Ethical Education in a Multicultural World

Peter JONKERS

Emeritus Professor of Philosophy, Tilburg University

Abstract*: This paper addresses a pressing question of world philosophy, viz. the impact of living in a multicultural world on ethical education. To explore this question, the introduction gives an overview of the ambivalent attitudes of modern, detraditionalized societies toward their embedded traditions and substantial values, based on the theories of social scientist Ronald Inglehart and philosopher Charles Taylor. The second section, which builds on Aristotle's insights and their interpretation by Martha Nussbaum, discusses a traditional component of ethical education, viz. the virtue of practical wisdom. Sections three and four focus on the challenges of multiculturalism to ethical education. In today's societies, it is difficult to reach a consensus and to find plausible points of orientation in pressing ethical questions. This is why a very influential way of responding to the multicultural situation, viz. to focus on universal but at the same time formal and procedural moral principles, and to leave the contents of substantial values up to the individuals' discretion, has fallen short of expectations. In exploring an alternative approach to this question, I use Paul Ricoeur's views on the value of traditions, viz. appreciating them as culturally embedded mediators between universal moral principles and the contingencies of the life-world. This is the second goal of ethical education. Yet, to avoid the looming deadlock of ethical traditionalism and particularism a reasonable debate is necessary to find out if and how particular ethical traditions have a universal potential, which can be integrated into universal principles. This approach aims at fostering the dialogue among ethical traditions with the help of an enlarged idea of rationality. Thus, the third goal of ethical education is training people in self-reflection about the ethical values of their own traditions, as a first step to understanding the values of other traditions as potential universals.*

Introduction: Setting the scene

These days, we see a growing interest in ethical education. Throughout the European Union and in many other countries, ethics is a part of the curriculum of high schools and universities, either as a separate course or as a point of attention in other courses,

like citizenship, religion, economics, law, etc.[1] Yet, as I will argue in more detail in this paper, ethical education is more than obtaining knowledge about moral theories, like utilitarianism, deontological ethics, or virtue ethics. Students can easily reproduce these theories without relating them to their moral behavior; reversely, people can be exemplars of ethical behavior without being knowledgeable about these theories. Hence, ethical education is not only a cognitive affair but should also include training in several non-cognitive skills and virtues, like ethical reflection, balanced judgment, and appropriate action.[2] An even more important element that needs to be taken into account is the rise of socio-cultural diversity in many societies around the world. This challenges ethical education to include a historical and intercultural dimension in its teaching and practical training.

One of the reasons for the growing attention to ethical education, not only among educators but also among politicians, religious leaders, and opinion formers concerns the ambivalent effects of detraditionalization, the shift from material to postmaterial values, and increasing socio-cultural diversity in many modern societies. Detraditionalization can be defined as the gradual fading of the societal impact of traditional values, moral institutions, and common patterns on people's (ethical) behavior. As the different waves of the World Values Survey show, the influence of (religious) ethical traditions upon modern societies has decreased dramatically since the end of the Second World War, while the importance of secular-rational values has been constantly growing. Secular-rational values "place less emphasis on religion, traditional family values and authority,"[3] and support a procedural, instrumentalist, and individualist approach of ethic, based on the principles of disengaged, impartial reason. Because of its claim to universal validity this procedural ethic and the secular-rational values on which it rests tend to overrule all substantial, traditional and hence culture-specific values.

In rich, postindustrial societies, this evolution runs parallel to another one, viz. the diminishing relevance of material or survival values. These values emphasize economic and physical security and are linked to a relatively ethnocentric outlook and

---

[1] For an overview of the situation in Europe, see Natascha Kienstra, "Ethics Education in a Globalized World: A Community of Ethics Teachers in Europe (COMET)," *Age of Globalization. Studies in Contemporary Global Processes* 33, no. 1 (2020), 109-119.

[2] Natascha Kienstra, *Zorg dragen voor ethische vorming [Caring for Ethics Education]* (Tilburg: Tilburg University Press, 2023), 16.

[3] *Inglehart-Wenzel World Cultural Map – World Values Survey 7 (2023).*
Source: http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/

low levels of trust and tolerance.[4] The three decades after World War II were a period of rapid economic growth and a more equal distribution of wealth in these rich societies. Because physical and economic security could be taken for granted during that period, material, survival values were replaced by the postmaterial values of individual self-expression, which emphasize human autonomy and choice. Self-expression values "emancipate people from traditional constraints that are no longer necessary for survival, allowing greater freedom of choice in how to live one's life. For many groups such as women and gays, emancipation from traditional constraints makes a major contribution to life satisfaction and happiness".[5] It goes without saying that the shift toward individual self-expression substantially increased socio-cultural diversity in Western societies, a trend that was further enhanced by the influx of immigrants, who brought their own cultures and values with them. In sum, rich, postindustrial societies, which are mainly Western ones, went through a process of pervasive cultural changes, leading them to embrace secular-rational and self-expression values, to the detriment of traditional and survival values.[6]

