

**TEACH OR NOT TO TEACH: ANALYSIS OF A MORAL
DILEMMA ABOUT THE TEACHING-LEARNING
PROCESS IN A MEXICAN SCHOOL**

**ENSINAR OU NÃO ENSINAR: ANÁLISE DE UM DILEMA
MORAL NO PROCESSO DE ENSINO-APRENDIZAGEM
NUMA ESCOLA MEXICANA¹⁰⁸**

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Abstract

In this text we analyse a moral dilemma presented in a middle school in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico, in the context of a teaching-learning process. Based on Immanuel Kant's ethics, namely, deontology, and more specifically, categorical imperative, we came to the conclusion that this particular moral dilemma must be solved with the maxim "as long as professor and students agree on the terms, they will take part on the teaching-learning process". In addition, we point out that Mexican institutions ought to (1) publish a professional code of ethics for teachers, (2) spread its content and (3) establish forums where professors can debate thereby avoiding future ethical issues.

Keywords: Professional ethics. Deontology. Moral dilemma. Teaching-learning process.

Resumo

Este texto analisa o caso de um dilema moral apresentado numa escola secundária em Guadalajara, Jalisco, México, no contexto de um processo de ensino-aprendizagem. Com base na ética de Immanuel Kant, a deontologia e, especificamente, o imperativo categórico, conclui-se que o dilema moral em questão deve ser resolvido com a máxima "enquanto o professor e os alunos corresponderem nas condições, eles farão parte do processo de ensino-aprendizagem". Além disso, destaca-se que as instituições mexicanas devem (1) publicar um código de ética profissional, (2) disseminar seu conteúdo e (3) estabelecer fóruns de discussão entre os professores para futuros problemas éticos.

Palavras-chave: Ética profissional. Deontologia. Dilema moral. Processo de ensino-aprendizagem.

¹⁰⁸ Este trabalho foi o resultado do curso "Ethics and Values of Communication", dirigido em outono 2019 pelos professores Jānis Buholcs e Linda Verliverronena na Vidzemes Augstskola.

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Introduction

In this text, we analyse a moral dilemma about teaching-learning process with the ethic developed by Immanuel Kant (1879), namely: the categorical imperative, which allows persons to identify whether their actions have moral value regardless the conditions. The case occurred in a Mexican school located in Guadalajara, Jalisco, one of the largest cities in the country, during the spring of 2019. There are four stakeholders involved, whose real names we will not mention to protect their identity and professional image, but for this text's purposes are Professor Daniela, Professor Frank, students and Principal Anna.

We divide the paper into four sections—first, we describe the actions that led to the moral dilemma in question; second, we point out the cultural context in which this event happened, for any event is doubtlessly limited and defined by the society to which is subject to; third, we explain Kant's ethics, also known as deontology, as well as how do we apply it to this particular instance to come to the conclusion that there is one right action¹¹¹ for this moral dilemma; lastly fourth, we discuss the ethics management in Mexico and teaching-learning process and related research papers that can help us to expand our view.

We conclude that there are three main recommendations for future ethics management, specifically: (1) to publish a code of ethics both for Mexican teachers and for every school, so every person (from Public Education Department¹¹² authorities to schoolchildren and their parents) can consult them whenever they think it is necessary; (2) to spread widely the content of such codes, so everybody knows how to behave in specific situations; (3) to establish forums where educators can discuss the moral dilemmas they have had in order to refine their ethic management. Besides, we emphasise that the resolution of the dilemma through deontology might be in disagreement with teacher's priorities, such as the preservation of her wage for living, which in turn reinforce the moral value of her action.

¹¹¹ Every time actions, decisions, etc. are claimed as "right" in this text, they concur with Kant's ethics.

¹¹² In Mexico named Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP).

Description of the case

In order to teach the procedures and the usefulness of a round table technique for the exposure of several ideas on one main topic, Professor Daniela (teacher of Language subject) asks six of the students to come up with a topic for homework research. Unanimously they decide to research and talk about paedophilia.

