

# EDUCATION FOR AN ETHICAL IMAGINATION

PAM CHRISTIE



## Abstract

*In response to the question, 'Education for what?', this article argues the case for an ethical imagination. It begins by illustrating different approaches to ethics – Greek antiquity, Kant's categorical imperative, Levinas's interhuman ethic of care, and Foucauldian genealogy. On the basis of this, it suggests that ethics may be understood as a disposition of continual questioning and adjusting of thought and action in relation to notions of human good and how to be and act in relation to others. It then briefly considers education as an ethical activity, and sets out three interrelated axes for an ethics of engagement in education: intellectual rigour, civility and care. Using examples of citizenship and statelessness in Australia, it argues that building an ethical imagination is a valuable goal for education.*

## Introduction

On 2 August 2005, the *Sydney Morning Herald* ran the following front page story. Harry Seidler, distinguished architect, Companion of the Order of Australia, and Australian passport holder, was advised, to his shock, that he did not hold Australian citizenship. A refugee from Nazi rule in his birthplace, Austria, Seidler had been interred in Britain during World War 2, was stripped of the German passport imposed on Austrians, and as a stateless person, was sent to Canada where he was given citizenship. In 1948 he migrated to Australia and in 1958 became an Australian citizen. In 1985, in a gesture honouring his architectural achievements, the Austrian government ceremoniously reinstated the citizenship he had lost under Nazi rule. Unbeknown to him, this invalidated his Australian citizenship. For twenty years, Seidler voted and travelled as an Australian, and in 2000 he was named on the Australian honours list. In the context of applying to change his address on the electoral roll in 2005, Seidler was informed that he did not qualify for citizenship. Berating the heavy-handedness of the Immigration Department, his wife made the following comment: 'For a person [who] over the years has been stateless, these things are precious. It's rather shocking. He's a high profile person, but I'm concerned this happens to other people who don't know what to do. It's just one more example of the sort of thing that's going on there [in the department].'

'For a person who has been stateless, citizenship

is precious.' Could people who have always had citizenship rights be expected to understand the experience of statelessness and the trauma of losing citizenship? How No doubt Seidler's case was a bureaucratic bungle, but it occurred alongside others that made the headlines in 2005: Vivienne Solon, wrongfully deported to the Philippines while suffering mental and physical illness; and Cornelia Rau, suffering from schizophrenia, wrongfully locked up without treatment in the Baxter Immigration Detention Centre. A number of ethical issues arise from these cases. To what extent are governments and bureaucrats accountable for wrongful and inhumane treatment of their citizens? And what is the responsibility of ordinary people – ourselves – in the face of such actions?

This article makes a case for 'an ethical imagination' as one of the goals of education. It begins by looking briefly at ethics and how it may be understood in the context of education. In doing this, it outlines various theoretical positions on ethics, and argues that, whether acknowledged or not, education always involves ethics. It then uses the case of citizenship and statelessness to illustrate an ethics of education where imagining the situation of others in ethical terms is a valued capacity.

## Western Traditions of Ethics

What constitutes a good life? And how should we live in consideration of others? These have been abiding concerns in western philosophy. Different ways of thinking about these questions – different discourses of ethics – have prevailed at different historical times. Three examples will serve to illustrate this.

For ancient Greeks, ethics was a concern with the good and the wise in a society based on strong hierarchical roles. 'Ethos' as a way of being and behaving required extensive work on the self to acquire intellectual and moral virtues such as wisdom, prudence, and courage, and to be honourable and exemplary in thought and action. Ethics was framed in terms of character and action, and was about goodness, virtue and prudence rather than duty or responsibility. In the ethical discourses of Greek antiquity, 'care of the self' and 'knowing the self' would simultaneously enable appropriate relations with others. As Foucault points out, within this framework of ethics, 'the good ruler is precisely the one who exercises his power as it ought to be exercised, that

is, simultaneously exercising his power over himself' (2000, 288).

