In Defence of a Dialectical Ethic Beyond Postmodern Morality

Mark Mason
University of Cape Town

INSTRUMENTALISM AS A POTENTIAL CONSEQUENCE OF STRONG RELATIVISM

Echoing Nietzsche's reference to truth as little more than the solidification of culturally specific metaphors,[1] Lyotard's characterization of a mood of "incredulity towards grand narratives"[2] — principally towards the ideals of the Enlightenment and modernity — signals a ubiquitous conferring of legitimacy on previously marginalized positions. The normative practice of education as the institutionalized transmission of canonical disciplines and ethical norms is implicitly identified by Lyotard as such a "grand narrative." In terms of the prevailing mood, positions previously marginalized by the meta-narrative of education claim legitimacy, often simply on the basis of prior marginalization or on account of their being different. The concomitant blurring, and sometimes the collapse, of ethical (and epistemological) boundaries in education leaves teachers and other participants in the educational process potentially defenceless in the face of a moral relativism where, in Feyerabend's terms, "anything goes."[3]

While a healthy scepticism towards the foundations of apartheid education in South Africa has helped to invigorate the process of educational reconstruction, a generalized non-foundational orientation potentially produces a pervasive moral and epistemological relativism with unfortunate and destructive consequences. Muller and Taylor, in Gramscian vein, highlight the recycling of deprivation that comes from students' lack of engagement with the canon consequent on a mood of strong epistemological relativism.[4] Taylor demonstrates how the possibility of an authentic identity, an important goal of education, is frustrated by a moral relativism which denies the validity of our "horizons of significance" and which underlies an instrumental attitude towards human relationships.[5] Identified as "postmodern" in much recent theory, dominant modes of ethical comportment in contemporary society are orientated in terms of a culture of "self-fulfilment" and what Taylor has called a "self-determining freedom."[6] Neither the process nor the ends of education are served by a moral relativism where anything goes: a *carte-blanche* ethics can quickly lead to an instrumental approach to moral decisions.

Bhaskar draws a distinction between an ontological realm of "intransitive" objects, processes, and events — those which exist independently of our formulations — and an epistemological realm of "transitive" knowledge-constitutive interests — in whose construction we are implicated.[7] Conflation of these realms is according to him, the source of much confusion in strong relativist positions. The ontological cannot be reduced to the epistemological, which is a mistake typical of much postmodern theorizing. Wittgenstein's assertion that "the limits of my language are the limits of my world"[8] coincides with much postmodern confusion in taking "the sheer variety of truth-claims advanced (and very often subsequently abandoned) down through the history of scientific thought as evidence that no truth

is to be had" beyond "whatever form of discourse — or *de facto* regime of instituted power/knowledge — happens to prevail in some given discipline at some given time."[9] Conflating the realms of ontology and epistemology in a constructivist move weakens the possibility of critical scholarship. In like manner, much confusion in moral relativism results from the conflation of the ontological and the axiological. The danger of strong moral relativism is that the ontological is reduced to the axiological: it is arrogant and reactionary to ignore the very real privations of the exploited in the name of relativism. At least a minimum level of ontological commitment is critical if we wish to sustain any coherent discussion about values.

The problems consequent on a generalization of postmodern scepticism to all moral foundations are particularly acute in education. The evident absence of a "culture of learning," of a "culture of teaching," and of mutual respect among teachers and students, are indicative of and partly consequent on the non-foundational orientation of the contemporary mood. While this mood and the concomitant "culture of entitlement"[10] prevail, participants in the educational process find themselves unable even to begin to define what is worthwhile in education, let alone defend it. The current morass that is the legacy of apartheid, accordingly persists.