---

[4] Ibid.
[5] Ronald F. Inglehart, *Cultural Evolution. People's Motivations Are Changing and Reshaping the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 39.
[6] The Inglehart-Welzel World Cultural Map of 2023 gives an excellent graphic overview of the current situation regarding the importance of these four groups of values under discussion in different countries across the world. See *Inglehart-Wenzel World Cultural Map – World Values Survey 7 (2023).*

The Inglehart-Welzel World Cultural Map 2023
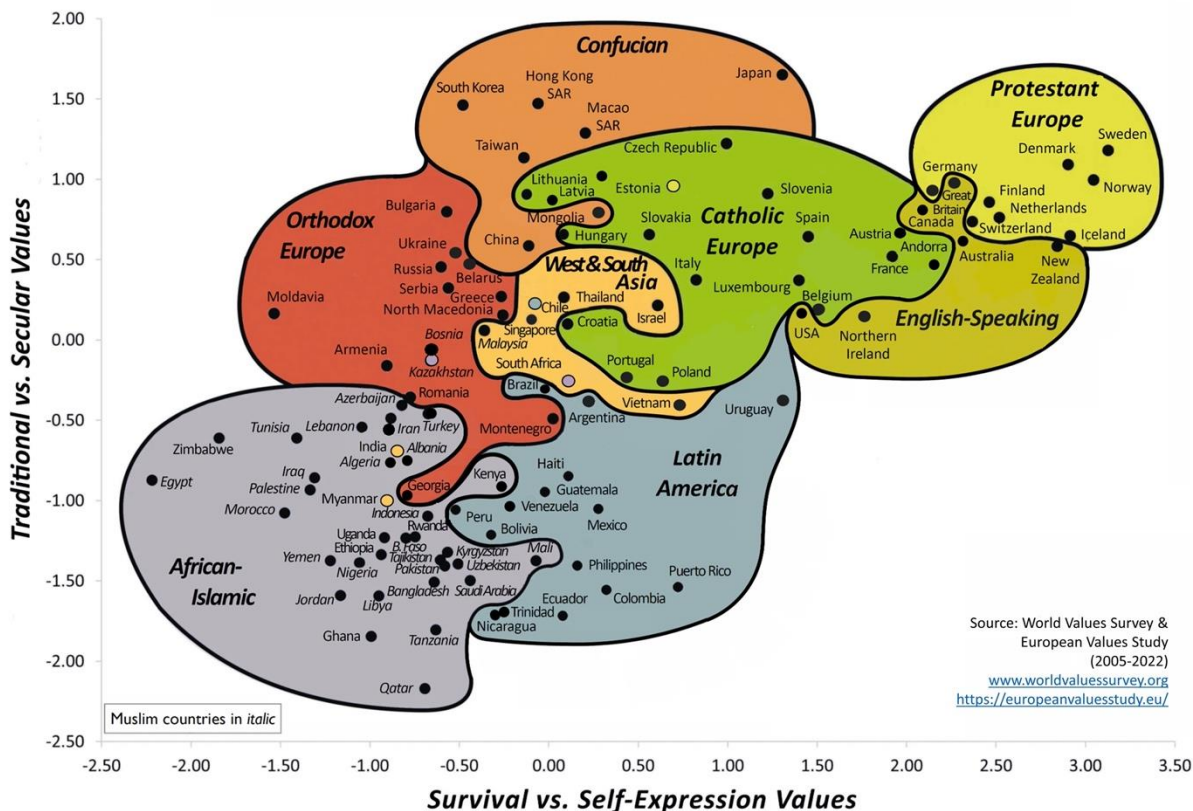
From a philosophical perspective, Charles Taylor interprets this evolution in terms of the rise of the ethics of authenticity. This expression refers to a new and potent ethical ideal, which stimulates each of us to discover and follow our own way of realizing our humanity and to live it out, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside.[7] This ideal, whose origin goes back to the Romantic movement at the end of the 18th century, has become mainstream in Western societies. However, the spread of this ideal has gone hand in hand with its narrowing down to the principle of free, individual self-determination, thus enhancing the individualizing and liberalizing trends in society. This evolution, in combination with the increase of socio-cultural diversity, explains the procedural character of contemporary ethics; it tends to become restricted to following correct and fair rules and procedures for autonomous decision-making, while leaving it up to the individuals to define the substance of their ethical values. A relatively recent factor,

---

[7] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 475.

9

enhancing this trend, is that the principle of self-determination and the proceduralist approach to ethical issues have been implemented in the legislation of most Western societies, resulting in a host of new laws that allow and facilitate individuals to choose their way of life as long as it does not cause harm to other people. This shows that the state has become loath to define, let alone impose traditional ideas of the common good and substantial values upon its citizens and confines itself to laying down the procedures that need to be respected. Examples of this trend are the legal recognition of a multiplicity of family models and work systems, and the voting of laws that allow people to decide autonomously about beginning- and end-of-life arrangements, gender, sexuality, parenting, etc., under the condition that they follow the correct procedures.