In a different historical context, the work of Immanuel Kant provided a definitive contribution to western thinking on ethics (see Kant 1996; 1956). An exemplary Enlightenment philosopher, Kant believed in the power of reason. He viewed the realm of morality as standing outside of the realm of nature, and sought to define what its unchanging elements might be. Kant's test for a moral precept was that we should wish to apply it universally to all human beings without exception. He termed this a categorical imperative, as distinct from a hypothetical imperative, which could be conditional (You ought to do such and such if...). In a Kantian framework, moral behaviour is not about obeying universal moral codes. The 'ought' of our behaviour does not require an external authority – God or moral law – to sanction us. Each of us is our own moral authority. As autonomous, rational beings we judge for ourselves and act accordingly. And the judgement to be made is that we should be able to consistently universalise a precept – consistently wish that it be universally done, without exception.

As MacIntyre (1966;1998) points out, the examples of categorical imperatives provided by Kant tell us what not to do, rather than what to do: not to kill, not to tell lies, not to break promises and so on. This form may perhaps look similar to moral codes such as the Ten Commandments. However, Kant's categorical imperatives are not a set of moral laws, laid down by God or existing as ontological norms. Rather, they are judgements made by rational human beings about how to think and act in relation to others.

A third example of an approach to ethics is to be found in the work of the Talmudic scholar, Emmanuel Levinas, a survivor of the Holocaust. Levinas (1998) challenges the approach which centres ethics on the autonomous sovereign subject who judges what is right and acts accordingly. Instead, extending the work of the phenomenologist Heidegger, he argues that ethics precedes ontology. I cannot know myself and then the other. I am only myself – an 'I' – in relation to another, who is not 'I'. It is the face of the other that calls me into being, and calls me to responsibility for the other, prior to any prior to any sense of mutual obligation or reciprocity. As Chinnery (2003) points out, in Levinasian terms my own self-unfolding cannot be the ultimate purpose of my life. My very existence as a human being depends upon the existence of the other, in response to whom my humanness is constituted. In Levinas' words, 'attention to the suffering of the other ... can be affirmed as the very nexus of human subjectivity, to the point of being raised to the level of supreme ethical principle...' (1998, 94).

These three examples illustrate discourses on ethics which construct the ethical subject and notions of

the good in different ways. What is common to all of them – the terrain of ethics – is the importance of thinking about what constitutes the right and the good and how we might live in consideration of others. I suggest that ethics is best understood as a concern with these issues, rather than a stable set of precepts. It is a disposition of continual questioning and adjusting of thought and action in relation to notions of human good and harm. It entails work on the self and consideration of how to be and act in relation to others. And this has taken different forms at different times.

Foucault's (1994, 263-5) work on the genealogy of ethics usefully sets out four aspects of ethical work on the self – which manifest differently in different discourses of ethics. First, there is the 'ethical substance', the parts of the self or behaviour which are relevant for moral conduct (for example our intentions, our feelings, our sexuality). Second is the 'mode of subjectification', or the way people 'are invited or incited to recognise their moral obligations' (for example, by divine law, by natural law, by laws of reason). The third is the self-forming activities that people undertake in order transform themselves into ethical subjects, to be or behave ethically (to moderate our acts, eradicate our desires). The fourth Foucault names 'telos': the desired goal of the ethical work, or, in his words, 'the kind of being to which we aspire when we behave in a moral way' (to be pure, to be immortal, to have mastery over ourselves). Almost in passing, Foucault (1994, 294) comments that 'it seems to me that contemporary political thought allows very little room for the question of the ethical subject'.

Many of the traditional concerns of ethics are familiar in modernist discourses of politics: notions of truth, freedom, justice and equality, for example. In modernist discourses, these notions may appear to have fixed meanings and universal application. Yet this belies the fact that they have taken different forms in different historical periods, and that they may take different forms in the future. The equality that inspired the French Revolution did not include women or peasants – yet today it does. The virtues of character and action of Greek antiquity pertained to an aristocracy in a strictly stratified, slave society – yet it would be unwise to dismiss their writings for this reason. Meanings have shifted, yet the concepts remain important. Rather than abandoning these concepts and searching for others, the challenge, I suggest, is to engage with them in different ways, and in ways that make more room for ethical considerations.

