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# Narrative Structures in Education from an Ethical Perspective

## ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to reflect on how many ethical problems concerning education relate to the narrative structures that can be found in the education process. These considerations, rooted in the works of Michael Oakeshott, Erik H. Erikson, Richard Pring, and Arthur C. Danto, among others, refer primarily to three kinds of narratives: instrumental, objective, and subjective. Instrumental narratives, which are used by teachers in didactic processes (e.g., fables or anecdotes), are discussed here in the context of the problem of representing marginalized groups in the school system. Objective narratives, about the outside world and its social institutions, are related to the moral rule of Erikson, which is that one should do to another that which will advance the other's growth, even as it advances one's own. Subjective narrations, which teachers as well as learners tell to themselves, are shown here in combination with the need for the moral education of youths. In all of these examples, we see narrative structures as a good formal point of reference for a discussion of the moral problems in education.

## KEYWORDS

narrative, narrative structures, education, ethics of education, fables

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## Introduction

It seems that, at the very beginning of our considerations, it is easy to yield to the illusion that education and narrative should be treated as areas that belong to two totally different cultural areas. The first one certainly arouses associations with various formal institutions (school, university, etc.), with codification, or even with normativism. It is regulated by the law and managed by a superior as it is ruled by different systems. Even apart from those legalistic associations, in contexts that are much less regulated by modern detailed laws, education still appears as something serious, focused on transferring knowledge, and determined by a rigid dynamics of the roles of a student and teacher. Narrative, in turn, although limited by a similar dynamics of roles (narrator and recipient), is much more elusive, informal and pluralized. It takes very different forms; it is a phenomenon in culture, a process of telling stories, a free product of human activity or creativity. Basing only on these simple, initial observations, we can notice that, due to the lack of a better definition, cultural space that is characteristic of education is “hard” space typical of law, social agreement or regulated human relationships. Narrative, in turn, can be located in “soft” space that escapes classification and leaves us a lot of freedom. This division of culture into the “hard” and “soft” sphere is compliant with the modern intellectual tendency to postulate similar dualisms<sup>1</sup>, but it does not mean that it fails to reflect the nature of the thing properly. It does not matter if it actually is so; what is important is the fact that using this metaphor we can clearly see how education and narrative seem separated from each other.

However, some researchers claim that we can find something that exists at the intersection of those two cultural spheres in which we have located those two phenomena. Those researchers believe that there is something that connects education and narrative. They present such an approach to “hard” sphere of education that allows them to consider it from the “soft” perspective of narrative. In the article

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1 It seems that conceptualization of phenomena from the social, cultural and other non-physical domains, such as law, science or even facts following the dualism “hard ≠ soft” was made popular in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century along with the common adoption of the division into *hard and soft skills*. In 1943, Frederic Charles Bartlett (1946: 145), pioneer of cultural psychology, was the first to use it with reference to culture as such.

entitled “Narrative and Education,” F. Michael Connelly and D. Jean Clandinin go beyond the traditional ways of institutional interpretation of education and search for it, as they say, within the “horizons,” i.e. touching experiences of our lives; in our own narratives about ourselves “that were hard to [...] ignore or reduce” (Connelly, Clandinin 1995: 75).<sup>2</sup> While doing this, they reach for the considerations of the philosophers of education, such as Michael Oakeshott, but also for the writings of experts in psychology, e.g. Erik H. Erikson. Such authors are much focused on a person’s inner life and the way they experience life.<sup>3</sup> An approach that is a little more technical and less related to philosophy is presented by other researchers, such as Hunter McEwan or Ivor Goodson who concentrate on the methodological issue of *narrative inquiry* (Fenstermacher 1997: 120). Although their research is focused on the practical application of narrative, it touches the very essence of the problem of the relationship between narrative multifacetedness and our everyday efforts made in the area of education.