Next week, all learners (about fifteen, including the participants in the round table) gather in a small auditorium to prepare for the activity. As the round table group is organising supporting data and papers, Professor Frank (teacher of Philosophy subject) comes by and hears about the topic and the task, which —he believes— is an inappropriate subject for students in the ninth grade of elementary school¹¹³, whose age is around 14 years old. Professor Frank decides then to go to Principal Anna’s office to assert his concern regarding this school project.

A couple of minutes later, Professor Daniela is called to Principal Anna’s office where is advised to dismiss the activity, go back to the assigned classroom and not to talk evermore about paedophilia, for this is a school that is sympathetic towards Roman Catholic religion, hence they care about its reputation. If Professor Daniela decides not to proceed as told — Principal Anna remarks—, her job will be jeopardised.

For more information, we describe the place and Professor Daniela, for it would be quite useful. The name of the school is Thomas Alva Edison College. It is located in one of the finest communities in the city, Arcos, which is in Western Guadalajara, approximately 4 km away from the centre. This private school was established in 1989. Nowadays, the institution covers all the education stages, from kindergarten to high school; additionally, offers virtual undergraduate and graduate programmes. The size of the school is rather small, for almost every classroom has a capacity of 10 students.

Professor Daniela is 24 years old and has been teacher of Spanish Language for almost one year. She studied Pedagogy at Enrique Rebsamen University, a private institution in Guadalajara. According to her income, she is a lower-middle-class worker as almost every elementary education teacher in Mexico, including Professor Frank.

¹¹³ In Mexican education system, they are in third grade of middle school, which is the last one before high school.

Cultural context

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Mexico is the country number one in regards of sexual abuse, physical violence and homicide in children under 14 years (OCDE¹¹⁴ apud BORBOLLA, 2019). Besides, 60% of the global child pornography comes from Mexico; and 25 of the 32 Mexican states consider pederasty and paedophilia as a no-serious felony. This data explain why students in the ninth grade of elementary school are interested in the subject.

Education, as stated by the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF, 2019), is key to prevent and eventually eradicate psychosocial problems in childhood. All children, especially those who live in countries not so developed, ought to have an education, but, moreover, their education could and will prepare them to their reality, so they can act accordingly. To understand the paedophilic actions in the world will surely allow the pupils to recognise such crimes and help them to act duly to real situations.

To talk about paedophilia in most of the circumstances could lead to mention the Roman Catholic religion because in the last years the latter has been highlighted as a corrupted institution, where several men have committed crimes against children with almost total impunity (GORRELL, 2006). Thus, Professor Frank and Principal Anna are worried about the prestige of their religion. If they allow schoolchildren to discuss paedophilia, they are allowing them to criticise the Roman Catholic institution, which represents an act of sacrilege.

The Political Constitution of the Mexican United States in this regard stipulates:

Warranted by Article 24 about the freedom of belief, education shall be laic and, therefore, shall be completely out of any religious doctrine¹¹⁵ (Garantizada por el artículo 24 la libertad de creencias, dicha educación será laica y, por tanto, se mantendrá por completo ajena a cualquier doctrina religiosa) (MÉXICO, 2019, p. 6).

So, laic public kindergartens and elementary schools are warranted by Mexican law. However, Thomas Alva Edison College is a private school, meaning it “could” be Catholic —

¹¹⁴ The author does not specify the OCDE source.

¹¹⁵ We translate every quote whenever necessary in this paper.

just on the mere fact that is not the education provided by the State— but verily “is not”. In this regard, Mexican law address about particular schools:

Education shall be based on the unrestricted respect to people’s dignity, with an approached of human rights consciousness and essential equality. Education shall tend to develop adequately all the human being faculties and at the same time shall promote love to Motherland, respect to all rights, freedoms, peace culture and consciousness of international solidarity regarding independence and justice; shall promote honesty, values and continuous improvement of the teaching-learning process (La educación se basará en el respeto irrestricto de la dignidad de las personas, con un enfoque de derechos humanos y de igualdad sustantiva. Tenderá a desarrollar armónicamente todas las facultades del ser humano y fomentará en él, a la vez, el amor a la Patria, el respeto a todos los derechos, las libertades, la cultura de paz y la conciencia de la solidaridad internacional, en la independencia y en la justicia; promoverá la honestidad, los valores y la mejora continua del proceso de enseñanza aprendizaje) (MÉXICO, 2019, p. 5).

