mind that my goal is not justifying his view, but taking just a part of it, it would be fit to elaborate this view and to give a sufficient reason for its importance. According to Levinas, there is something that precedes everything social, political, normative etc. That something is the primordial relation between the self and the other; the relation that is shown by the transcendental scheme of face to face3 (Levinas, 1979, pp. 187-189). Now, from this very primordial relation we can derive every principle there is – right or wrong, just society or unjust society, peace or war. In which way? This is where Levinas takes that Hegelian turn, the relation between recognizing and to being recognized. If we, in that primordial relation perceive someone as the other who is the same as the self, the very relation will give us the sufficient and necessary reason to recognize and affirm the self of the other, and in doing so, affirm the self of itself. This is how we get moral norms, principles which govern one society etc. In this case, we recognize the other as a being of infinity; or to put it more simply, a being which we do not perceive only as a means to an end, but at the same time as an end⁴ (Levinas, 1979, p. 196). On the other hand, if we only use the other to affirm the self, but dehumanizing the other in the relation to the self, we come towards the result which consists of wrongness, injustice and war. Simply put, we perceive the other as totality and only as an instrument for some state of affairs. However, this relation, in this context, shall be taken as a never-ending one, a relation in which we constantly tend towards the others.

self, at this instance, is considered from a phenomenological perspective. We can consider this to have the same meaning as the self-consciousness, that is, our reflective perception of our perceptive apparatus.

² Opposite and the same as *the self*. Opposite as in not being a part of our self-constitution, however, like a *self*, we also assume it has the same reflective perception of its perceptive apparatus.

³ The very transcendental nature of this relation is based on the complex metaphysical position which Levinas gives throughout the half of his book. The consequence of it is that each and every one of us has a certain kind of cognitive mechanism in the relation *face to face*.

⁴ Of course, Levinas accredits this view to the Kantian legacy he derives it from.

Now, let us expand this basis within the sphere of metaethics. Namely, two authors that are in consideration are Charles Stevenson and Richard Hare. By assuming that there is a certain emotion which comes after the primary relation, I would propose a stance which was elaborated by Ayer and perfected by Stevenson. Of course, there will be no further elaboration of the theory of metaethical emotivism itself, for only thing that it is taken from that theory is the emotive relation between subject X – moral act- subject Y. In this context, the moral act is replaced by the phenomenological relation between the self and the other assuming that it comes after it. Now, what is this emotive reaction and what significance does it have in the given context? Ayer (I believe falsely) assumes that moral sentences are not propositions and as such do not have truth-value (Ayer, 1971, p. 105). For example, if X states that killing is wrong, it would only mean that X has an emotional disapproval of the act of killing. The consequence would basically be that X is simply saying that he doesn't like when someone kills, or, "Boo to killing!" However, Ayer does not state much in his defence, that job was due for Charles Stevenson.

Stevenson's theory expands emotivism in many ways; however, what is important for this paper is his differentiation between disagreements in attitudes and beliefs. Namely, Stevenson argues that we have various moral disagreements, both interpersonal and personal (when two or more subjects disagree on some moral question, or when we are not certain on the moral judgment ourselves) (Stevenson, 1944, pp. 8-19). It is within these interpersonal disagreements that we find two reasons for disagreeing – disagreement in belief and disagreement in attitude. Disagreements in belief are often interpreted as fact-based norm, however, Stevenson takes beliefs in a much broader sense; namely, beliefs incorporate knowledge, facts, and subjective convictions (for there can also be personal uncertainty in beliefs⁵). Disagreement in attitudes is taken as a broad sense of value-based norm. However, in the same manner as the case was with the relation between the fact-based norm and beliefs, Stevenson takes attitudes to be a psychological tendency (again, we can also be uncertain of our attitude on a personal level⁶) to be for something or against it, that is to say, takes value-based norm in the broadest sense possible.