It is that perspective of the narrative approach to education, represented by the above-mentioned thinkers and having, as it seems, strong justification in the books they wrote on this topic, that will be applied in this brief text in which I would like to focus on moral problems related to education. Such problems actually exist because, as Richard Pring claimed in a very convincing manner (2001: 101–112), all educational practice involves actions related to moral issues. As such, in various contexts in which it functions, such practice is an interesting subject for ethics, which is why I would like to present several remarks that explore its morality within the space in which it is connected with narrative. There is no doubt that one of the issues taken into account by a researcher analyzing this space is the issue of the truthfulness of the narrative mentioned by authors such as Walter Doyle or Denis Phillips (Fenstermacher 1997: 120). However, since it refers to more complex epistemic issues and it has already

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2 Translation of quotations used in this text (unless otherwise stated)—M.J.

3 As emphasized by Terry Nardin (2020) in his text about him, Oakeshott is first of all famous for his writings on political and moral life. Erikson, in turn (1998) paid a lot of attention to the psychoanalytic theory of a man’s psychosocial development, without omitting the issue of the historical nature of human life.

been analyzed in many texts, in this paper we will discuss other, more interesting questions related to contemporary moral dilemmas.

Obviously, ethics and narrative are extremely complex phenomena, so what is necessary from the very beginning is a more precise approach to what is being discussed here. Thus, in this paper ethics will be perceived in a broad, pre-theoretical manner, as a reflection on moral problems, i.e. problems that are connected with the rules of our actions and their evaluation according to different systems of values. A reference to specific ethical systems is not necessary, because the considerations do not include solving problems, but problems as such, as well as their understanding and formulating. In the text, I will particularly quote four exemplary ethical problems related to education which are also much discussed in the books on the subject: representation (Hurley 2005), coherence and authenticity (Danto 1985; Pring 2001), and the origin of moral education (Connelly, Clandinin 1995). While discussing them, education will be treated as a context within which these problems occur and to which they refer, and as a sphere of moral actions, both on the part of a teacher and a student. Since the above-mentioned problems may occur on each stage of formal education, as well as in non-institutional educational situations, we have to take into account the broadest possible scope although, in case of certain problems, we will also make references to specific stages of education in which these problems are particularly clear (e.g. early school didactics or education of adolescents). Finally, the expression “narrative structures” refers to a specific theoretical frame or research perspective within which we can distinguish narrativity as a particular feature of reality produced by a human being and a key to its understanding. The point of reference for understanding narrative will particularly include the ideas of Arthur C. Danto (1985).

Oakeshott used to claim that:

[...] none of us is born as a human being; each of us is what he/she has learnt to be. This means that a person is what they have learnt to perceive, think and do, and that differences among human beings are differences in what those beings have learnt in their lives. [...] this connection between learning and being human means that each of us is our own “story” played by ourselves; and that the expression “human nature” is only something we use to denote the form of commitment which is common to us and impossible to reject: to become through learning (Oakeshott 2001: 6).

There is no doubt that this reflection, which is typical of a thinker fascinated with the concept of human life as a private “history,” was based on a deep belief in a forming role of education that defines not only what each student will know as a future adult, but also the way in which he/she will think, and, as a result, it defines what he/she will become. This belief can also be referred to narrative structures which accompany us in education.

Let us now think about the basic ways in which narrative can occur in the processes described by Oakeshott. There are at least three of such basic ways; perhaps more. In education, and in learning in general, we can certainly distinguish subjective narratives, i.e. narratives that refer both to students and teachers. These are narratives within which the way of understanding ourselves, and what we are able to say about ourselves and our life, is shaped. They are particularly interesting for psychologists, such as Erikson, if we only assume that they can influence human life understood as a psychological process, or that they are the basis for that process, as suggested in the theory of narrative identity. Another kind of narratives within education includes objective narratives. They refer to the external world and its rules, to the way in which society functions, and to what is perceived as a valid norm. Obviously, we can only speak like this if we adopt the assumptions of the continually popular metaphor of “culture as a text.” In the light of this metaphor, school is the same cultural space as work places or mass media, and it often duplicates the same narratives. What makes school different is the narrative sub-class related to itself: the narrative on what education is, what it should serve, how it should be carried out, etc. Finally, the third kind of narrative includes narratives used in an instrumental manner. This includes stories, anecdotes, or even thought experiments used by teachers in their work. The advantage of implementing a story into a fictional (or even factual, but properly contextualized) lesson is that it makes listeners potentially strongly interested in the lesson, which also has certain consequences. In the next part of the article, I will present examples of four ethical problems related to education and the way in which each of them can be approached in a narrative perspective—with reference to subjective, objective and instrumental narratives, starting from the latter. The objective of this text is to

indicate, based on those four selected examples, that at least some ethical problems can be analyzed from the narrative perspective.

