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ETHICS IN HIGHER EDUCATION BETWEEN ENGAGED REFLECTION AND EMBODIED PRESENCE STYLES

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Abstracto

El resultado de la ética en la educación superior es, ni más ni menos, que lograr inculcar el empoderamiento, la pasión, la compasión y el sentido de propósito y longevidad. La ética no puede ser neutral, sino que abarca la totalidad del compromiso humano con todo el mundo creado y, por lo tanto, todo el sistema de plausibilidad que guía todos los procesos de toma de decisiones³.

. Por un lado, la ética es reflexiva, ya que se origina en la estimulación intelectual y depende de cadenas continuas de discursos, y por otro lado, está orientada hacia la acción, propensa a ser aplicada en

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entornos concretos. Esta comprensión fundamental permite desplegar el reto y la oportunidad de la ética en la enseñanza superior en conjunción con tres puntos principales, cada uno de ellos asociado a una breve viñeta de caso: La ética en la enseñanza superior como tarea formativa e informativa; La ética en la enseñanza superior como tarea de promoción; La ética en la enseñanza superior como tarea de invitación.

Palabras clave: ética, educación superior, formación, información, reflexión comprometida, presencia encarnada, creación de consenso, defensa, invitación.

Abstract

The result of ethics in higher education is no more and no less than instilling empowerment, passion, compassion, and a sense of purpose and longevity. Ethics cannot be neutral, but encompasses the entire human commitment to the entire created world and, therefore, the entire plausibility system that guides all decision-making processes.

. On the one hand, ethics is reflective, since it originates from intellectual stimulation and depends on continuous chains of discourses, and on the other hand, it is oriented towards action, prone to being applied in specific settings. This fundamental understanding allows the challenge and opportunity of ethics in higher education to unfold in conjunction with three main points, each associated with a brief case vignette: Ethics in higher education as a formative and informative task; Ethics in higher education as a promotional task; Ethics in higher education as an invitation task.

Key words: ethics, higher education, training, information, committed reflection, embodied presence, consensus building, defense, invitation.

Ethics in Higher Education

“The calling of the teacher. There is no craft more privileged. To awaken in another human being powers, dreams beyond one's own; to induce in others a love for that which one loves; to make of one's inward present their future; that is a threefold adventure like no other.”

*George Steiner, Lessons of the Masters*⁴

There are probably not more powerful words than George Steiner's to describe the noble task of teachers, all teachers, and academic teachers in higher education more specifically. The outcome of ethics in higher education is in this sense, not more and not less, than succeeding in instilling empowerment, passion, compassion and a sense of purpose and longevity. However, such an endeavour cannot constitute a linear, one-dimensional or mechanical process. Rather, ethics in higher education has to be understood as a cycle of layered and reiterated interactions.

Before embarking on these interactions in detail, it will be useful to define – or at least to describe the understanding of ethics in higher education. The starting point of this investigation is to understand ethics as *engaged reflection and embodied presence*. This perception is informed by the insight that ethics emerges, both theoretically and practically, out of an intentional process of being and becoming in and thinking about the world. Engaged reflection, because ethics demands a conscious position with regard to a moral end. Being in the world prompts discernment as a principally open process of reflection on what it means to be in the world and how the web of relationships therein have to be built and described.

⁴ See George Steiner, *Lessons of the Masters*, Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2004.

Therefore, ethics cannot be neutral, it encompasses the totality of the human engagement with the entire created world, and hence the whole system of plausibility which guides all decision-making processes. At the same time, it is the articulated imagination about the difference between the existing reality and the hoped-for reality. Ethics is articulated in the space between the imperfect status quo and the aspiration for an existence responding to ideal normative criteria. In this permanent tension ethics finds itself, is expressed, contested, negotiated and created afresh. On the one hand, ethics is reflective as it is originating from intellectual stimulation and is dependent on continuous chains of discourses, and on the other hand, it is action-oriented, prone to be applied in concrete settings. The discursive, reflective strands cannot be divorced from the action-oriented strands, unless ethics would become self-fulfilling and inward-oriented.

This foundational understanding leads me to unfold the challenge and opportunity of ethics in higher education in conjunction with three focal points, each one of them associated with one brief case vignette:

1. Ethics in higher education as formative and informative task
2. Ethics in higher education as advocating task
3. Ethics in higher education as inviting task

I explain myself by expanding on each of the three focal points. First, I will reflect upon ethics in higher education as formative and informative task. To stress this dimension, goes to say, that there is an intrinsic relationship, and yet a distinction, between forming and informing. If ethics is methodologically (not with regard to its content) adequately described as engaged reflection and embodied presence, it calls all those engaged in higher education into the responsibility to nurture this ethos, this attitude and way of seeing and discerning. In this sense, ethics becomes a formative exercise: it builds awareness, a way of seeing and interpreting the realities in relation to a hoped-for reality.