Yet, as Taylor has convincingly argued, the drawback of detraditionalization and the reduction of the ethics of authenticity to promoting the values of individual self-expression and free self-determination is that they reduce people to unsituated, even punctual selves and sap the broader horizons of meaning, against which every ethical decision gets its significance.[8] Authenticity is a genuine moral ideal, but it cannot "stand alone, because it requires a horizon of issues of importance, which help define the *respects* in which self-making is significant. […Hence,] the agent seeking significance in life, trying to define him- or herself meaningfully, has to exist in a horizon of important questions".[9] Therefore, ethical traditions and substantial values, which constitute the frame of reference and meaning of a person's ethical deliberations and actions, keep their relevance even in a detraditionalized society. This shows that "authenticity is not the enemy of demands that emanate from beyond the self; it supposes such demands".[10] Precisely the recognition of the importance of these horizons of meaning distinguishes the moral ideal of authenticity from its flattened mode, viz. free self-determination, and, hence, serves as a philosophical critique of the dominance of a secular-rational and procedural ethics and the value of free self-expression. According to Taylor, the current dominance of these ideas is self-defeating because it ignores the dialogical character of the self and the fact that the self cannot determine on its own what is of value since this depends on the recognition by others.

---

[8] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 514.

[9] Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 39f.

[10] Ibid., 41.

Interestingly, Taylor's philosophical insights concerning the importance of ethical traditions in modern societies as horizons of meaning and orientation and his critique of procedural ethics are confirmed by empirical research into some recent evolutions of the values in post-industrial, high-income societies. In the USA and most European countries, the spread of secular-rational values and postmaterial, self-expression values, which were promoted by the younger, economically more secure, and better-educated strata during the "Golden Sixties", is going into reverse. According to Ronald Inglehart, this backlash is partly caused by growing economic inequality and, hence, insecurity among older and less educated people since the end of the previous century.[11] This has resulted in a return to material values, which goes hand in hand with a rise in xenophobic and ethnocentric attitudes and a greater attachment to family and other traditional values.

A second explaining factor of this reverse trend is that "postmaterialism was its own gravedigger".[12] One of the effects of the growth of self-expression values and the concomitant liberalization and individualization of society has been the emergence of radical cultural changes and their implementation into the legal systems of most rich, post-industrial societies. More than that, sociological research shows that "the new non-economic issues introduced by Postmaterialists overshadowed the classic economic Left-Right economic issues, drawing attention away from redistribution to cultural issues".[13] This has provoked a counterreaction among older and less secure strata who felt threatened by the erosion of familiar values. Apparently, the return to traditional and material values is not only caused by growing economic insecurity but also by socio-cultural insecurity. An additional element that contributed to the rise of socio-cultural insecurity is the large immigration flows from low-income countries with different cultures and religions, causing a feeling of socio-cultural estrangement among the native population. "Rapid cultural change, coupled with large-scale immigration, tends to make older [and less educated] people feel that they are no longer living in the country in which they grew up".[14]

Of course, the above counterreactions against radical cultural changes have been present for decades. What is new is that this trend has become dominant in many Western societies: it receives support from people who do not belong to the older and less educated strata of the population, resulting in a diminishing tolerance toward

---

[11] Inglehart, *Cultural Evolution,* 191-193
[12] Ibid., 175; see also 188-191.
[13] Ibid., 175; see also 181f; 185f.
[14] Ibid., 188.

cultural minorities and more attention to socio-cultural matters in the programs of mainstream political parties. Unsurprisingly, this evolution has led to rising tensions between the more and less educated, younger people and older ones, city dwellers and people who live in the countryside, native inhabitants and migrants, etc.

Interpreting the above analysis of radical cultural change from a larger perspective explains why the reverse movement to traditional values is not as unexpected as it seems at first sight. Social scientists argue that "cultural change is path-dependent: a society's values are shaped by its entire historical heritage, and not just its level of existential security".[15] This means that cultural change certainly happens but at a very slow and gradual pace. This is because traditional values are deeply embedded in a society, so that they never really disappear but continue to play an important role in the background. Therefore, in times of adverse period effects, such as economic crises or periods of cultural insecurity, people still can and actually do fall back on these traditional values. In sum, despite all the (empirically well corroborated) talk about detraditionalization and the shift toward postmaterial and self-expression values, traditions and traditional values remain important in rich, postindustrial societies as ways to give orientation and motivation to people's ethical behavior.

The upshot of the above overview illustrates the predicament in which many contemporary societies find themselves. Universalist, secular-rational ethics has fallen short of expectations because of its procedural character, which means that it is unable to serve as the only or even most important source of ethical orientation and motivation. At the same time, a simple return to traditional values offers no solution to the above tensions either because it ignores the profound and irreversible societal changes that Western societies have been going through since the end of the Second World War. Therefore, it is no wonder that the contents and goals of ethical education in a multicultural world have become an important issue. This paper aims to contribute to this debate by analyzing three important elements of ethical education and the cognitive and attitudinal virtues underpinning them. The next section discusses the virtue of practical wisdom, thereby building on the insights of Aristotle and the interpretation that American philosopher Martha Nussbaum gives of them. Sections

---

[15] Ibid., 24; see also 42f. See also Wil Arts, "The European Values Study and Grand Theory: A Fruitful Alliance?", in *Reflections on European Values: Honouring Loek Halman's Contribution to the European Values Study (European Values Series, 2),* eds. Ruud Luijkx, Tim Reeskens, and Inge Sieben (Tilburg: Open Press Tilburg University, 2022), 36: "Cultural traditions create forces to sustain themselves even though the circumstances that gave rise to and reinforced them in the past may now no longer be relevant".

three and four analyze the virtues that are needed to respond to the ethical challenges of today, viz. the gap between procedural ethics and substantial values, and the consequences of rising socio-cultural diversity for peaceful co-existence in a multicultural world. The analyses of these two sections build on the insights from French philosopher Paul Ricoeur.