## Instrumental narratives and the problem of openness to representation

The didactic function of a story has been known and appreciated since ancient times, or even earlier. One of the ancient authors who were aware of it was Aesop, author of fables. The stories he wrote were seemingly simple, but, as indicated by Leslie Kurke (2011: 125–158), using them, Aesop was able to oppose the existing, pre-philosophical model of knowledge. According to Kurke, what Aesop did was “political counselling through fables” (2011: 156). His activity was certainly directed towards adults and it was more similar to a rhetorical discourse or public debate typical of the ancient Greece than to didactics as such. Indeed, Aesop sometimes criticized and parodied adopted didactical practices (Kurke 2011: 202–238). This, however, does not change the fact that his works became the basis for the creation of a fable as a kind of narrative that was later perceived as dedicated to children and used to give them important lessons of life<sup>4</sup>, and that also had a complicated cultural history in Europe.

There is a good reason why I am writing about instrumental narratives, starting from fables, which are special examples of them. Not only do they accompany us from the beginning of our civilization and they are used as an educational tool (not only in the formal educational process), but they also carry a clearly moral message. Examples can be found very close to us. Young generations of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries are well familiar with fables teaching them about the value of friendship, love or being good to others. This results, *inter alia*, from the effort of cartoon producers, such as Walt Disney Company, which was making such movies for children in 40s and 50s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and from the ideas of other film producers that developed

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4 It is worth mentioning the fact that, writing the history of children’s literature, Seth Lerer (2008: 35–56) did not hesitate to reach for Aesop’s fables. As Lerer emphasized himself, it was not only due to the original nature of those texts, but due to the way in which they were interpreted later—already in the times of Plato.

that idea in 90s. Continuous popularity of cartoons, subsequent editions of classical fairy tales by the Grimm brothers, film and game adaptations of such stories, and the fact that they are still directed to children—all these factors show how strongly education, especially moral one, is connected (also in case of the youngest pupils) with instrumentally used narratives. Today we live in the times when teachers are actively encouraged to using proper anecdotes directed to their listeners (Sajduk 2015: 58), and many teachers strive to draw young people's attention with modern communication devices, such as YouTube videos or video games, which are still rooted in the ancient art of telling stories. Thus, we have to be aware of possible consequences, including ethical ones, of reaching for narratives in educational activities.

The issue of the kind of stories that are adequate for children in particular age groups has always been the subject of discussion of teachers, but also authors of entertainment products, lawmakers, journalists, and even citizens concerned for children's good.<sup>5</sup> It is very good that such discussions occur, as children have to be protected against possibly harmful content, which is reflected not only in many ethical systems, but also in international legal regulations (Lievens, Valcke, Stevens 2015). However, it is also worth discussing other issues than the age at which children should be allowed to watch, e.g. erotic scenes. These are aspects related to film contents, but we should also focus on formal aspects which refer to narrative structures occurring in fables and other stories for children, as well as to the way in which such structures are implemented.