At last, for the completion of this model, we would need to introduce the prescriptivist view of Richard Hare. Again, this paper does not need the systematic elaboration of the prescriptivist view which Hare gives; therefore, the only thing that will be taken from his complex theory is the prescriptive value to the moral judgements. While trying to build upon the theory of emotivism, Hare was very influenced by Kant's writing, more specifically, Kant's view on the moral obligation of the imperatives; thus, he introduced a new position

For example, let us consider the case in which we are watching a movie of a court case. During the movie we are constantly being given evidence and counter evidence before the final trial. At that very moment, we can imagine ourselves as uncertain whenever our beliefs about the case are correct or incorrect.

⁶ Example for this can be linked to the already mentioned example above. Imagine that during the trial, even if we have all the evidence revised and are certain that is correct, we are still unsure if we are for, or against the prosecution.

which is a symbiosis of emotivism and imperativism – prescriptivism (Hare, 1952, pp. 153-155). While stating earlier that the consequence of emotivism is "*Boo to the certain moral act*", prescriptivism gives us the obligatory power of the given propositions; thus, when we are stating that a certain act is wrong, we do not only give emotive response, but also obligate ourselves not to do the certain act, and obligate others not to do it either. For example, consider the following:

- P1. X thinks that eugenics is wrong
- P2. X gives an emotive response Boo to eugenics
- C. In conclusion, X obligates himself and obligates others not to practice eugenics

Having said that, certain emotive reactions, according to Hare, become moral imperatives that are not only prescribed to others, but to the subject as well. This also, as opposed to Ayer and Stevenson, leaves the room for moral discourse and deliberation of certain principles which can later be seen in the theory of metaethical constructivism⁷.

Now, one might be tempted to ask what this all has to do with education and with the principles of normativity and actuality. Where exactly is this model that will shed some light on the given matter?

Let us consider the following- every *self* has a desire for *the other*. After the given relation, there is an emotive reaction to the given *other*. From that relation, and from that given emotion, we prescribe certain ethical prescriptions toward the circumstances and contexts in which those emotions are invoked. This is, of course, still in the fields of an abstract modelling of the situational occurrence, therefore, some examples need to be taken into consideration

THE EXAMPLES OF THE GIVEN MODEL

The two examples I have are quite popular in the political theory; namely, the *Brexit* case and the case of the Yugoslav wars. First one is an occurrence which is still debated over at the contemporary political theory and often deemed as a great surprise. The second one is quite close to the area from which I am writing now, and for which I am writing, thus, it is closely related to the educational institution in the particular context.

Firstly, what happened during this political phenomenon we call *Brexit*? Simply put, as the very name suggests, *Brexit* is a referendum which took place on 23 June 2016 in which it has been voted for the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to leave the EU. Official statistics suggest that the 72.2% of the general public has voted, that is, 46,501,241 of the people; of that number, 51.9% has voted for the UK to exit the EU, while 48.1% has voted for the UK to stay in the EU (EU Referendum Results, 2016). At the

⁷ For more, see John Rawls, Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy (Rawls, 2000, pp. 235-253).

very first glance, we can conclude that the final results were very close, that the difference was extremely low. At this very instance we can remember that old saying that every vote counts and that was the saying everyone was aware during this process. Now, we can ask ourselves, if everyone was aware that the results of the voting would be quite close, which tactics were used by the political actors to gain the votes in their favour? The answer is quite simple – media. During the campaign that was 10 weeks long, we could see the influence of the political astroturfing8 which proved to be very effective. In which way was the process of astroturfing used? Simply put, during the pre-elective process, in the goal of getting as many votes as possible, a lot of (understandably, fake) profiles and pages on social networks, news networks and talk show hosts have spread a lot of disinformation and propaganda against the EU. Max Hänska and Stefan Bauchowitz have conducted a research during which they analyzed more than 7.5 million twitter profiles and have concluded the following - the users which were for the exit of the UK outposted the ones who were opposed to it by the shocking 1.75-2.3% (Hänska & Bauchowitz, 2017, p. 29). The very reason why this proved to be quite effective was the fact that the people had a neutral opinion towards the EU, or had no knowledge of it at all. Interestingly enough, the fact that the most searched instances during that time, according to Google statistics, were "What does it mean to leave the EU?", "What is the EU?", "Which countries are in the EU?" (Selyukh, 2016). The last and, arguably, most important fact for this paper is the view of the political analytics, such as Howorth and Schmidt, who state that the influence which was a product from the astroturfing process has not occurred during the pre-elections, but during the last few decades (Howorth & Schmidt, 2016, p. 123). Namely, the vision of the EU has been twisted from the earliest ages, the education that the British get is actually quite patterned; it gives the idea that can often be seen in the other education systems, the idea that is hidden very well under that very well-known nationalistic narrative - the idea of the nationalistic supremacy. This is a very important moment for everything that was said, however, I believe that another example should be given before the line is drawn.