This is not, however, to gainsay the progressive potential of postmodernism: the legitimacy claimed by and accorded to those previously excluded by the logic of the "grand narrative" constitutes recognition of these voices in a celebration of identities previously denied by assimilation or exclusion. The paper acknowledges and is situated in the aporetic tension between the progressive and reactionary potential of the postmodern turn. Faced with the exclusionary injustices of established educational practices on the one hand, and the ubiquitous claims to legitimacy by those previously marginalized by such meta-narrative practices on the other, *the question is whether it is possible to develop an ethics within the framework of which educational communities can engage in dialogue over these competing claims.*

In summary, the paper considers *the problem that the "anything goes" relativism and non-foundational orientation associated with strong postmodern positions, while celebrating a plurality of previously marginalized voices, will potentially, by virtue of their retreat from a foundational moral position, perpetuate cycles of deprivation and instrumentalism, and minimize the possibility of realizing a key goal of education, an authentic identity.* This is the illusion of relativism construed as unambiguously progressive, and these are the difficulties consequent on an unreflective celebration of difference and diversity.

Hypotheses

The paper, aiming to develop a dialectical morality in the face of "incommensurable" pluralities, and offering a defence of these ethics beyond postmodern ethics, hypothesizes that:

• a moral commitment more sensitive to principle than mere temporary adherence to whatever value position sits most comfortably according to the dictates of the prevalent context offers a possible escape from a careless instrumentalism;

• such a moral commitment is contained in an *ethics of integrity*, which is constituted by respect for the dignity of our and each other's being, and by taking responsibility for the consequences of moral choices;

• this principle, or ethics of integrity, is able to be derived from, and is indeed logically consequent on, postmodern intuitionist morality;

• moral judgement and action that avoid both the fundamentalism and colonialism of strong foundationalism and the abdication of responsibility consequent on strong relativism depend on the ethics of integrity as a *dialectical* morality;

• the possibility of developing an authentic identity depends in part on the ethics of integrity;

• the possibility, both in education and in the broader society, of interrupting cycles of deprivation and instrumentalism depends in part on the ethics of integrity; and

• discourse beyond postmodernism will be characterized by an orientation around *discursive principles* within the hypothesized dialectical morality, with which are associated *defensible* or *warrantable claims*.

The Reassertion Of Value

The defence of principle beyond postmodern ethics is consonant with recent research reasserting value beyond strong postmodern relativism. Derrida asserts that deconstruction is committed to "the ethico-politico-juridical question of justice" and to "the sense of a responsibility without limits."[11] Taylor's "ethics of authenticity" assert the impossibility of constructing an authentic identity without accepting a non-instrumental commitment to our relationships and without acknowledging our "horizons of significance" which generate moral demands from outside ourselves.[12] Norris identifies in the recent work of Said[13] and Kristeva[14] a shift towards a reconstruction of the Enlightenment goals of justice and liberty, and away from their erstwhile positions which exalted difference and otherness and ultimately equated notions of truth, reason and critique with a discourse of oppression.[15] Benhabib is cautious of the debilitating consequences of postmodern relativism.[16] Mouffe argues in defence of "a new type of articulation between the universal and the particular."[17] Weeks seeks to balance relativism with "some sense of minimum universal values."[18] Soper suggests that any vacillation in the comfortable position of postmodern cynicism is logically to be committed "to certain political principles and values."[19] Squires calls for "normative expressions of value,"[20] Hirst for a foundational ethics.[21] Harvey is sceptical of an appeal to "unassimilated otherness" and the celebration of all difference;[22] Young suggests that a recognition of difference "will also at the same time involve an assertion of some form of solidarity and agreement."[23] Smeyers offers a justification for an educational project in terms of "what one cares for," rejecting the nihilism of strong postmodernism and its denial that "anything is worthwhile."[24] Kane is concerned to search for "absolute values in a pluralistic world,"[25] McCance to "re-address the ethical"[26] in a move that reflects the current trend away from the focus on aesthetics in social theory under the influence of postmodernism, and the renewed interest in philosophy in the field of ethics.