Didactic stories used in the context of institutional education (fairy tales, fables, humorous stories) are not and should not be neutral in what messages they convey. On the contrary: like all that is of educational nature (I am again reaching for Pring, but also, partially, for Oakeshott), we use such stories to exert a specific influence on the listeners. Their very persuasive nature is reflected in the form they

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5 The activity of the latter can be noticed, e.g. in the website dedicated to parents and teachers: "Common Sense Media" (<https://www.commonsense-media.org/>, access: 03.04.2022) where people publish film reviews in which they recommend films adequate to specific age groups and give advice related to possibly harmful content of those films, such as violence, vulgar language or sex scenes.

adopt because they are narratives that aim at a specific conclusion, i.e. the moral. That is why, they function within a narrative structure that can be described as “open” at the beginning and, at the same time, “closed” at the end. At the beginning it opens to the widest possible group of recipients, e.g. through the main character with whom the recipient may easily identify, and at the end it closes the pool of available interpretations, imposing a certain lesson on the recipient who had been engaged in the story. Such imposition of the lesson does not have to consist in providing an off-hand punchline that contains one well-turned moral, such as, e.g. “a friend in need is a friend indeed,” because, as a matter of fact, the same effect can be achieved through any other narrative tools due to which the recipient becomes aware of the fact that what seemed a neutral story to him/her actually referred to what the moral is about. Thus, the structure is as follows: at the beginning, all the recipients are encouraged to get engaged in the story (to listen to it); then the action of the story unfolds, and finally the narrative ends in one specific point (the punchline) which the recipients reach along with the narrator.

What is particularly important here is not the ordering function of the narrative structure, which will be later analyzed on other examples, but its engaging function. According to Sławomir Chrost:

[...] a child identifies himself/herself with a specific character, accompanies the character in his/her quest, feels the character’s emotions, such as joy, sorrow, or pain, fights with the enemies, and takes up challenges, transferring the child’s own experiences, emotions and needs into the world of fables. Due to such identification, the child is made familiar with a whole range of emotions, feelings and attitudes. He/she learns socially acceptable behaviors, as well as those which are unacceptable (Chrost 2016: 62).

This creates a very interesting ethical space, starting from the very structure, and not from the content of the story that is being told. Such a space appears at the very beginning, and it originates from the openness of the act of transferring a narrative. It is such openness that generates a moral challenge, as it actually constitutes a non-neutral postulate which requires equal and total fulfilment.

According to the silent assumption, the story that is being told actually opens equally to each recipient (in this case: to each student). However, is it really so in reality? Let us consider the above-mentioned



animated adaptations of fairy tales from the Walt Disney Company. They are popular around the world due to international distribution, numerous professional locations and multi-channel marketing managed by foreign branches of the Walt Disney Company. It might seem that their films are models of narratives directed to all children, so they are good didactic tools, especially in early school pedagogy. The truth is, however, that Disney films are controversial for modern pedagogues. Dorothy L. Hurley (2005: 221–232) presents an important opinion on this subject, as she claims that in those films we can come across clear binary color coding, such as the dichotomy: “black/white” and “good/evil,” which does not make it difficult for children whose skin is not white to understand the story, but makes it hard for them to identify with the story and use it to build their own, positive identity. Seemingly open narrative structure is, in fact, closed to some recipients due to harmful stereotypes which it (consciously or not) duplicates. And I wish to emphasize that this is not a problem related to the content of such animated movies, or only to their content, but, as I have already mentioned, it reaches to the very core of those stories, i.e. to the narrative structure that dictates their course.

In this way, it is from the side of the analysis of narrative structures that we reach to the problem of representation known in modern research on the media. This problem has been many times formulated in the context of non-white, non-heteronormative or non-cissexual people, although, in the educational space, especially in more uniform communities, it rather refers to children with different skills or interests. Let us notice that in the above considerations we derived the real need for varied representation in didactic narratives (the requirement that they must be open to everyone) not from the current political and social discourse the strong ideologization of which makes the topic difficult, but from the very definition of didactic narrative, from a very simple structure within which it must function.