The second example is by far much more controversial; however, I merely presentan analysis based on the extreme consequence which occurred by the systematic indoctrination hidden under the name of institutionalized education. Also, it is a way to give criticism to the *status quo* of the educational system of the very nation the author of this paper comes from. Not so long ago, there were series of conflicts that are often described as the deadliest conflicts in Europe since the Second World War, conflicts which took the lives of 140.000 people, conflicts which had it all - hatred, ethnic cleansing, forced exodus, rape, crimes against the principles of humanity... In short, if we are to accept the notions of just and unjust wars, it is safe to say that this event is nailed to the second bracket. The conflicts which I am talking about are those during the Yugoslav wars. I shall only consider one aspect of

Astroturfing is used to describe a process of using a systematic and planned falsification of the public opinion which results in an illusion of the spontaneity in opinion. By politicizing that process, the political actors and the financers use that model for their own interests. I have written a paper on this subject, thus, for more detailed explanation, see the given publication (Lukic, 2017).

this event which I find most relevant to be used as an example. The rise of Serbian ressentiment. "The principal mechanism for escalating interethnic conflicts in a multinational state begins when political elites in a tenuous position of power successfully portray their ethno-nation as being threatened by another. The political players will then manipulate this "ethnic threat" to advance their interests in holding onto political power and/or vanquishing competing elites." (Pešić, 1996, p. 17) Creating a national threat is, by all means, an effective strategy for the two-way goal that conservative factions in the League of Communists of Serbia had set. The strategy was simple, yet devastating, quite Schmittean in its core. Let us look at one quote from Dobrica Cosic during the culmination of the inevitable: The enemies of the Serbs made Serbs Serbs. (Čosić, 1991) Does this not sound like that infamous statement form Carl Schmitt that the specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is between friend and enemy. (Schmitt, 2007, p. 26) Enemy was anyone who stood in the way, even Serbs who opposed the cause for "Great Serbia", classic example of the politics of ressentiment. The important moment was materializing ressentiment in one single book published unofficially by SANU (Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts), Memorandum, the same institution that had a question in the overall education of its citizens.

THE ACTUALITY OF EDUCATION: DISTURBING THE BALANCE OF THE RELATION

At this instance, I believe it is safe to draw the line and conclude the following chapter on the actuality of education. Of course, this is not a universal norm; however, political situation that currently arises is the inevitable indication that this is truly the case. The question that I want to tackle here is as it follows – what makes people prone to commit certain acts or to agree with certain statements? This question can very well be answered by referring to the model which was given earlier. The very relation between *the self* and *the other* is transcendental in nature, however, when systematically reducing the worth of, or, in the more extreme cases, dehumanizing *the other*, that relation becomes uneven. *The self*, in that case, recognizes itself as the superior in a given way and uses *the other* to affirm its status without recognizing it as the authentic *otherness* in the sense of Levinas' concept the infinite, but totalizing it in a given context. The emotion that arises from that is used to motivate *the self* and to cultivate certain principles which give ethical prescriptions so that *the self* can affirm the given superiority position towards *the other*.