The laicism of education is an issue in Mexico, for several schools (both public and private) do have Roman Catholic commands on their basis since this religion is by far the most popular among the people. In addition, another problem should be considered—although Mexican schools could be as laic as dictated, the beliefs of the Public Education Department employees (e.g. Professor Daniela’s or Professor Frank’s beliefs) may leak through the system as nobody can be purely objective, resulting again in a non-laic education.

Since nobody in Mexico can uphold firing a teacher on any religious basis, for it is a crime, the answer of this particular case might seem quite obvious—Professor Daniela’s duty must prevail because the proceedings of Principal Anna are simply illegal. Nonetheless, Mexico is affected deeply by corruption (CASAR, 2015), and in this particular situation, Professor Daniela cannot trust in Mexican judicial procedures. If she sues the school or Principal Anna, she will not only lose her job, but she will likely not be a teacher anymore. On top of that, “Behaving ethically is more than a matter of following the rules or not breaking the law—it means acting in a way that promotes the learning and growth of students and helps them realize their potential” (PARKAY¹¹⁶, 2004, p. 195 apud BUCHOLZ, KELLER E BRADY, 2007, p. 61).

¹¹⁶ PARKAY, F.W. **Becoming a Teacher**. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2004.

Laicism in Mexico has been an issue since its publication in the Constitution in 1857. In that time, the Mexican government was looking a separation between the State and the Catholic Church, so liberal congressmen decided to promulgate a law stating that public education shall have no religious basis—furthermore, any participation of the Catholic Church in the government was prohibited from that moment onward. Meantime, the Church tried to keep its educational influence and political power in various states of the Republic of Mexico. States like Jalisco (including the capital city, Guadalajara) kept mixing religion in schools, as Mexico City and surrounding territories were more aligned with the 1857 Constitution (PÉREZ SÁNCHEZ, 2012).

Other Latin-American countries with issues regarding the laicism in education are Bolivia (PREISWERK, 2013) and Argentina (TORRES, 2018). Preiswerk argues that it is almost impossible to eliminate religion in public education, for every Bolivian probably has his own belief. In a country where the Roman Catholic religion was used by Spanish conquerors to teach culture and language to native communities, and where indigenous people have in most cases their own religion, it is likely true that Bolivian —like Mexican— people cannot isolate education from religion (PREISWERK, 2013).

Torres points out that in Argentina the government supports the creation of several private schools, where the Roman Catholic is by far the most popular religion. By supporting the teachers' wage, the Argentinian government subtly encourages the dissemination of the Catholic religion (TORRES, 2018). Here, we can ask: To which extent a State is entitled to spread a particular belief within the people? To which extent a State should avoid or seek supporting education when involving a religious institution? If we consider that some communities —apparently such as Mexico, Bolivia and Argentina— cannot divide religion(s) and education, another question raises: How would the State ensure a pluralistic religious education or educational religion? These are questions not to be answered in this text, but perhaps handful ones for further investigations.

Analysis of the case

There are two possible solutions to Professor Daniela's predicament: (1) to continue the round table activity, or (2) to dismiss the round table activity. We will present Kant's

(1879) theory, also known as deontology (VAUGHN, 2016), as well as more details about the stakeholders and the case itself to elucidate what Professor Daniela should do.

According to Kant, good and right decisions are made regardless of utility, religion, tradition, authority, emotions, desires, etc. Reason —and reason only— leads to making the right decision, as the former is part of the “good will”, which determines the moral value of right actions:

Nothing can possibly be conceived in the world, or even out of it, which can be called good, without qualification, except a good will. Intelligence, wit, judgement, and the other talents of the mind, however they may be named, or courage, resolution, perseverance, as qualities of temperament, are undoubtedly good and desirable in many respects... A good will is good not because of what it performs or effects, not by its aptness for the attainment of some proposed end, but simply by virtue of the volition; that is, it is good in itself, and considered by itself is to be esteemed much higher than all that can be brought about by it in favor of any inclination, nay even of the sum total of all inclinations (KANT, 1879, p. 5).