There is no doubt that ignoring some students in the didactic process due to a feature of their appearance or character, even in such a seemingly trivial and harmless manner as telling a story that is not addressed to them, is something unethical in the teaching practice. This fact, however, indicates not only the necessity to carefully and sensitively choose the presented narratives, but also the moral obligation to apply those narratives. It is because, if the teacher’s task is

to not only transfer knowledge, but also constitute a moral model for students, one of necessary elements of education includes the need for a student to identify with the teacher, i.e., to some extent, see the teacher as someone the young person would like to be in future.<sup>6</sup> However, if there are too many differences between a teacher and a student, which often happens in multicultural communities, such direct identification may be very difficult. One of the ways to prevent it is, as suggested by Dan Goldhaber, Roddy Theobald and Christopher Tien (2019: 25–30), is making the team of teachers in a given school as varied as the group of students. But if this is impossible, we still have stories about characters that are different than teachers yet representing the same moral discipline and being a valuable pattern to follow. Such characters especially include universal characters, such as anthropomorphic animals known from some information campaigns directed to children. In this way, the history of didactic fables makes a circle, once again coming back to the ideas popular at the time of Aesop.

### Objective narratives and the problem of coherence and authenticity

Let us now move to considerations on objective narratives enlightened by the following quotation from Erikson:

[...] I would perceive adolescence [...] as a person's stage of life that is open, both from the cognitive side and from the emotional side, to new ideological imageries that are able to order fantasy and energy of the new generation. Depending on the historical moment, they will either strengthen or oppose the existing order, or they will promise the youth a future, more radical or more traditional, reality through which they may help them overcome uncertainty related to identity (Erikson 1998: 86).

Narratives on what the world and the society actually are, are given to us in didactic processes already at very early stages of life, but Erikson rightly notes that what he calls “ideological imageries,”

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6 Pring emphasized that a teacher's role includes “introduction of (usually) young people into the valuable way of perceiving the world, experiencing the world, and approaching others in a more human and empathic manner” (Pring 2001: 106), i.e., in other words, a teacher is to be a model of someone who looks at the world in such a way.

which in practice often takes a narrative form, becomes a key phenomenon a little later, i.e. in adolescence. Moreover, he comes to the right conclusion that it is during adolescence, which, for a young person, is the time of shaping identity (Erikson 1998: 67–70), when ethical space is created in which people responsible for transferring those “imageries” to the youth must act “with a strong sense of morality and concern for the ethical aspect” (Erikson 1998: 86). He even formulates the general ethical principle which, in his opinion, is adequate to this situation. It says: “Do to another what will advance the other’s growth to the same extent as it will advance our own growth” (Erikson 1998: 86).<sup>7</sup> It is worth asking whether (and if at all) this principle of Erikson can be analyzed through the reference to narrative structures ruling objective narratives in didactic processes, and what ethical problems are connected with such a principle.

Let us start from the role of giving a certain structure to such narratives, i.e. the ordering role, if we are to follow Erikson’s thought (1998: 86). One of the basic features of a story is that from the seeming chaos, which human experience often is, it elicits a certain order, a series of reasons and consequences, a structure consisting of agents and events in which they participate. Danto, who was aware of this, in his considerations on the role of narrative in history as a science (and in historical practice), emphasized that “what people usually want and expect when asking for explanation is just telling a real story,” and—at the same time—“when we ask someone for explanation, the person will automatically start to tell us a story” (Danto 1985: 233). Nevertheless, taking into account that basic need for explaining or ordering, which narratives are to satisfy in us, we cannot simply assume that, in the situation we are discussing, narrative structures guarantee the equal importance of students and teachers required by Erikson, and that teachers use such structures to make students perceive the world in a way that is as ordered as theirs. It is because the adoption of such an assumption would make us fall into the vicious circle (the *petitio principii* mistake). However, we can further explore the thought of Danto who adopts the explanatory role of narrative

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7 In this place, Erikson refers to his own considerations presented in the lecture on the golden ethical rule (Erikson 1994: 185–188), while in *The Life Cycle Completed*, he provides a slightly different formulation of this rule and he uses it in a more direct manner in the context of education.

as given due to the nature of the *explanandum* itself which he sees in the changeability of things.

“When we ask for the explanation of an event [of historical nature—M.J.], we actually refer to a change,” writes Danto (1985: 346). Such a change, which is inherent to explanatory narratives, is analyzed by him in relation to two particular points of reference: beginning and end, which already suggests a structure. If the structure is possible to be extrapolated outside historical sciences, and the initial remarks by Danto suggest that this is so, it turns out that the very process of explaining the world, which is the root of any education, is of narrative nature. This situation creates at least two clear structural requirements for objective narratives which, at the same time, are of ethical nature (just like in the case of previously noted requirement for the openness of instrumental narratives).