From Postmodern Ethics To The Ethics Of Integrity

The context of a non-foundational ethics is articulated in Bauman's postmodern ethics,[27] characterized by the intuitionist position of "morality without ethical code"[28] and marked by his return to Kant's "mystery of morality inside me." Bauman suggests that while the moral thought and practice of modernity may have been "animated by the belief in the possibility of a *non-ambivalent, non-aporetic ethical code*," what is *post*modern is the "*disbelief* in such a possibility."[29] The postmodern insight into morality is that in an era when the range of our moral choices and the consequences of our actions are more far-reaching than ever before, we are unable to rely on a universal ethical code which would yield unambiguously good solutions:

> Human reality is messy and ambiguous — and so moral decisions, unlike abstract ethical principles, are ambivalent. It is in this sort of world that we must live...Knowing that to be the truth...is to be postmodern. Postmodernity, one may say, is *modernity without illusions*.[30]

Bauman's response to the ambiguity of human reality is based in his position that it is our *moral capacity* that essentially defines us as human beings. While Kant's categorical imperative, "So act that the maxim of your will could always hold at the same time as a principle establishing universal law"[31] is suggestive of universalism, Bauman's assertion — while seeking to avoid foundationals and universals — that "if in doubt — consult your conscience"[32] is surprisingly close to deontological ethics. Postmodern ethics could almost be characterized in terms of an intuitionist deontology: of course not quite as deontological as Kant's classical statement since Bauman's conscience-guided morality would be more sensitive to the contextual specifics of a particular dilemma than would Kant's transcendental position.

Bauman's position that it is our pre-rational and pre-social *moral capacity* that essentially defines us as human beings, marked by his return to Kant's "mystery of morality inside me," is ultimately an intuitionist argument which claims that moral capacity lies intuitively in all of us and not in some ethical code external to ourselves which is universally applied.

However, underlying an intuitionist position is an assumed principle: that we respect the dignity of our and each other's being as a prerequisite for the confidence we place in our and in other's moral positions. Acceptance of this obligation implies a willingness to take responsibility for the moral choices we make. As we strive continually to grow morally, it is towards this goal of taking responsibility for the moral choices we make because we respect the dignity of our and each other's being. This process constitutes what I postulate as *the ethics of integrity: a life identified by commitment to growth towards integrity is a life that is inescapably responsible for moral choices made, and inextricably connected to respect for the dignity of being and the ensuing moral commitments.* Conversely, a life respectful of the dignity of being and responsible for that commitment's moral consequences, is a life whose identity is defined first and last in terms of integrity. The three elements of the triunity exist in a relationship of equivalence: each is a *sine qua non* of the others, and the absence of any immediately implies the absence of the others. *The ethics of integrity, then, imply respect for the dignity of being, and responsibility for moral choices.*

Bauman's assertion that "moral proximity, responsibility, and the uniqueness — irreplaceability — of the moral subject are triune; they will not survive (or, rather, would not be born) without each other"[33] is consistent with the position I am advocating: for Bauman, "being for Others [is the] cornerstone of all morality,"[34] and "moral responsibility is the most personal and inalienable of human possessions."[35] Also consistent is Taylor's argument that an authentic existence is not possible unless we recognize the validity of moral demands emanating from outside of ourselves as well as the demands of our commitment to others:[36] to deny the first is to collapse Taylor's horizons of significance and to trivialize our more significant decisions by imbuing them with meaning solely on account of their having been freely chosen; to deny the second is to negate the possibility of meaningful identity construction given the politics of identity recognition in an age of flexible identity.

Although space prohibits my doing so in this paper, from this moral principle of respect for the dignity of being it is possible to derive logically the five moral principles posited as widely accepted by Thiroux:

the value of life principle;
the principle of goodness or rightness;
the principle of justice or fairness;
the principle of truth-telling or honesty; and,
the principle of individual freedom.[37]