Practical wisdom

Following Aristotle, the first goal of ethical education is to acquire practical wisdom, defined as the reasoned capacity to act regarding the things that are good or bad for man.[16] Although practical wisdom cannot attain the same degree of exactness and certainty as theoretical wisdom because of the contingency of human life, practical wisdom is a *reasoned* capacity and can therefore not be reduced to a private opinion or practical skill. Rather, practical wisdom is knowledge about what is truly good for all human beings, and its insights serve as a horizon against which the ethical quality of individual decisions and actions can be assessed.

Knowledge about moral principles and obligations is an important goal of practical wisdom for yet another reason. As summaries of the wise judgments of others, these principles and obligations are guidelines in moral development. They serve as rules of thumb, guiding virtuous people tentatively in their approach to the particular, and helping them to pick out its salient features. When there is no time to formulate a concrete decision or to deliberate about the impact of all the features of the case at hand, it is better to follow a good rule of thumb than to make a hasty and inadequate concrete choice. Furthermore, these rules and obligations give constancy and stability in situations in which bias and passion might distort judgment. In sum, knowledge about moral principles and obligations is necessary because we are not always good judges.[17]

The final and most important reason why knowledge about moral principles is crucial for moral education is that this knowledge is essential to grasp the ethical salience of particular situations: "The particular case would be surd and unintelligible without the guiding and sorting power of the universal. [...] Nor does particular

---

[16] Aristotle, *Metaphysics,* I 1, 981b-982b; *Nicomachean Ethics,* VI 3-7, 1139b-1141b; VI 8, 1142a 23-4.
[17] Martha Nussbaum, *The fragility of goodness. Luck and ethics in Greek tragedy and philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 304.

judgment have the kind of rootedness and focus required for goodness of character without a core of commitment to a general conception – albeit one that is continually evolving, ready for surprise, and not rigid. There is in effect a two-way illumination between particular and universal".[18] Since all knowledge is essentially a matter of interpreting the particular experiential world with the help of universal concepts, we always need to perform a back-and-forth movement between the universal and the particular, in this case, between the life-world and its broader, conceptual horizons of meaning. Hence, conceptual knowledge is needed to orient and sift out our spontaneous experiences of right and wrong, while moral experiences are crucial to give content to these concepts and to amend and modify them in the light of new ethical challenges. Yet, there is a difference between theoretical and practical knowledge: whereas the laws of nature apply to the material world in a univocal way, the world of ethical praxis is continually evolving in sometimes unpredictable ways, so that it requires a kind of knowledge that is flexible and ready to respond to unexpected situations. To illustrate the flexible character of practical wisdom, Aristotle uses the image of the builders of Lesbos, who measure a round column with a flexible lead rule that "adapts itself to the shape of the stone and is not rigid".[19]

In sum, insight into moral principles and obligations is an important goal of ethical education. This insight can be acquired in various informal and formal, experiential and theoretical ways: The informal and experiential ones, which are by far the most effective, include parental education, life stories about ethical dilemmas and decisions, conversations with relatives and friends, and the public (including online) debate on topical ethical issues. Formal knowledge about the theories that underpin these principles and obligations is acquired through courses and books on ethics, religious teachings, the study of human rights and constitutional essentials, etc.

Stressing the importance of moral knowledge for ethical education is a critique of the idea that self-expression and individual self-determination are the only foundations of ethical deliberations and actions. Knowledge about moral principles and obligations is essential to contain the passions of the heart, to give orientation to ethical choices, and to foster critical self-reflection. This marks the crucial distinction between Immanuel Kant's idea of moral autonomy, according to which the will of every rational being should be a universally legislating will,[20] and the principle of

---

[18] Ibid. 306.
[19] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* V 10, 1137b 29-32.
[20] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 39 (*Akademie Ausgabe* 4:431). Of course, it is essential to interpret the idea of autonomy in a non-egological and non-monological way, taking into account the

self-determination, which does not refer to any universal moral principle or obligation and hence lacks the broader perspective that ethical actions require. Furthermore, Kant's categorical imperative highlights the need for an ethical reflection about whether individual maxims for action can become universal moral laws,[21] whereas the value of individual self-expression lacks this reflexive, self-critical potential.

However, moral knowledge is only one aspect of practical wisdom. It also comprises sensitivity to the moral dimensions of particular situations and actions, the ability to apply universal moral principles to concrete situations, and, reversely, the capacity to seize these principles and values in a confrontation with concrete, moral situations. In other words, universal moral principles need to be contextualized in historical and communitarian ways.[22] This aspect of practical wisdom is the result of a (reflexive) praxis, which is why ethical education requires not only cognitive insight but also practical training.