The first requirement, which is the most clearly visible, is the requirement for coherence. If it is true that explaining the world in the process of education consists in telling stories about changes that occur in it, such stories must be coherent with one another and they must present a uniform image of the world. Otherwise, any structure ceases to be possible, because it becomes conflicted with itself. In practice, this leads to the conclusion that in didactics coherence is very important as, in the light of the above considerations, it warrants that the educational process will be constructive and not disruptive for a young person. Let us take an example from the surrounding reality: at the moment much is being spoken about so-called “patriotic education” which seems to be promoted by the present government (Stec 2018), and which can certainly be treated as a good example of an objective narrative. It is because this concept assumes a specific image, not only of social and cultural phenomena (nation, citizen, etc.), but also education itself and what it is to serve (shaping attitudes, developing patriotism, promoting values, etc.). However, this topic is highly controversial, as such an approach to education is opposed by some environments presenting different opinions, promoting their own, alternative vision of the world and way of teaching (Podgórska 2021). Without judging which side of the controversy is right, let us see how this situation looks like from the structural side of those two narratives. The lack of coherence results in a conflict that has a great influence on educating millions of children in Polish

schools where they experience a disruptive lack of consistency in the way in which the world is explained to them.

Let us note, however, that although this situation is harmful for the very structure of narrative, and, because of this, it is morally controversial, the other extreme constitutes an equal threat. It should be emphasized that coherence does not mean dictatorship. The previous age of terrible wars and postmodern reflection that appeared later made us particularly sensitive to the threats of the so-called “great narratives” or “metanarratives,” as Jean-François Lyotard (Aylesworth 2015: 2) called them, i.e. objective narratives with total ambitions. In this case, practice and difficult historical experiences teach us that, although narrative structures are not only inevitable, but often beneficial (as I am trying to prove in this text), we cannot trust them without any restrictions. That is why, we need objective narratives that will be coherent and free from total ambitions, emphasizing the complexity and pluralistic nature of the world which is so changeable. However, the question of how we should use such narratives has to remain unanswered, because it is more content-related than formal, and solving it is a matter of careful and sensitive social-political debate rather than of theoretical speculations. Anyway, moral responsibility of those who manage education is choosing such objective narratives that will not be dictatorial or highly controversial for the society.

There is also another requirement (apart from coherence) which should be mentioned here, and it refers to authenticity. In the process of education, it does not seem enough to provide the young generation with objective narratives being a coherent explanation of changes taking place in the world. What is also needed is that such explanation is authentically adopted by teachers themselves, i.e. that it is perceived by them as an explanation that adequately reflects the nature of things. This requirement is also structural, although it may seem counterintuitive. Once again, we are returning to the engaging role that those narratives have to play. Danto also writes about it, claiming that “one of the key objectives to achieve within a narrative is preparing the scene for the course of events that will lead us until the end” (Danto 1985: 248). Thus, he emphasizes that if we are to perceive a given narrative as truly explanatory, it has to, in its very beginning, contain, in the form of an ovule, some assumptions

concerning the end. In Danto's thought (1985: 248) this is clearly related to the fact that he understands change as something that aims from the original state to the final state, but it is also clearly connected with the dualism of the roles of a narrator and recipient. Explanatory narrative is not, even purely structurally speaking, just a technical process or a transfer of some kind of knowledge from one place to another. On the contrary: it is something that a narrator gives to the recipient, taking responsibility for the narrative process already at the moment of its initiation. In this way, the narrative becomes a game of a non-zero stake (understood in an abstract manner) in which the narrator is engaged and in which that non-zero stake is particularly important as it is not void of ethical nature. The authenticity of complying with the explanations that are given warrants that such a stake is, in case of objective narratives, at least morally good, i.e. it consists in aiming at transferring knowledge and values which one believes are true, and not in manipulating students in order to change them into the obedient mass that is easy to use for a particular purpose.