Edward Said, for example, puts a strong case for critical engagement with humanism, suggesting that the ideals of justice, equality, liberty and learning 'still supply most disadvantaged people with the energy to resist unjust war and military occupation, for instance, and to try to overturn despotism and tyranny' (2004, 10). A similar point is made by Arjun Appadurai, who argues for the

importance of engaging with the discourses of globalisation from below: 'the word *globalisation*, and words like *freedom*, *choice*, and *justice* are not inevitably the property of the state-capital nexus' (2001, 19). Similarly, Judith Butler suggests the theoretical and political importance of working strategically with categories that appear universalist, in order to expose them as contingent and contestable, to render them 'permanently open, permanently contested, permanently contingent, in order not to foreclose in advance future claims for inclusion' (1995, 41).

The theoretical move of challenging the certainties of absolute notions of right and wrong should not be confused with relativism, where 'anything counts' as knowledge, and all values are equal. In a relational approach to knowledge and ethics, as Yeatman (1994, 19) notes, 'All knowledge is situated knowledge, and is governed by the perspective of those who are the knowers'. This means that knowledge is tied to specific perspectives; but it does not mean that it floats free in a relativist way. A relational theory of knowledge implies that *all* knowing is situated – there is no place 'outside' where we can go to find 'the truth'. However, we *can* locate our perspectives and those of others in time and place and traditions of knowledge. What is required of us is to question, to grapple with, and to problematise what we take for granted as knowledge and ethics, in a continuing, open and imaginative process.

### Education and Ethics

Education has many goals and purposes, and many different activities are carried out in its name. Schooling (as an institutional form of education) is viewed in many ways: as places of formalised teaching and learning; as socialising agencies where young people learn appropriate social roles; as repositories of cultural conservation where valued traditions are passed on; as prevocational spaces where young people acquire knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate for the world of work; and so on. All of these discourses of schooling are saturated with assumptions about what counts as progress and development, of what is good and bad, normal and deviant. Whether acknowledged or not, these discourses operate on the terrain of ethics. All have an ethical telos (an ideal good to which they aspire), all require specific work on the self or subject to achieve this, and all involve consideration (in some form or another) of individual and collective good. How might we make room in these discourses of schooling for an ethical imagination as a goal of education?

Elsewhere (Christie 2005), I have argued for the importance of an ethics of engagement in education, building on three interrelated dimensions:

- An ethics of commitment to intellectual rigour where we strive continually to understand our conditions of existence in all their complexities.
- An ethics of civility in which we actively build the conditions for a democratic public space.
- An ethics of care in which we acknowledge the significance of our care of the other, prior to any concerns for reciprocity or mutual obligation.

Each of these entails an ethical imagination. Here, I elaborate on what this might entail, using the example of Harry Seidler's experiences of citizenship and statelessness as illustration.

### An Ethics of Intellectual Rigour

A central purpose of schooling is the systematic teaching and learning of socially valued knowledge, skills and values to young people. Ideally, schools build rhythms of learning and teaching, both formal and informal, structured and unstructured. Formal, structured learning is the object of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. Informal learning takes place in the fluid interactions of daily life in schools. In a misleadingly simple formulation, the Coalition of Essential Schools states as its first principle that schools should help students 'learn to use their minds well' (Sizer 1992, 207). Extending this, I would suggest that an ethics of intellectual rigour entails building habituated practices of learning and enquiry as dispositions for both students and teachers.

What might this look like? Newmann and Associates (1996) provide a useful outline of what we might aim for in education, saying that: 'all students deserve an education that extends beyond transmission of isolated facts and skills to in-depth understanding and complex problem solving and that is useful to students and society outside the classroom' (1996, 18). Opposing 'meaningless school work' that 'emphasises superficial exposure to hundreds of isolated pieces of knowledge' (1996, 23), Newmann and Associates propose instead that students should be actively involved in constructing knowledge through disciplined inquiry which has meaning and value beyond the school. Clearly, developing imagination is a central part of this, both through exposure to the scholarship of in-depth disciplinary inquiry, and also through the creative extension of this into new knowledge.