The derivation of further moral principles such as those sketched by Thiroux, and the possibility of moral reflection, depend on a rational capacity which Strike and Soltis assume as a further distinguishing characteristic of humanity.[38] We therefore have to draw on both our *moral* and our *rational* capacities if the potential of moral reflection is to be realized. Strike and Soltis invoke the possibility of moral reasoning as a defence against relativism. In this respect the crucial question has to do with the origins of our moral intuitions, since they are assumed to be the basic data for moral reasoning. Some positions assert them as innate, some as a way of seeing moral phenomena, some as culturally shaped. If the last is true, moral relativism is indisputable. But just as Bauman asserts that relying on moral intuition does not necessarily entail relativism (it is the competition among ethical codes for paradigmatic status, and not our moral intuition, that gives rise to relativism), Strike and Soltis take a less decisive position with regard to the origins of our moral intuitions, pointing to the commonalities of humanity, particularly at the broad level of intuitions. Strike and Soltis are content with the establishment of "a provisional reflective equilibrium"[39] that is tolerant of a mild degree of social constructivism with respect to intuitional morality: "we can be objective without being certain, and we can be tolerant and open to other points of view without being relativists".[40] Reflective equilibrium between members of radically different cultures may not be easily attained, but we are not so far apart that it is impossible. What is assumed is both our moral capacity — which is acknowledged in "affirmative" postmodern positions[41] such as Bauman's — *and* our rational capacity — which has been celebrated in modernity. But both capacities, albeit in various forms and to differing extents, have for centuries been identified as the essence of humanity, and both are essential resources for an ethics *beyond* postmodernism.

Towards A Dialectical Morality Beyond Postmodern Ethics

This attempt to move beyond the problems of relativism and the cruelty potentially associated with the consequent withdrawal from commitment has involved the development of what I have postulated as the ethics of integrity. One of the constituents of the ethics of integrity is the principle of respect for the dignity of being. It is certainly true that we are moved to act morally by a commitment to a principle which we understand as foundationally constitutive of our identity. But our moral judgements and actions are motivated by more than purely a principled commitment: we are also moved to act morally by the demands of a particular situation in which we are involved at a Levinasian "face to face" level.[42] Such face to face interaction moves us, whether in solidarity, in empathy, or in horror, to take responsibility for our actions. This responsibility is the other constituent of the ethics of integrity which I have posited. Moral judgement and action, I suggest, exist always within the span of these two constituents — principled commitment and face to face responsibility — which I will constitute as a dialectical morality. We understand our feelings of empathy or solidarity as significant (and hence they demand that we act) by reference to our "horizons of significance,"[43] to the moral obligations which emanate from beyond ourselves, some of which — respect for the dignity of being, for example — we may understand as foundational. The immediate move to act, spurred by the face to face demands of the situation, is contextualized within a broader framework: it is by reference to this broader framework, which may include the obligation to respect the dignity of being, that we are able to recognize certain practices as demeaning of dignity and are accordingly moved to act against them.

The ethical projects of modernity are motivated, according to Bauman, by the desire for certainty, for a non-ambivalent and non-aporetic ethical code. As such the ethics of modernity aspire, as is the case with ethics in traditional societies, to foundationality and universality. Postmodern ethics, according to Bauman, is convinced of the futility of this exercise, and is accordingly content to leave moral decisions to the specifics of a particular situation. Each of these orientations tends to ignore the potentially productive tension between them as each tends towards its own pole: modern ethics towards the goal of foundationality, risking the cruelties associated with colonialism and fundamentalism as it ignores postmodernism's celebration of the other and of difference; postmodern ethics towards the ambit of the local, the specific and the immediate, risking the cruelties associated with strong relativism in its denial of commitment to a foundational principle. What is lost is the potential of the dialectical tension between them.

What is established then, is a tension between moral action as motivated by foundational principles and by face to face situation-specific responsibility and solidarity. Rorty's descriptions of objectivity and solidarity reflect the poles of this dialectic.[44] Dynamically within this tension are *discursive moral principles*, moral obligations that are wrought simultaneously by the bipolar demands of a foundational respect for the dignity of being (associated with Rorty's objective pole) on the one hand, and by the demand that we take responsibility for our moral decisions by virtue of a Levinasian face to face solidarity (associated with Rorty's pole of