The practical aspect of practical wisdom comes to the fore when we realize that moral principles are plural and incommensurable, and therefore cannot be measured univocally, as if morals were a kind of *technè*. There is no single common notion of the good that practical wisdom only needs to apply to pass a correct ethical judgment in specific situations. Instead, the best human life should be conceived as a life inclusive of a number of different constituents, each being defined apart from each of the others and valued for its own sake; each virtue is defined separately, as something that has value in itself. To put it concretely: "If I should ask of justice and of love whether both are constituent parts of *eudaimonia* […], I surely do not imply […] that we are to hold them up to a single standard, regarding them as productive of some further value. […] Something can be an end in itself and at the same time be a valued constituent in a larger or more inclusive end". To choose a value "for *its own* sake (for the sake of what it itself is) not only does not require, but is actually incompatible with, viewing it as qualitatively commensurable with other valuable items".[23] Different values can be legitimately valuable for their own sake and cannot be weighed up against each other without considering the particular situation.

---

plurality and otherness of persons, which implies accepting a certain degree of heteronomy; see Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 275.

[21] Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals,* 47 (*AA* 4:441)

[22] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another,* 274.

[23] Nussbaum, *The fragility of goodness,* 297. For this argument see also Thomas Nagel, "The Fragmentation of Value," in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 128-141.

Hence, because moral principles are manifold and because the practical field in which they are realized is mutable, indeterminate, and particular or non-repeatable, it is crucial that the person of practical wisdom is a thoroughly human being, that is, someone who does not attempt to stand outside of the conditions of human life but bases her judgment on a long and broad experience of these conditions,[24] and is able to understand their complexities. This is why confining ethical education to teaching universal moral principles and values, like human rights, the principle of reciprocity, etc., is inadequate. Instead, ethical education should also comprise training people in accepting the confrontation of these principles with the particular conditions of human life.

In sum, the first goal of ethical education is to foster practical wisdom, which consists not only of moral knowledge and insight into the multiple and incommensurable nature of moral principles and obligations but also practical training in how to apply these universal principles to particular situations. Because the judgments and decisions of practical wisdom are always situational, a person of practical wisdom needs to realize that they are always temporary and open to improvement.

Revaluing ethical traditions

The second goal of ethical education concerns a revaluation of the role of traditions in contemporary, detraditionalized societies. This introduces a new element in comparison with Aristotle's theory about practical wisdom. Aristotle developed his ideas in a traditional, morally homogeneous society with a small number of well-defined relationships, so that there was a broad consensus about the substantial values constituting the good life. By contrast, today's societies have become irreducibly plural and even fragmented; in the words of Ricoeur, they are societies "after Babel".[25] This implies that reaching a consensus about substantial values and their mutual relationships has become difficult. To deal with this situation, contemporary polities tend to limit themselves to defining rather formal and procedural moral principles, like free self-determination, reciprocity, causing no harm to other people, etc. and are

---

[24] Nussbaum, *The fragility of goodness,* 290.
[25] Paul Ricoeur, *On Translation* (London: Routledge, 2006), 11. Ricoeur refers to George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998).

loath to interfere directly in people's preferences regarding the prioritization of these principles and the ensuing substantial values. This means that modern societies leave the contents of the good life up to the discretion of individual citizens and only try to influence this process indirectly through nudging.[26]

However, this procedural approach to values generates its own problems, thus showing the flipside of the shift from traditional to secular values. The rationality that underpins secular values is not as neutral as it seems but is a heritage of the Enlightenment, dominated by a functional and quantitative outlook on the world. Therefore, functional rationality is inclined to treat traditions and their ideas of the good life as non-functional, non-measurable, and thus irrational. As Jürgen Habermas has argued, because of its dominant position in most modern societies, this type of rationality has colonized the life-world of many people by re-organizing it through more impersonal and strategic exchanges of money and power, within the context of the economy and the modern administrative state and judiciary.[27] The upshot of this development is that, in today's detraditionalized societies, formal principles and secular-rational values appear unable to orient and motivate people's ethical life in the broad sense. This explains why they nowadays feel left to their own devices when it comes to finding ethical orientation in the life-world. This causes increased mental pressure, as the growing numbers of burnouts illustrate,[28] and estrangement from the functioning of the modern state, as the rise of populist political parties in many Western countries shows.[29] The reverse movement from secular to traditional values, as analyzed above, is an expression of society's discomfort with and resistance against the dominance of procedural rationality and its formal moral principles. This shows that the universal but formal principles of justice, fairness, reciprocity, etc., however important they are, cannot be entirely detached from traditional, teleological ideas of the good,[30] thus providing a strong argument for the need to revalue the role of traditions in detraditionalized societies: Traditions are a source of inspiration for a life

---

[26] For examples, see the Introduction.

[27] Nick Crossley, *Key Concepts in Critical Social Theory* (London: Sage Publications, 2005), 37f. See also: Timo Jütten, "The Colonization Thesis: Habermas on Reification", *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 19, no. 5 (2011): 704.