The ethics of intellectual rigour that I am proposing here is premised on recognising the importance of human agency in shaping the material and ideational world. Human history is filled with chance and confusion as well as grand schemes and careful plans; with the unconscious and irrational as well as the conscious and rational; with hopes and ideals as well as despair and defeat; with proud achievements as well as marks of shame. Edward Said evocatively talks of 'the existential density of real human life' (2004b, 179). I suggest that an ethics of intellectual rigour means engaging with this

'existential density', with the intricate and complex textures of meaning in their social contexts, time and place. It entails continually pushing the boundaries of what we know, questioning the certainties, and traversing different worlds of experience. It requires ethical reflection, not moral judgement. The purpose is not to find a viewpoint and know it well, to find a position and occupy it, to find a tradition and belong to it. Instead, to use Said's words again, the purpose is about 'cultivating a sense of multiple worlds and complex interacting traditions', so that we are able to be 'both insider and outsider to the circulating ideas and values that are at issue in our society, or someone else's society or the society of the other' (2004a, 78). This, I suggest, is the work of an ethical imagination.

An ethics of intellectual rigour would certainly render Harry Seidler's experiences intelligible. The experiences of the Holocaust, of being a refugee from Nazi Germany, of deportation, and of people moving to reshape their lives after World War Two – these are part of a defining event in Western history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, leaving imprints in aesthetics, poetics and philosophy as well as carving deep social and political contours. It is not unreasonable to expect education in Western societies such as Australia to develop students' and teachers' capacities to engage ethically and imaginatively with Harry Seidler's experiences.

However, the imagination cultivated through an ethics of intellectual rigour need not stop with Seidler as an exemplar of a particular 20<sup>th</sup> century experience. It enables us to move beyond Seidler to others in current times experiencing different forms of violence and oppression, the dislocations of forced migration, and the loss citizenship, which confers an entitlement to belong.

### **An Ethics of Civility**

Citizenship raises the question: How might we best live together in a shared public realm? An ethics of civility opens up considerations such as this. Etienne Balibar (2001) defines civility as: 'creating, recreating and conserving the set of conditions within which politics as a collective participation in public affairs is possible or is not made absolutely impossible' (2001, 15). Building and maintaining the conditions for participation in public affairs is a central task for democracy. It is a task that education rightly addresses, as is evident in declarations on the goals of schooling such as Australia's *Adelaide Declaration* (MCEETYA 1999).

If intellectual rigour entails dispositions of enquiry, and thus may be undertaken as an individual, civility entails dispositions attuned to shared public life, and thus requires, in Hannah Arendt's phrase, that we 'think in the presence of others' (2001, 22). Building on the work of Kant, Arendt argues for the importance of 'enlarged thinking' in political life. This requires individuals to move

beyond their subjective positions and preferences to judge and act with others in a public sphere. For Arendt, what is at stake in politics is not 'knowledge or truth', but rather 'judgement and decision, the judicious exchange of opinion about the sphere of public life and the common world, and the decision what manner of action is to be taken in it, as well as to how it is to look henceforth, what kind of things are to appear in it' (2001, 22).

An ethics of civility entails considerations of the good and the right in a shared public realm. Arendt suggests that 'the capacity to judge' is important as a specifically political ability 'to see things not only from one's own point of view but in the perspective of all those who happen to be present' (2001, 20). This is not about trying to put oneself in the position of another, or showing empathy; rather, it is about acknowledging that there are standpoints other than one's own in a public realm, with which one needs to engage in order to communicate and come to agreement.

In a nation state, 'those who happen to be present' in the public realm are conventionally constituted as citizens with rights and responsibilities. Those who fall outside the nation state system – for example, as refugees and asylum seekers – have no rights, and as Arendt famously pointed out, no rights to rights. How nation states treat those who are excluded from citizenship rights in the public realm is a matter for ethical consideration. Balibar (2005) suggests that those who are radically excluded are in danger of 'being pushed into a social symbolic corner' where they have the status of 'living corpses' – groups of people 'who are *neither completely 'alive', nor yet already 'dead'*" (2005, 32-33, original emphasis). Practices which place human beings outside of a shared moral order – where concerns of truth, justice and equality are suspended in relation to them – are a form of violence. Yet they are carried out in democracies like Australia in the name of safeguarding a public sphere.