Therefore, once again, from the side of narrative structures, we reach the issue that has been historically approached from many other, more casual perspectives. It seems that this reminds us of the above-mentioned belief of Pring (2001: 105–106) who claimed that a teacher is not the one who transfers some sets of information or data to his students, but the one who introduces them into a kind of *modus vivendi*, into a moral and social order, which he himself follows and into which, similarly to his present students, he had been introduced by his teacher in the past. The conclusion is that if, in teaching young generations, we cannot avoid transferring certain narratives to them, we should at least use those narratives that we actually believe in. We should not think that such narratives can be designed in advance like a technical product. They must be something we truly comply with; otherwise, we will not be able to guarantee the narrative stake of such an action.

Considering those two ethical requirements, i.e., coherence and authenticity, we can now attempt to return to the general rule of Erikson, i.e. to the principle: "do to another what will advance the other's growth to the same extent as it will advance our own growth." There is not an easy answer to the question of to which extent Erikson's principle is compliant with the structural features of objective

narratives, because, after a closer look at them, it is hard to postulate that the principle results from them directly. However, and this should be particularly emphasized, such narratives do not contradict that rule. On the contrary: there is a clear consistency between them. The requirement for coherence seems, in a form, to be reflected in Erikson's emphasis on personal development (aiming at constructiveness, and not disruptiveness in education), and the requirement for authenticity very strongly resonates in his belief that both the student and the teacher participate in the same reality the concern for which must be their common and unanimous effort.

### Subjective narratives and the origin of moral education

Before I move to summarizing this text, I have to mention the issue of subjective narratives although this issue has already been discussed in detail in the texts I have quoted here. Subjective narratives are much discussed by Oakeshott, Erikson, McEwan, Goodson, and especially Connelly and Clandinin. The latter authors, in the conclusions of their considerations in the article entitled "Narrative and Education," asked the following question: "How can we prepare for a meeting with our students in order to hope and be certain that, in future, they will perceive the meeting in a narrative way as an educational experience?" (Connelly, Clandinin 1995: 84). This is a particularly difficult question for each person interested in the narrative aspect of education, but also for each teacher. Although it is hard to answer it briefly, we may at least suggest into which direction our quests for the reply should turn.

In their question, Connelly and Clandinin use the category of *narrating by yourself*, which suggests that subjective narratives, which are stories told by ourselves and to ourselves about our own lives, are—in their opinion—something very common and important. They believe that human life is something "composed of many narrative unities" (Connelly, Clandinin 1995: 82). They draw such a conclusion concerning the subjective reality after careful reading of Oakeshott and his reflections on a human being perceived as an individual who creates his/her personal story, and of Erikson who saw a human being as a creator of the process of their own life (Connelly, Clandinin 1995: 77). Thus, both of those opinions emphasize

the value of self-reflection which is something we cannot avoid. Due to such self-reflection, we can identify an order in our life, which is so needed for the sense of identity, and which we can achieve through narratives. That is why, what Connelly and Clandinin actually ask about, is how we can help the students to find that order in the personal meeting with the narratives.

This issue is highly subjective, which is why it is hard to speak about any generalizations here. It seems that everyone has his/her own order of life to find. That is why, Oakeshott (2001: 4–6) so strongly emphasizes our autonomy and the fact that we cannot reject responsibility for our words and acts which, in turn, are a consequence of the way in which we learnt them. However, our radical freedom, which means that “in oneself, everyone is whom he/she is for themselves” (Oakeshott 2001: 4), does not mean that there are no rules and structures. On the contrary, it is freedom that makes us realize that not all of our actions are right and that it is possible for us to make bad choices and to perceive the world and ourselves in a wrong manner. In other words, it is our freedom that makes ethics possible.