Having said that, it is assumed that there is a certain kind of a basis on which the relation is dictated, a basis upon which our views preconfigure the significance of the subjects. That basis is, I would argue, a character of *the self* which is formed by the education prior to the relation. Consider the primary education that the people from Britain got. The nationalistic narrative which is one-dimensional in its core gives only a one-sided view from the already established scope. By giving certain information on which people have no opinion with referring to that basis, the opinion is clearly formed. Such is the case for the already given

example concerning *Brexit*. The very narrative on how the British wealth is being exploited, how the others (using migrant crisis as an example) are taking the constitution of the United Kingdom for granted and have more rights that the British citizens themselves (which, at this very case, is the perfect example of how the primary relation can be misbalanced by introducing that famous rightist communitarian slogan – *Us vs. Them*) is aimed at the citizens that share the similar educational basis by invoking a certain emotion. That emotion is a negative one, one that motivates people to follow certain prescriptions which are seemingly in accordance with the conformist sense of belonging to the given conception of the good life as the education dictates. A lot of publications and articles which share the same goal, the already mentioned *astroturfing*, have that similarity. One of the examples of this prescriptive language can be elaborated in the following schematization of an argument:

- P1. British people are being coerced and their rights are violated by those others who are brought in by the EU.
 - P2. Welfare of the British citizens should be a primary goal of our nation.
 - P3. Therefore, Britain should leave the EU.

Therefore, it easy to see the point of this model. The similar thing can be said for the other example I have given in this paper. The same thing that Howorth and Schmidt have said about the UK, that this was not merely the consequence of the given period, but the consequence of the whole systematic creation of the already mentioned basis. The education in Serbia is structured in a way that it teaches the certain mythological conformist position of the greatness of its people. From the first grade till the end of the eight of the primary education, history and Serbian language and literature, for example, are structured in such a way that they promote the suffering, anguish, misfortune, torment and hardships of our people that was caused by the (as Heidegger famously puts it) faceless the they which are far more powerful, however, trough the given set of values, Serbs always seem to overcome the they and make a moral triumph. Now, given the basis we have at hand, it is easy to see how we can elaborate this in a given model. Of course, the relation is, again, misbalanced in the sense in which is Us vs. Them. The second subject of this relation can be given a face of everything that does not fit the given political order and the negation of the values that are prescribed by the education are attributed to that second subject. The consequences of this wiring are very well shown by the event I have mentioned earlier.

From the ethical perspective: a critique of actuality

It is always easier to conduct the philosophical analysis of the given problem than to give a solution. It is even harder to give a certain set of normative rules for one thing or another. However, by taking for granted the given model, a critique shall be given based on the primary speculative description. The sentence which can be used to describe the given

Namely, out of the 351,166 articles which came out during the *Brexit* referendum, 98,090 were takin into consideration by Moor and Ramsey. Topics which had the already mentioned goal usually took on the subjects of economy, migration, superstition, fear, etc. (Moore & Ramsey, 2017, p. 4)

critique is as it follows – *infinity and not totality!* Again, this is quite an abstract sentence and seemingly very broad, even if the principles are already defined.

During the elaboration of the primary relation, it was stated that when the self recognizes itself trough recognizing the other in the equal relation, it is a basis not only for the just society, but for the just constitution of the character of the self. Aristotle famously refers to this as an excellence of the character, a constitution in which every virtue is in the middle between two vices, two extremes. For example, he takes examples such as truthfulness of a person being in the middle of boasting and mock-modesty, righteousness of a person being in the middle of envy and spite, modesty being in the middle of bashfulness and shamelessness etc. (Aristotle, 2017, p. 30). Aristotle used this to characterize every virtue he deemed important for the well-formed character of a virtuous person who got the right education. Can we use this Aristotle's method on the relation I have given as a model? One side of the extreme would be recognizing the other and affirming the self in regards to the other. The typical example is the master - slave dialectics in which the slave sees himself through the eyes of the other, in this sense, the master. Can the example of this be given from today's perspective? Various political systems make hierarchies in which those from the lower ladder define themselves in accordance to the expectations set by those above. On the other hand, another extreme has been already portrayed in the earlier chapters, that is, the affirmation of the self in the expense of the other. I am inclined to quote Marta Nussbaum, who is quite famous for her work on Aristotle and for being in the group of the virtue theorists, at this instance, having in mind that my conclusion is similar to her own. In her book Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs Humanities she writes the following:

"... Children learn from the adult societies around them, which typically directs this "projective disgust" onto one or more concrete subordinate groups – African Americans, Jews, women, homosexuals, poor people, lower castes in the Indian caste hierarchy. In effect, these groups function as the animal "other" by the exclusion of which a privileged group defines itself as superior, or even transcendent." (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 33)

Nussbaum writes this to describe the non-democratic systems of education which break the very principles of equality and justice. Her conclusions are concerned with the moral and not-moral emotions¹⁰ which arise from the very education itself. This, as pointed out before, serves as the basis for the primary relation in the context of this paper. Now, what does Nussbaum do to solve this issue? I would bring the readers' attention back to the earlier chapter in which the motive of one-dimension and one point of view have been pointed out. Institutionalized education usually keeps that principle within itself and it shows in the consequences. Nussbaum, and I tend to agree with her, proposes the pedagogy based

Nussbaum was concerned with the phenomenon of political emotions throughout her career. Her investigation on the topic of public emotions is shown in her book *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*(Nussbaum, 2013, pp. 200-378) and investigation on the particular emotions which influence political sphere can be seen in her *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice*(Nussbaum, 2016).

on the Socratic method (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 48). Her point is that education should not be based upon a certain principle based on the economic growth of a given society, for it sacrifices the individual's tendency for an examined life. By introducing the argumentative method the education is based on examining the claims given by the certain system. This also breaks the classic model of the all-knowing teacher and the student which is there to gain that knowledge.

Interestingly enough, the same conclusion has been made by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire in his famous work *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. He criticized the education which is being structured by the institution under a banking system (his name for the capitalist society). In such a system, the relation of the student – teacher is similar to the already mentioned Hegelian slave-master dialectic (Freire, 2002, p. 45). In that relation, the student affirms himself through the eyes of the teacher, losing his sense of value and selfhood under the superordinate *the other*, in this case, the teacher. According to Freire, this leads to the loss of creativity, method and knowledge on the behalf of the students. What he proposes is something very similar to what Nussbaum is arguing for, that is, the breaking of this student – teacher relation and drawing a new relation in which both of them are the student and the teacher. This is somewhat of a system in which argumentative power has its priority, a system in which both the teacher and the students by their combined forces come to a conclusion based on that old Socratic method.

What do we hope to gain by incorporating this normative model which would destroy the given actuality? Firstly, the character virtues would be constantly upgraded and deliberated on. Secondly, it would produce the citizens who are less prone to *astroturfing* or to indoctrination of values by a certain political system. Thirdly, on a theoretical level, the relation of *the self* and *the other* would be in the middle of that old Aristotelian model. Having said all of this, my point is quite clear here. By abolishing the model which affirms only one side of the relation (be it the teacher, be it the student, or be it the very institution) and which denies us the excellence of our character, we open the way to make that relation much more equal and by doing so, open the way for knowledge which is used to make ourselves virtuous.

CONCLUSION: DRAWING THE LINE

Having said all of that, a conclusion follows. We have started with a goal of contrasting two principles – of actuality and normativity, that is, showing what is and prescribing what should be from a certain ethical position. By assuming the ethical theory of virtue in the equation, the character traits have been constantly in the background of this paper. By proposing a certain ethical model and giving two famous examples, it was shown how the actuality of education works. On the other hand, by introducing the breaking of the extremes in that primary ethical model, a solution has been proposed by consulting the theories of Martha Nussbaum and Paulo Freire which is what the normativity principle of this paper is.

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