Kant discerns two types of “commands” or “imperatives” that we should follow to do the right thing: (1) hypothetical imperative, that tell us what we should do if we desire something; and (2) categorical imperative, that tell us what we should do regardless our wishes. According to the philosopher, only the latter constitutes the moral law, for these commands are universal and unconditional. Therefore, we will only consider Kant’s categorical imperative to analyse the exemplification.

To determine if an action is motivated by a categorical imperative, according to Kant’s first version of the term, we ought to derive a maxim from the action. If the action can be universalised (everyone could do it) and unconditional (everyone would let that happen), then it is indeed a permissible and right action.

We believe that, on the one hand, the maxim 1 derived from the first possible solution, this is to continue the round table activity, would be “guide the teaching-learning process no matter the subject.” On the other hand, the maxim 2 derived from the second possible solution, this is to dismiss the round table activity, would be “guide the teaching-learning process unless the subject is not allowed.”

It would appear that both imperatives could be universalised however conditional. About maxim 1: Every person could guide the teaching-learning process no matter the subject, but perhaps not every person would let that happen, because of diverse opinions

regarding taboos, religions, utilities, desires, etc. About maxim 2: Every person could guide the teaching-learning process unless the subject is not allowed, but some people would not let that happen because they might think education should not be restricted.

Here, Kant's second version of the categorical imperative apropos is more useful to determine whether the maxims are correct: "So act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as means only" (KANT, 1879, p. 26). So that instead of just look the Professor Daniela's perspective, we must also look at the learners' perspective, as they are a crucial part of the teaching-learning process. To discard the schoolchildren in both maxims may be to treat them merely as means, for the end then would be the process by itself; nevertheless, with no pupils, there will not be any process at all.

Since both the students and Professor Daniela are as important as the teaching-learning process, we can presume the following maxim: "as long as professor and students agree on the terms, they will take part on the teaching-learning process". This maxim can be universalised, for every person (professor or student) could do it, and is unconditional, for everyone would let that happen. Furthermore, this categorical imperative constituted by the maxim entitles both teachers' and pupils' duty and dispose of any external agent that could hinder the activity. As long as Professor Daniela and learners agree on the terms of a round table task—including the paedophilia topic—, they could take part on the exercise, and this will be indubitably the right action, according to Kant.

It is worth noting that Kant argued that every human being has freedom, equality and independence (KANT, 1793). Freedom is an "autonomous right of all individuals to conceive of happiness in their own way" (RAUSCHER, 2017); thus no one is entitled to interfere with other people's freedom and happiness. Equality means each individual is equal to every individual of the state before the law, this is a formal equality—persons can indeed be unequal regarding power, mental ability, income, etc, but they must have the same opportunities. Finally, Kant understood independence on two levels: at the first level, the participation in the determination of particular laws—children and women are excluded here by Kant, however they do have freedom and equality rights—; at the second level, every individual ought to be able to will the basic law—"The basic law is willed by each subject in

the sense that the ‘will of all’ or a ‘public will’, or ‘general will’ (Kant uses Rousseau’s term) determines the basic law” (RAUSCHER, 2017).

In this sense, Professor Daniela and her students are participants of these three principles underlying any state. Both have the autonomous right “to conceive of happiness in their own way” (RAUSCHER, 2017), so nobody shall be entitled to interfere with this right, for no reason. Both are equal before the law, so they have same opportunities to teach and learn, this is why a lot of researchers argues that the teaching-learning process is indeed a dialogue wherein teachers learn, and learners teach simultaneously. Both of them, Professor Daniela and her pupils are independent at least on Kant’s second level, this is, they are able to will the basic law. This “basic law” or “original contract” forces all sovereign “to frame his laws in such a way that they could have been produced by the united will of a whole nation, and to regard each subject” (KANT, 1793), meaning that the whole people are entitled to agree to act in a particular way, which enforces, on the one hand, the established maxim whereby professors and students must agree the teaching-learning process, and, on the other hand, the possibility to have a laic or religious education, depending on the general will.