[28] Joep de Hart, Pepijn van Houwelingen, Willem Huijnk, *Religie in een pluriforme samenleving. Diversiteit en verandering in beeld. Deel 3: buiten kerk en moskee [Religion in a Pluriform Society. Diversity and Change in Pictures. Part 3: Outside Church and Mosque]* (Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2022), 147.

[29] Inglehart, *Cultural Evolution,* 176-187.

[30] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 284.

beyond the domain of functional and quantifiable rationality and for the substantial ethical values embedded in them.

Traditions are also important to modern societies for another reason: they bridge the gap between formal moral principles and the life-world. Traditions can be defined as successful examples of the good life, thus showing people how to live by substantial values. Moreover, since traditions have a narrative character, they are usually better suited than abstract moral principles to make people aware of ethical dilemmas and trade-offs. Finally, because of their embeddedness in the life-world, ethical traditions have a far greater motivational potential than formal principles or theoretical arguments about ethical matters. To avoid misunderstanding, this argument in favor of revaluing traditions should not be understood as a plea for traditionalism. Modern, democratic societies are by definition plural and, therefore, need to be based on a consensus about universal moral principles as a result of reasonable deliberation. This raises the fundamental question about the recognition of particular traditions and their substantial values in a plural, multicultural society, which will be explored in the next section.

In this section, I will confine myself to showing how traditions can bridge the gap between universal, but formal moral principles and people's particular convictions and substantial values in the life-world. To do so, I will summarize Ricoeur's critical discussion with Hans Küng about the pros and cons of a global ethic.[31] Küng states that the principle of reciprocity, also known as the Golden Rule, is the most universally accepted moral rule in all cultures and throughout the times.[32] Because this principle "is not just hypothetical and conditioned, but is categorical, apodictic and unconditioned – utterly practicable in the face of the extremely complex situation in which the individual or groups must often act,"[33] it has tremendous moral authority and reveals the profound unity that underlies the diversity of human

---

[31] "Entretien Hans Küng – Paul Ricoeur [autour du "Manifeste pour une éthique planétaire" (Ed. Du Cerf) de Hans Küng]," in *Les religions, la violence et la paix. Pour une éthique planétaire* http://www.fondsricoeur.fr/uploads/medias/articles_pr/entretien-hans-kung-paul-ricoeur-v2.pdf (retrieved Feb. 5, 2016).

[32] Hans Küng, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic,* (New York: Crossroad Publications, 1991); "Global Politics and Global Ethics. Status Quo and Perspectives", *Seton Hall Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations* (Winter/Spring 2002), 8-20. For an analysis of the complexities of reciprocity as the principle of a global ethics, see Peter Jonkers, "Can Reciprocity Be the Principle of a Global Ethics?", in *Reciprocity: A Human Value in a Pluralistic World,* eds. Peter Jonkers, Wang Tianen, Astrid Vicas (Washington DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2022), 275-294.

[33] Küng, *Global Responsibility*, 59.

experience. This is why Küng proposed reciprocity as the principle of the "Declaration Toward a Global Ethic", which was accepted by the Parliament of World Religions in 1993.[34] In contrast to the idea of self-determination, the principle of reciprocity recognizes that human beings are dependent on and in permanent interaction with each other, thus creating room for commitment to fellow human beings and the world around them.

Despite its obvious merits, a fundamental problem of reciprocity as the most fundamental and universal ethical principle is its disembodied formalism. Küng accepts this drawback to be able to unite all people around this principle and expects them to endorse it. He is of the opinion that the Declaration Toward a Global Ethic rightly does not mention specific ethical issues, such as sexual behavior, contraception, abortion, euthanasia, etc. because there is no consensus either among religions or within each single religion.[35] This is a fair argument, but Ricoeur queries the relevance of this global ethics if the consensus on which it is based does not reach beyond the abstract universality of the Golden Rule and proves to be unable to address concrete, pressing ethical questions.[36]

Hence, it is no surprise that Ricoeur is quite critical of the high hopes that Küng places in reciprocity as the principle of a global ethic. He compares Küng's project with the attempt to create a universal language, viz. Esperanto. This attempt has been unsuccessful because people are profoundly attached to their native language. In a similar vein, because global ethics only rests on the universal principle of reciprocity, it does not recognize the passion that arises from people's deep attachments to their individual life-worlds, including their heterogeneous ethical traditions as an orienting and motivating force for moral praxis.[37] This insight shows that universal moral principles can only become effective if they can be embedded in ethical traditions as concrete exemplifications of the good life, just like the universal capacity to express oneself and communicate linguistically can only be realized through a multiplicity of particular languages. Therefore, universal moral principles cannot overtrump culture-

---

[34] See *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic,*
http://www.parliamentofreligions.org/content/toward-global-ethic-initial-declaration. For an excellent overview of the background and the various stages of Küng's project of a World Ethos see José Casanova, "The Sacralization of the *Humanum:* A Theology for a Global Age", *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 13, no. 1 (1999): 21-40.
[35] "Entretien Hans Küng – Paul Ricoeur."
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.

specific traditions, nor should the relation between them be conceived as antagonistic. Rather, societies need to find a reflexive equilibrium between them.