Connelly and Clandinin agree that the above opinion of Oakeshott is not revelatory. They add that subjective narratives are what happens *post fatum*, so they may only refer to past events. This is a structural feature of those narratives—the fact that they are a consequence or a resultant of our previous actions, i.e. the actions on which we no longer have an influence, and that is why we can try to order them in our heads. Thus, the very structure of subjective narratives suggests that they appear after ethics, and, to be more precise, after what constitutes the possibility of the occurrence of an ethical reflection, i.e. after good or bad actions we had taken up (Connelly, Clandinin 1995).

However, not only do those actions constitute an ethical reflection, but they also demand it. Perhaps this is the role of subjective narratives in educating young people; perhaps they are to constitute a reply to the requirement of our freedom the acts of which demand ethical (self)reflection. If the very structures of those narratives so clearly match the need for explaining and justifying our actions in the ethical aspect, no wonder that many thinkers, such as the above-mentioned Pring, so frequently emphasize that a teacher is



not just a repository of knowledge poured into students' minds. "The educational experience" about which Connelly and Clandinin write, i.e. the meeting of two people being a constructive event, occurs provided that the teacher makes the effort to order the student's life on the moral level. Although—as I have already noted—the teacher does not have to do this using instrumental or objective narratives, he/she is always obliged by the narrative structure of subjective narratives which make him/her a person facing another human being. This is what the role of a teacher consists in.

In many respects, the dynamics of the relationship between a student and a teacher reminds that of a narrator and recipient, while in many other aspects it is radically different. It is true that a teacher is a narrator in instrumental narratives, but in objective narratives a teacher is just a person who transfers the content narrated by the society or culture. Finally, in subjective narratives a narrator is also the student who searches for the moral meaning in his/her life. From the perspective of a narrator, combination of those three cases arouses more questions than answers, but it very clearly reveals many roles which, in the educational process, have to be played by a teacher: he/she has to be the source of knowledge, a story teller, a representative of the adult world, a person who brings children up and introduces them into the mysteries of life, and, finally, someone who is morally responsible for the narratives he/she provides to the students.

### Narrative structures in education as a formal point of reference

Therefore, as we can see, in case of at least certain moral issues related to education, such as representation and identification of various groups of students, coherence and authenticity of views provided to them by teachers, and the origin of the moral nature of the very process of education, considerations from the perspective of narrative structures may give us a precious material for reflection. If we take into account the very urgent issue of providing students who, in many ways, are very diversified, with conditions for becoming engaged in the educational reality, we will notice that this is difficult because education (especially through instrumental narratives) must, already in its beginning, be open to everyone. When we think of the need to make what teachers tell the students internally coherent

and authentically experienced, we will notice that this is so due to the features of cultural and social subjective narratives understood as processes. Finally, when we refer to the question of what makes education as such a moral action, we will also realize that this topic is clearly connected with the ordering function subjective narratives perform in our lives. Thus, it turns out that (numerous) moral problems related to education can be formulated, i.e. become meaningful when we look at them from the perspective of narrative structures present in our culture and social life. Perhaps such an approach to them suggests certain ways to solve those problems, which is so much needed in our times.

To sum this text up, once again I would like to emphasize one general conclusion that can be drawn from the above, more detailed considerations. The conclusion is as follows: a lot of well-known ethical problems related to educational processes (representation, authenticity of teaching, moral responsibility) can be formulated in the perspective of narrative structures used in those educational processes. Usually, in ethical discussions concerning education of young generations, these problems are taken up in very different, more occasional circumstances, such as political debates, problems of social inequalities, worldview differences and different philosophical approaches, i.e. in the contexts that are more closely connected with the content of the solutions to those problems than with their form. In this way, the discussion on such topics seems to be more vivid and up-to-date, but it also makes the debate more controversial and polarized. That is why, it seems that we should return to those perspectives that enable us to understand the ethical complexities of education through referring to its formal aspects. It is true that the same ethical problem can be solved from many different perspectives and that each of them increases our ability to understand it, but formal perspectives play a special role here, marking the area of interpretation for content perspectives. As indicated in the considerations included in this text, one of such formal perspectives is the perspective of narrative structures that can be broadly applied in this matter, which was confirmed by several above examples. That is why, narratives and narrative structures may constitute a good point of reference whenever we speak about ethical problems connected with education.

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