Discussion and ethics management

In Mexico, there are no official codes of ethics that can help teachers or principals to make the right decisions, not from syndicates of teachers or this particular school in Guadalajara. The most similar document to a code of ethics is a 200-page-long book published by the Public Education Department (MÉXICO, 2014), entitled *Profile, Parameters and Indicators to Professors and Technical Teachers*. However, this book describes how teachers should work in terms of the job’s duties; it does not explain any moral principle or ethic management.

In respect of dilemmas in the teaching-learning process and Kant’s deontology, there appear not to be many texts. Nevertheless, in the past two decades, there have been several research papers than can be useful to this text’s aim, so we discuss them. Sumsion (2000), a teacher educator, presents her moral dilemma about teacher-student relationships. Based on theory given by Noddings¹¹⁷ (1984 apud SUMSION, 2000), she states that teachers should

¹¹⁷ NODDINGS, N. *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984.

embrace a so-called “ethic of care” in which the educators care not only about the schoolchildren’s knowledge and abilities but also about their needs and concerns. Yet this must be done reciprocally, meaning pupils should also care about teachers’ work.

There are, withal, three notions that can be very useful for this text (TOM¹¹⁸, 1997 apud SUMSION, 2000): (1) deliberative relationships, this is to explicate the teacher-student relationship, so it is clear; (2) transparency of practice, this is to reflect and express why and how teachers are performing as they do, so pupils can understand their actions and the relationship; and (3) presence, this is to be oneself as human.

The stated maxim through Kant’s deontology in this text, “as long as professor and students agree on the terms, they will take part on the teaching-learning process”, concurs with the notions of deliberative relationship and transparency of practice; it does not involve by itself the notion of presence, but in fact Professor Daniela could be “present” by means of feedback or other actions. These three notions, as well as the ethic of care (NODDINGS¹¹⁹, 1984 apud SUMSION, 2000), could veritably enable Mexican authorities to propose not only a code of ethics as rules that must be followed, rather as a reminder that they are dealing with unpredictable human interactions (BUCHOLZ, KELLER E BRADY, 2007).

Husu (2001) presents an inquiry, which reveals that instructors usually recognise moral dilemmas with schoolchildren, colleagues and community (a whole school and parents). These intra-institutional conflicts are often centred on children’s welfare. “All the ethical dilemmas identified by teachers dealt with human relationships and different ways of perceiving the ‘best interest of a child’” (HUSU, 2001, p. 86). His conclusion coincides with Kant’s ethic, for pupils—in this plight— ought to be treated as an end, not as means.

Álvarez, Rodríguez, Herrera and Lorenzo (2012) research how Spanish undergraduate students perceive the importance of ethics both in their bachelor programmes and their future jobs. They find that most of the learners they interviewed recognise the relevance that Professional Compromise, Professional Ethics Behaviour and Moral Behaviour (in that order) have in their career. According to the researchers, Professional Compromise is the awareness of ethical principles and commands, inherent in the teaching profession;

¹¹⁸ TOM, A. The Deliberate Relationship: A Frame for Talking about Faculty-Student Relationships. **Alberta Journal of Educational Research**, n. 63, p. 3-21, 1997.

¹¹⁹ NODDINGS, N. **Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education**. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984.

Professional Ethic Behaviour is the knowledge of teacher's duties in the job; and Moral Behaviour is the responsibility, efficacy and impartiality of teacher's work (ÁLVAREZ ET AL., 2012, p. 29). In this regard, Mexican universities could utilise these three categories to ameliorate the curriculum and publish their code of ethics, as recommended hereby.

Sanz Ponce and Hirsch Adler (2016) seek the middle-school educators' perception of themselves in Valencia, Spain. The methodology employed uses four dimensions: conflicts and ethical dilemmas, deontology, professional identity and ethical skills. Regarding conflicts and ethical dilemmas, most of the educators say that in spite of not being prepared, they believe they solve conflicts correctly. Concerning deontology, most of the teachers say they know about the rule of law, yet more than 10% do not know the human rights; besides, more than 8% think they do not have to teach human rights. Respecting professional identity, most instructors say they encourage students' self-esteem and do love their career. About ethical skills, most teachers say they respect the pupils, although more than 5% do not consider personal dignity as an unconditional value.

