Ethics – Morality – School

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*I*n 2019, we celebrated thirty years since the Velvet Revolution. We celebrated the desired change in the political regime and the transition to democracy, including the change in economic and social conditions; in short, the restoration of freedom. The celebrations were mainly about successes, the raising of people's standard of living, etc. Speakers returned to the past in black-and-white speeches. It was as if they had forgotten Jan Werich's observation that *"Every era has a gown and that gown has a train. When the era passes, the gown is gone, but the train is still passing"* (Janoušek, 1994, pp. 12-13). In other words: after the change in the political system, we continue to pull the burden of the past behind us and, in many cases, add to the problems and troubles that produce and permit the present era.

It is no coincidence that the Czech education system has boasted of its quantitative indicators (e.g. increasing the number of secondary schools, increasing the number of public and private schools, massifying secondary and higher education, and increasing teachers' salaries). The problems related to the continuous reforms of the school system, repeated efforts to reduce the demands on the training of prospective teachers, a decline in the quality of teaching and teaching in many primary and secondary schools, and, in many fields, a decline in the quality of graduates, were somewhat left behind. However, what was not mentioned during the celebrations was the ethical and moral aspects of the functioning of Czech schools and the *open, unresolved problems* that relate to these. They start with dealing seriously with the past in education (see e.g. Cach, 1991; Svatoš, 2010; Mareš, 2010; Zounek, Knotová, & Šimáně, 2017) and end with dealing with the present (Dvořáková & Smrčka, 2018).

By interconnecting three words – **ethics**, **morality**, and **school** – we open up a topic that is gratifying and at the same time ungratifying. Almost everyone has something to say on this topic. By way of examples: pupils, teachers, school heads, school inspection staff, parents, philosophers, theologians, psychologists, and researchers. The editors of the Pedagogika journal decided to prepare a monothematic issue on this topic more than a year ago and you have before you the issue that was announced.

Before mentioning the set of articles in this issue, let us remind those of you who have already forgotten of the difference between the first two terms. **Ethics** is a theoretical discipline that examines the values and principles that guide people's decisions when they are free to choose. Ethics assesses their actions in terms of good and evil. It considers what is generally right and wrong; it says what one should do and what one should not. It seeks to find a deeper rationale for evaluative judgments.

In contrast, the concept of **morality** is closer to real life. It is interested in a set of values that are important to a community of people, as well as a set of rules that the members of a community recognise. The individual, the group, or the population (in accordance with general opinion) consider such rules binding for their behaviour. There are two approaches. One can either study the rules that individuals or groups of people truly follow in their behaviour in everyday life, and then it is a *descriptive* approach, or one can examine a) what is right or wrong behaviour for

individuals or groups according to their internal beliefs, and b) a set of principles that the members of a given community should follow in their decision making. Then it is a *normative* approach.

There is always a tension between ethics and morality, as well as between normative and descriptive approaches to morality. The causes of this tension are that human deeds and behaviour are never strictly normative. Normally, we always make demands, but human deeds and behaviour are always based on individual psychological dispositions in combination with a shared value ladder, the peculiarities of the situation in which a person is choosing, and the consequences they expect. Thus, the ethical aspect, in our approach the **educational** aspect, is always a challenge, in other words, a problem that can only be solved as an "eternal question". This is also because within ethical problems and norms of evaluation there is a development over time. Normative principles and real opinions are always (or, more precisely, they should be) confronted. The institutionalized form of this confrontation, which fulfils the socializing function, is school education.

This is particularly true of the areas of education that include the social sciences and humanities. While the ethical level of exact and natural science subjects is much more obvious in terms of their subject matter (e.g. the established truth, valid under defined conditions), in social and humanities subjects it is necessary to deal with an open thesaurus of information, which, thanks to today's digital world, is

virtually unverifiable for the most part. Any judgment of this nature is a value judgment; it is a kind of "verdict". The unmanageable amount of information of all sorts of quality and material relevance that each and every one of us is bombarded with necessarily raises questions of an ethical nature: What is true information? What are the starting points? Are they relevant? If the information is true, what position should one take? And many more questions of this type can be asked. Therefore, it is necessary to ask questions about the assumptions, the cultural and noetic establishment of our judgments and opinions and their subsequent decisions – possibly even life decisions. Are we to adopt a (strictly) normative or descriptive interpretation strategy? Should I judge or seek to understand the situation, which means conducting a critical appraisal of the "facts" that are presented?