Hence, the second goal of ethical education consists of making people sensitive (again) to the importance of ethical traditions, especially their role as bridges between formal principles and the concrete life-world. In fact, ethical life in the broad sense consists of intertwining three aspects: first, there are universal moral principles; second, these principles have to be applied to the complexities and contingencies of the life-world; and, third, these life-worlds are embedded in historical and communitarian traditions of the good life, which are, in turn, related to these universal moral principles. Inevitably, there will be conflicts between these three dimensions of ethical life, since they result from the conflicting nature of human existence itself. However, it is impossible and undesirable to extract people's individual ethical actions from their embeddedness in larger traditions or to treat these traditions as if they could be reduced to objects of detached moral reasoning, as the failure of Küng's proposal about reciprocity as the principle of a global ethics shows. As human beings, we are always situated in such a way that we cannot bring our individual moral praxis face-to-face with universal ethical principles, be it reciprocity or another one. Rather, we need traditions as examples of the good life, embedded in the life-world, thus enabling them to mediate between the two other aspects of ethical life.

Responding to the challenges of a multicultural world

The plural, multicultural character of liberal democracies adds yet another new dimension to the Aristotelian idea of ethical life and, hence, points to a third goal of ethical education. As argued in the previous section, the detraditionalization of modern societies needs to be counterbalanced by ethical traditions and their substantial values as means for orientation and a mediation between formal moral principles and the life-world. Yet, typical of a multicultural world is that these traditions are plural, heterogeneous, and thus potentially conflictual. [38] Social scientists have demonstrated that the demographic composition of contemporary Western societies, especially in the big cities, is becoming increasingly diverse, evolving towards an increasing number of minority cultures without a majority culture. The members of each of these cultures are attached to their own traditions and

---

[38] Peter Jonkers, "How to Respond to Conflicts over Value Pluralism?" *Journal of Nationalism, Memory, & Language Politics* 13, no. 2 (2020): 1-22.

substantial values and claim the right to manifest their attachments in the public sphere and even ask for the political recognition of these values. Hence, it is no option to (politically) impose a limited number of well-established values of the majority culture upon society as a whole. This shows how vital it is that ethical education trains people to respond to the challenges of today's multicultural world and its concomitant ethical pluralism in a constructive, non-exclusivist way. In this section, I further explore Ricoeur's ideas on this matter.

This goal of ethical education should first make people aware of the passion, which arises from their deep attachment to traditions and the substantial values embedded in them. As demonstrated in the first section, the cause of many controversies about these issues in our times is not the persistence of these traditions and values but rather the fact that their crucial contribution to the formation of people's socio-cultural identity has been ignored. Hence, the pluralism of traditions and substantial values is not only a matter of fact but their (political) recognition is also a legitimate claim from communities the world over. Thus, the challenge of our times is not so much finding a minimal consensus about universal moral principles, as Küng argued, but rather becoming sensitive to what distinguishes us from people who belong to another tradition and learning how to prevent this distinction from degenerating into a means of exclusion.

To develop this sensitivity, we need a profound understanding of the – sometimes conflictual – plurality of traditions, because only on that base can we become aware of the substantial ethical values embedded in them. This understanding should primarily take the form of a self-reflection on why and how the values of our own tradition separate us from those of other ones. The crucial question in this respect is: how can I recognize from my own conviction that something vital is not said in my tradition but may be addressed in another one?[39] Such a self-reflection can lead to the conclusion: yes, we can understand that other people endorse their values from a different point of view than ours, i.e., from their embeddedness in a different tradition. Hence the most appropriate way of responding to our multicultural condition is to discover and recognize the inexhaustible richness of ethical life at the heart of particular traditions instead of abstracting from them.

To realize this goal of ethical education, Ricoeur proposes that we should learn to assume the following paradox: "On the one hand, one must maintain the universal claim attached to a few values where the universal and the historical intersect, and on the other hand, one must submit this claim to discussion, not on a formal level, but on

---

[39] "Entretien Hans Küng – Paul Ricoeur."

the level of the convictions incorporated in concrete forms of life. Nothing can result from this discussion unless every party recognizes that other potential universals are contained in so-called exotic cultures. The path of eventual consensus can emerge only from mutual recognition on the level of acceptability, that is, by admitting a possible truth, admitting proposals of meaning that are at first sight foreign to us".[40]

In this quote, Ricoeur expresses his agreement with the basic idea of Habermas and John Rawls that the problem of cultural and ethical diversity can only be solved by means of public political debates, which are the cornerstone of liberal, deliberative democracies. Yet, Ricoeur is skeptical about their argument that these debates require the translation of these traditions and substantial values into the language of secular reason as the only common ground of liberal democracies.[41] In contrast to Habermas and Rawls, Ricoeur is of the opinion that the translation proviso favors secular moral principles and attributes them a seemingly universal status, overtrumping the values of particular ethical traditions. Moreover, the formal character of the moral principles of secular reason makes them unsuited to fully appreciate the substantial values embedded in these traditions. This also explains why most religious and cultural traditions reject this proviso as an unfair demand. Instead, to create a level playing field between different ethical traditions, including the secular one, Ricoeur thinks it necessary to broaden our conception of rationality in such a way that it is hospitable to the substantial values of all ethical traditions.