solidarity) on the other. Ever situated within this dialectic, such discursive moral principles acknowledge the tension between universality and community, between objectivity and solidarity. For Rorty, "the desire for objectivity is not the desire to escape the limitations of one's community, but simply the desire for as much intersubjective agreement as possible."[45] Moral action is wrought by this tension between objectivity and solidarity, between foundational commitment and face to face responsibility, as we strive towards "as much intersubjective agreement as possible," towards a discursively principled morality. We become moral, asserts Greene, as we come together in our educational communities and wrestle with the moral choices that we face.[46] Such interaction is moral only in so far as it is based in the ethics of integrity. We are viscerally motivated by the Levinasian and Rortyan pole of face to face solidarity and responsibility, by Bauman's moral responsibility as the "first reality of the self,"[47] and we may avoid the cruel consequences of a strong relativism and its *carte-blanche* morality consequent on a withdrawal of commitment by reference to the opposite and more objective pole, with which is associated the principle of respect for the dignity of being.

We saw earlier that Kant is implicated in this dialectic, not only in Bauman's return to Kant's "mystery of morality inside me," but also in the obvious association of my "respect for the dignity of being" with Kant's respect for persons. The dialectic between solidarity and objectivity which I wish to sustain is highlighted in the tension between the positions of Kant and Hume. Kant's project is to base our ethics in reason, in a direct challenge to Hume's project to base our ethics in feeling. This tension between Kant and Hume is where I wish to situate the dialectic I am postulating between a principled moral commitment to a respect for the dignity of being at the objective pole, and a visceral motivation to act by virtue of face to face responsibility at the pole of solidarity. As a thoroughgoing empiricist, Hume denied that reason or rationality could play a role in morality. His "is-to-ought" fallacy reminds us that we cannot draw normative conclusions from empirical premises.[48] For Hume, we are thus moved to moral action by *sentiment* and not by reason or empirical experience. For my purposes with respect to the dialectical morality posited here, Hume is located at the pole of solidarity, where moral action is viscerally motivated by the responsibility associated with face to face interaction. For Kant it is our "practical reason," our intuitive rationality, which informs our moral decisions and action.[49] His categorical imperative is rationally derived and exists at the level of a foundational and universal moral law. His reference to "the mystery of morality inside me" is a reference to this universal moral law, or conscience. Kant is thus situated at the objective or foundational pole of the dialectic, where my "respect for the dignity of being," associated with Kant's respect for persons, functions as a reference with respect to which we are able to recognize practices as enhancing or diminishing the dignity of being.

To summarize, the ethics of integrity which I have postulated is constituted by a respect for the dignity of being and by responsibility for the moral choices we make. Respect for the dignity of being is associated with a Kantian deontological ethics which I have located at the objective or foundational pole of the dialectical morality posited here. Responsibility for moral choices is associated with Hume's

visceral morality which I have located at the pole of the dialectic identified by Rorty's notion of solidarity, by Levinas's face to face situationally responsible morality, and by Bauman's moral responsibility to the other. To repeat by way of conclusion, moral action is wrought by this tension between objectivity and solidarity, between foundational commitment and face to face responsibility, as we strive towards "as much intersubjective agreement as possible," towards a discursively principled morality. We are viscerally motivated by Levinas's and Bauman's face to face moral responsibility, by the Rortyan pole of solidarity, and we may avoid the cruel consequences of a strong relativism and its *carte-blanche* morality consequent on a withdrawal of commitment by reference to the opposite and more objective pole, with which is associated the principle of respect for the dignity of being. Moral action and moral judgement are always, aporetically if you will, situated in this dialectic, and we should be ever mindful of its polarities as we come together in search of a discursively principled morality dynamically situated on the continuum which spans the poles of solidarity and objectivity. Conscience spans the continuum, but defined differently towards each end. Toward the pole of solidarity, conscience is understood in terms of Hume's sentiment, Bauman's and Levinas's face-to-face responsibility, and Rorty's solidarity. Toward the pole of objectivity, conscience is understood in terms of Kant's respect for persons by virtue of the categorical imperative, and in terms of a principled commitment to a respect for the dignity of being that expands Taylor's horizon of significance to a universal horizon. Both understandings of conscience are consonant with the ethics of integrity. And the ethics of integrity in turn both celebrates and is constituted by both poles of the dialectic.

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29. Ibid., 9,10.

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