Roldão (2017) reflects upon the profession of being a teacher nowadays. She believes, based on terms used by Shulman and Schön (SCHULMAN¹²⁰, 2004; SCHULMAN¹²¹, 1987; SCHÖN¹²², 1987; SCHÖN¹²³, 1983 apud ROLDÃO, 2017), that educators' work should entail the following factors: knowledge (what are they teaching), pedagogy (how are they teaching) and compromise (why are they teaching). In this text's illustration, Professor Daniela has the three factors: knowledge, pedagogy and compromise—knowledge about the expressions of ideas and, moreover, about Language skills; she is also aware of methods, such as the round table activity that can lead schoolchildren to get the knowledge; and she notices why pupils should learn not only about the expressions of ideas and how to do it but also about the topic in question, paedophilia.

Conclusion and recommendations for ethics management

¹²⁰ SHULMAN, L.S. **The Wisdom of Practice: Essays on Teaching, Learning, and Learning to Teach**. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004.

¹²¹ SHULMAN, L.S. Knowledge and Teaching: Foundations of the New Reform. **Harvard Educational Review**, n. 57, p. 4-14, 1987.

¹²² SCHÖN, D. **Educating the Reflective Practitioner**. New York: Jossey-Bass, 1987.

¹²³ SCHÖN, D. **The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action**. London: Temple Smith, 1983.

To avoid similar contingencies, we think that the Public Education Department must publish a code of ethics for the teachers in which they can consult not only their commands but also —and perhaps more important— the answers to their questions in regards of different hypothetical scenarios of moral dilemmas, at least the most common ones. Every candidate to become a teacher would have to read this code of ethics and proof in the exam for Public Education Service that he or she can handle several moral dilemmas. Furthermore, it would be optimal if every teaching programme in Mexican universities enhanced this, say, National Code of Ethics for Teachers, not to change its bases —for candidates to teachers could get confused—, rather to constantly review its content and propose changes, so the code will remain up to date.

In accordance with Kant, this code of ethics shall be related to the basic law, the social contract whereby all the citizens of Mexico have agreed to act in a particular way. This means the code of ethics will be in consonance with people’s customs, somehow deleting the question if the code is actually prescriptive, imposing an alien behaviour. Rather, people’s behaviour shall regulate and improve this document.

Mexican schools as well ought to have their code of ethics, not only for teachers but also for principals, administrative staff and learners. This will set the basis on which every person should behave. Altogether, this National Code of Ethics for Teachers, the University Code of Ethics for Teachers and the School Code of Ethics shall be diffused to the persons, for it would be pointless to have the documents and not to know their content.

Many could argue that a code of ethics, or several, cannot by itself improve the teachers’ ethics management, for the latter comes only through work experience. Thus, it will be also convenient to have some forums wherein educators can freely state the moral dilemmas they have faced in their career. In such events, both veteran and novice teachers can learn from each other. These actions will in sooth improve ethics management in Mexican schools and particular teaching-learning processes.

Regarding the solution of this case’s moral dilemma, the maxim “as long as professor and students agree on the terms, they will take part on the teaching-learning process” will permit to set the categorical imperative. If Professor Daniela and the learners agreed on the terms of the round table activity, they could take part in the teaching-learning process, without considering any other situation. Nevertheless, this right action determined by Kant’s

deontology could lead to bad consequences for Professor Daniela—she could get fired, for example.

Deontology truly states that the duty should be done for duty's sake, so it is unconditional. However, in contexts such as Mexican culture, it is quite strenuous to make the right decision due to corruption and other situations; low wages and high rates of unemployment could affect persons' moral judgement. Ergo, this very context, in turn, strengthens the moral value of the actions—even though many conditions could influence the decision, persons decide to act for duty's sake.

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Data do envio: 03/12/2019

Data do aceite: 28/05/2020.