An ethics of civility calls for a reflective disposition towards the public realm and how it is constituted and maintained. Where citizens are passive and cede political responsibility to others, the nature of their own democracy is eroded. This is particularly the case where governments and bureaucracies are not held accountable for wrongful and inhumane treatment of people. There is no ethical space for citizens to say that 'they did not know' about the violent and inhumane treatment of others – common excuses in Nazi Germany and apartheid South Africa. Education for an ethical imagination requires continuing engagement with issues of civility. This is not about politicisation, or making simple judgements of right and wrong in terms of a pre-existing moral code. Rather, it is about building an understanding of the ways in which the public realm is constituted by interhuman activity.

And it is about continual openness of thought and action in relation to notions of human good and harm in the public realm.

Returning to the question posed at the start of this article, I suggest that education for an ethical imagination would enable the circumstances of Seidler, Solon and Rau to be read within the framework of civility. Reflection on an ethics of civility would also guide citizens in their responses to such cases.

### **Ethics of Care**

So far, I have argued for an education which builds a disposition of enquiry and which supports thoughtful engagement in public life. It now remains to argue for extending the ethical imagination to consider what being human alongside others entails. In education, this means recognising that being human – with all its possibilities and failings – means caring for each other, even those who are not the same as ourselves.

What is it to be human? This is a topic of much debate. Kant and his followers assume the existence of a universal, autonomous human subject who is capable of rational thought and action. Post-foundationalists such as Judith Butler (2004) argue against assuming that there is a universally shared human experience or a human nature which is essentially the same. Whatever position is taken, it is clear that human experience is shaped in engagement with others; it is not a matter of the individual being alone. The relationship of self to other is integral to human experience.

How, then, might we understand the other? Iris Marion Young usefully argues that in engaging with others, we should not assume that we are able to stand inside their world and think like them. Engagement with others requires recognition of their separateness as 'irreducible and irreversible' (2001, 216). This requires a moral humility which recognises that there is 'much that I do not understand about the other person's experience and perspective' (2001, 219). An ethical relation with others, she suggests, 'is structured, not by a willingness to reverse positions with others, but by respectful distancing from and approach towards them' (2001, 217).

In a strong philosophical statement, Levinas insists that, while we may want to understand the other, our relationship with the other 'exceeds the confines of understanding' (1998, 5). Even before I know or understand the other, I engage with the other as a human being. The face of the other calls forth a response in me, prior to any knowledge. The interhuman ethic, for Levinas lies in 'a non-indifference of one to another, in a responsibility of one for another', (1998, 100) prior to any concerns for reciprocity.

An ethics of care in education means building a capacity to care for the other as another, not myself. It entails the willingness to face suffering and deal with

difficult emotions without denying or rejecting them, and without rationalising them away. As Susan Sontag (2003) points out in her essay, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, there are no easy emotional spaces from which to engage with suffering. Passivity and impotence are clearly undesirable responses. But simple sympathy is not necessarily more appropriate, particularly since it may distance us from the sources of suffering. In Levinas's terms, the appropriate ethical response entails a shattering of indifference and a willingness to suffer for the suffering of others.

Returning finally to the story with which I opened, I conclude that education for an ethics of care would open us to the experiences of Harry Seidler and others who have lost citizenship and experienced statelessness. Following Levinas, our ethical response is not to impose meaning on their suffering, but to be open to suffering ourselves for their suffering.

### **Concluding Comment**

In foregrounding ethical considerations in education, I do not justify any actions which cause human suffering and loss of life. In everyday life, as well as times of crisis and times of war, we live with the horror of the violence and suffering that people inflict on each other for whatever reason. What is required, beyond judging or blaming, is a preparedness to face this and deal with it in ethical ways. What is required, ethically, is that we should care. The ethical challenge, I have suggested, is to hold a position of continuous questioning and reflection, to work to create and sustain a common public sphere, and to be open to others who are different from ourselves. These, I suggest, are the challenges of education for an ethical imagination.

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### Bio

Pam Christie teaches in the School of Education at the University of Queensland. She is also a Research Associate at the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of Queensland, and Visiting Professor at the University of Witwatersand, south Africa.

weight

in your voice  
the past

a weight  
as tides

have taken  
children

RORY HARRIS