The major advantage of this broadened rationality is that it enables people to give a constructive response to the ethical challenges of today's multicultural world: with the help of this enriched idea of rationality ethical education can create an awareness that the substantial values of exotic traditions potentially have a universal significance. According to the traditional view, which goes back to Aristotle, the task of practical wisdom is to apply universal moral principles to contingent situations, resulting in a prudential judgment. Yet, this idea of practical wisdom leaves these principles unaffected and holds them superior to the values of particular traditions. Hence, the possible cultural biases of these principles remain unnoticed; an example of such a bias in Aristotle's ethics and political philosophy is the inferior position that he attributes to slaves, craftsmen, and women in the polis. The innovative character of Ricoeur's proposal lies in recognizing the universal potential of ethical traditions,

---

[40] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another,* 289.
[41] See e.g. Jürgen Habermas, "Faith and Knowledge," in *The Future of Human Nature* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 109; John Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited", in *Political Liberalism. Expanded edition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 462.

which means that they can possibly modify and enrich universal moral principles. In other words, the relation between universal moral principles and particular traditions and their values is not a one-way movement from the former to the latter but also the other way around. Stressing the potential universality of particular ethical traditions makes this relation much more dynamic without yielding to ethical traditionalism, since the question of whether this potential universality is actually realized depends on reasonable deliberation.

The Christian value of mercy is an excellent example of the universal potential of a particular tradition. This value offers a necessary modification and complement to the principle of reciprocity, which Küng saw as the basis of global ethics. Reciprocity is based on the symmetrical relations between free and equal citizens in a well-ordered society, and hence the basic principle of a fair distribution of primary goods.[42] However, the value of mercy, which is embedded in the Christian tradition and is narrated, among others, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, points to the importance of asymmetric relationships in every society, as the examples of the relationships between parents and children, healthy and disabled people, etc. show. Hence, the value of mercy shows the limits of the principle of reciprocity: a society based on reciprocity alone is unforgiving because it fails to take into account that the altruistic attitude of giving something without expecting something in return plays a crucial role in all forms of human interaction.[43] As is common knowledge, this insight has not remained limited to the Christian community of faith but is nowadays recognized as vital for every human society and implemented in the legislation of most states. This clearly shows the universal potential of the value of mercy.[44] This conclusion does not automatically put particular ethical traditions on a par with universal moral principles, but it definitely rebalances the traditional conception of their relationship by adding a historical and intercultural dimension to the idea of universal moral principles. In sum, learning to see insights of particular ethical traditions as potential universals is an essential element of ethical education in a multicultural world, because it staves off the danger of apriori excluding the

---

[42] John Rawls, *Political Liberalism. Expanded Edition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 17.

[43] For an analysis of the value of reciprocity and its problems, see Jonkers, "Can Reciprocity be the Principle of a Global Ethics?", 275-294.

[44] Another example of the potential universality of the values of a specific tradition is the idea of human dignity, which was originally a Christian and Western value, but is now universally recognized as the foundation of human rights. See Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another,* 289 and Hans Joas, *The Sacredness of the Person: A New Genealogy of Human Rights* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013).

substantial values of the cultural other under the pretext that they run counter to the universal principles of secular reason. At the same time, this approach also avoids an unqualified upgrading of particular values to universal ones, which would inevitably lead to cultural relativism: whether or not potentially universal values are actually recognized as universal always depends on the outcome of reasonable deliberation.

Conclusion

In this paper, I discussed three goals of ethical education. All of them are focused on teaching and training people to find a reflexive equilibrium between three different dimensions of ethical life, viz. universal moral principles and obligations, ethical traditions as examples of the good life in a specific socio-cultural context, and the indeterminateness and contingencies of ethical praxis. First, people need to familiarize themselves with moral principles and obligations through formal and informal learning. These principles should be applied in a flexible, yet appropriate way to various contexts of action. Hence, to realize ethical praxis, people need training in the virtue of practical wisdom, that is, determining which moral principles are salient in a particular situation and finding ways to apply these principles to contingent situations. However, it has become difficult to find plausible points of ethical orientation in today's multicultural societies. This explains why a very influential way of responding to the multicultural situation, namely to promote a formal, procedural approach to ethical issues has fallen short of expectations. To address this issue, I used Ricoeur's alternative approach to the value of traditions, viz. appreciating them as culturally embedded mediators between universal moral principles and the life-world. This is the second goal of ethical education. Yet, to avoid the looming deadlock of ethical traditionalism and particularism a reasonable debate is necessary to find out if and how the universal potential of particular ethical traditions can be realized. This approach aims at fostering the dialogue among ethical traditions with the help of an enlarged idea of rationality. In today's multicultural society, the third goal of ethical education is, therefore, to train people in self-reflection about the ethical values of their own traditions, as a first step to understanding the values of other traditions as potential universals. Yet most importantly, the analysis of all three goals of ethical

education has shown that its aim is not so much to *inform* the learners about moral theories and insights, but to *(trans)form* their lives.[45]

---

[45] Pierre Hadot, *La philosophie comme manière de vivre. Entretiens avec Jeannie Carlier et Arnold I. Davidson* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2001), 144.