This cannot be imposed or inculcated, hence the difference to a purely informative task. During one of my teaching assignments in the Democratic Republic of Congo, a female student offers a ‘thick description’⁵ of her experience of the conflictive and violent situation at the boarder to Rwanda. “Perhaps,” she reflects, “we have not learned to genuinely look inside ourselves, and our society. Perhaps, we would be able to build bridges of reconciliation with those we stigmatised as our enemies, if we know who we are as humans first, and not as members of one ethnic group or nation.”

It seems that higher education traditionally privileges the informative over against the formative task. The transmission of knowledge is emphasised as primary objective, as if knowledge can be acquired as a material good and as if it were about a mere physical transfer. Paulo Freire critiqued and guarded against such an understanding of education.⁶ Education, as per his perception, has to be a liberating and emancipative process, which capacitates individuals and communities to read, to interpret and ultimately to transform their respective societal environments. From this perspective, ethics as reflective and embodied experience appears as a prerequisite of a transformational agenda that reposes on an ethos and on a cluster of values around justice, integrity and truth: the refusal to accept the world as it is.

Against this background, the second focus becomes plausible. Ethics constitutes also a field for an advocating task in higher education. It builds critical awareness and tools for addressing the uncomfortable disparity between the world in which we find ourselves, and the one, we aspire to build. This constitutes, paradoxically, a labour, an intentional effort of estrangement. In recognising, for instance, one’s own situation

⁵ See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basis Books, 1973.

⁶ See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017, rev. ed. (translated from Portuguese original, 1968).

of privilege, or by contrast, one's individual and collective experience of woundedness, one is able to build ethical responsiveness. This means that ethical responsibility, moral obligation and responsiveness to the situation of others can only grow through the experience of strangeness: the bewildering experience that *the Self and the other* are akin, and yet are and have to remain *the Other*.⁷ Higher education can cultivate and nurture an environment in which the discovery about the simultaneous common humaneness and fundamental difference can be made. Ethics provides a theoretical and practical framework for understanding and defining humanity in relation with all creation as non-invasive and irreducible to one uniformed appearance. In times of growing enmities fuelled by populist tendencies, such a task cannot be underestimated, as it is foundational in order to counter the commodification of life in all its form. Ethics, even in its contested form, offers at least the opportunity to express and to exchange upon criteria on how societal life should be lived.

Again, a case vignette from the higher education classroom can help to illustrate this advocating task of ethics. I recall a situation in one of my ethics classes: "May I ask if you are racist?" Absolute silence follows a Nigerian student's question to his North American white classmate. In what may be perceived as audacious utterance and personal offence, lies the core of the ethical quest: we can only

⁷ See Levinas, Emmanuel, *Totality and Infinity. An essay on Exteriority*, Dordrecht/Pittsburgh: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers and Duquesne University Press, 1969 (translated from French original, 1961); Butler, Judith, "Precarious Life, Vulnerability and the Ethics of Cohabitation", in: *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, Volume 26, Number 2, 2012: 134-151. Albertson Fineman, Martha / Grear, Anna (eds), *Vulnerability. Reflections on a New Ethical Foundation in Law and Politics*, London etc.: Routledge, 2016; Volf, Miroslav, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005; see also Shildrick, Margrit, *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self*, London: SAGE Publications, 2001.

understand the deepest fears, veiled assumptions, and barely articulated hopes, if we dare to translate them into narration, into speech. This is the only possibility for humans to cross the barrier into the experience of the other. Assumed strangeness in form of an ontological attribution, was in this case the beginning of an honest conversation on how different societal and historical locations are interwoven with individual judgments, and how an ethical advocacy – not in the sense of speaking *of* the other, but *with* the other – becomes a critical, existential lens for ethical discernment.

Thirdly, ethics in higher education is about inviting people into a continuous dialogue and process of consensus building. Ethics itself becomes a paradigm of invitation⁸ in societies in which building normative consensus becomes increasingly tense and sometime conflictive. Here, the task of those engaged in higher education is to accompany especially the emerging generation of scholars to develop their own critical standpoints and to become vibrant and ambassadors for normative consensus building in societies. In this regard ethics may be understood as important field, perhaps the most important, as it offers a qualitative perspective on how plural societies can engage in an ethical discourse on how they want to live together. The perspective of inviting one another⁹ to ethical conversations can be one into which higher education initiates students, so that they can experience and practice models by which ethics transcends the normative rigidity of right versus wrong.

“I have learned”, said a former child soldier from South Sudan, in another of my ethics classes “that it is not only about me, and my

⁸ See Plasger, Georg, “Einladende Ethik. Zu einem neuen evangelischen Paradigma in einer pluralen Gesellschaft”, in: *Kerygma und Dogma* 31, (2005): 126-156.

⁹ See Novak, John M., Denise E. Armstrong, Brendan Browne, *Leading for Educational Lives: Inviting and Sustaining Imaginative Acts in a Connected World*, Rotterdam/Boston/Taipei: Sense Publishers, 2014.

survival, but how I can, together with others, contribute to transforming our lives. I want to invite others to do the same.”