Our vision of the world tends to exact and scientific knowledge; we want a clear answer to our questions about the world. Is such an answer always possible? Certainly, there are situations in which clear answers are needed and are the norm. There is no need to mention that many ethical issues are involved. But we live in an era that is often referred to as postmodern. And it is characterized as a "radical plurality", the product of which is either a difficult possibility or even a loss of orientation in a rapidly changing society and its new impulses, challenges, and warnings. Radically speaking, as Hamlet put it, "the time is out of joint". However, in this time too (perhaps particularly in this time), as

Hamlet also knew, certainty is sought. Postmodernism can thus be described as a good diagnosis of the era, which, however, does not in itself bring and find a cure.

In such a situation, the importance of school and school education is emphasized and increased. On one hand, it should provide basic "anchors" for thought, relevant knowledge in their contexts. In addition to specific knowledge and skills, it ought to educate to the order of thought, to awareness of the order of exact thinking, humanitarian thinking, and aesthetic feeling. Value judgments and ethical ones form an integral part of these. And all with a future perspective. What are the questions and how will we address the environmental problems and challenges we face, how are we to integrate ethics into the school curriculum, and what is (and what will be) the teacher's position and responsibilities in emerging situations that we can only partially estimate?

This monothematic issue of Pedagogika includes five studies. The first study, *Ethical and moral aspects of school education: The situation in the Czech Republic* (Mareš, 2019) is an overview. It is devoted to the teaching of ethical topics at Czech basic and secondary schools, Czech publications on ethics education at school, and an overview of Czech empirical research. The second study, *Moral education in secondary schools: What, how, and why?* (Hejduk, 2019), is theoretical. It reflects on the possibility of applying a philosophical approach to moral education in secondary schools. Students may be encouraged to think that there are higher values of truth,

beauty, and goodness that lie on a higher level than everyday concerns, but at the same time that truth and beauty can be revealed even more closely in everyday life. The moral education of adolescents is needed to balance the growing information and consumer character of contemporary society and to give meaning to the lives of every individual involved. The third study, entitled *The activity "At the Swallow's Nest" and its use in developing environmental ethics in primary school pupils* (Jančaříková, 2019), is a research study. Its focus is on environmental ethics. Basic school pupils (6-13 years old) were asked to solve a specific problem situation. The results show that basic school pupils can already discuss environmental problems, learn to solve them, and justify their solutions. Well-thought-out pedagogical interventions can thus become a useful tool for environmental moral education. The fourth study, with the title *Subjective responsibility of Spanish university teachers: A qualitative pilot study* (Pečivová, 2019), is a research study. She chose an interesting topic: the subjectively perceived responsibility of the teacher for whether his/her pupils are successful or unsuccessful at school. After all, this type of teacher responsibility is an important part of a teacher's professional identity. If a teacher attributes students' successes only to themselves and failures only to the pupils, then this has serious implications for the pupils' learning. The fifth study, entitled *Development of a tool for determining moral distress among teachers in basic schools* (Váchová, 2019), is a research one. It focuses on decision-making processes in the work of contemporary teachers that are associated with morally dilemmatic situations. These are cases where the teacher has to act against his/her beliefs and submit to the pressure of the school management or his colleagues or parents. Then he/she experiences moral distress, with all its negative effects.

The five studies published here address the above-mentioned general ethical issues in one way or another. However, they are, of course, only partial probes. For this reason, this special issue of Pedagogika is a challenge, appealing to the need for interdisciplinary discussion on a topic which, it is becoming increasingly obvious, is extremely serious. Because this topic is actually our future.

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