

**Ethics Education in Maltese State Schools:  
A response to Otherness or a contribution to  
Othering?**

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A dissertation presented to the Faculty of Education at the University of Malta  
for the degree of Master of Education in Teaching of Ethics in Schools

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ta' Malta

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# **ABSTRACT**

## **BERNARDETTE MIZZI**

### **ETHICS EDUCATION IN MALTESE STATE SCHOOLS: A RESPONSE TO OTHERNESS OR A CONTRIBUTION TO OTHERING?**

While Malta has lately taken a leap forward in terms of social progressivism, its Constitution obliges state school to teach the teachings of Roman Catholicism, reflecting the privilege the Catholic Church retains in the country. This fact causes tension with the demographic changes, mainly due to migration and growing secularisation. As a response to the increasing number of students in Maltese states schools opting out of Catholic Religious Education, with the new National Curriculum Framework of 2012, the Ethics Education Programme was established.

This study, which is grounded in Emmanuel Levinas's concept of *ethics as first philosophy*, and adopts postmodern and poststructuralist perspectives, questions if the teaching of Ethics is an adequate response to the otherness of the cultural and religious other in schools. Specifically, through a theoretical thematic analysis and personal reflections, I problematise the oversimplification by which the teaching of Ethics is said to cater for the diversity of its students. I argue that the Ethics Education curriculum's alignment to shared universal values and rational autonomy, idealised in the Western philosophical tradition, others the particularities of students whose outlook and beliefs are different. It tends to assimilate the cultural and religious other into a Westernised way of knowing and thinking, which can constitute ethical violence. Within this totality, the Ethics teacher plays a pivotal role in lessening this violence by adopting an understanding of teaching as an act of responsibility that opens itself to the vulnerability of students.

#### **KEY WORDS**

Emmanuel Levinas   Ethics Education   assimilation   othering   otherness   violence

# DEDICATION

In memory of Daphne Caruana Galizia

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# **GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS**

**CoI:** Community of Inquiry

**CRE:** Catholic Religious Education

**EE:** Ethics Education

**EEP:** Ethics Education Programme

**EU:** European Union

**MATSEC:** Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate

**MEDE:** Ministry for Education and Employment

**NCF:** National Curriculum Framework

**P4C:** Philosophy for Children

## CHAPTER I | The religious other in Europe and its schools

*They are not refugees, but a Muslim invasion of force.*

Viktor Oban, January 2018

*[Q]uickly put an end to this policy of Islamization [...], otherwise we Austrians, we Europeans, will come to an abrupt end.*

Heinz-Christian Strache, January 2018

*Act normal. Or leave.*

Mark Rutte, January 2017

*The problem is not with individuals but the culture of Islam. It's backward, and not compatible with our society. If you have to live in peace [...], you have to prepare for war.*

Matteo Salvini, January 2017

*Just watch the interlopers from the world come and install themselves in our home.*

*They want to transform France into a giant squat.*

Marine Le Pen, April 2017

*Islam, as a cultural and religious entity, has no place in Germany.*

Alexander Gauland, August 2017

*We will never [...] bring one single Muslim to Slovakia.*

Roberto Fico, March 2016

*Implement pushback: refuse to pick up the floating, Black garbage when they next arrive [...].*

*Malta will save both Europe and all Europoids.*

Norman Lowell, July 2013

## **1.1 Contemporary contexts**

The increasingly politicised fear of European civilisation being besieged by an overwhelming number of non-Western immigrants crossing over to Europe evokes memories from my primary education. As school children, we were awed by the story of how, in 1565, ten thousand Knights and Maltese repelled the invading Muslim army from reaching Europe, thus preserving Christendom. In reality, this was never an issue of religion but about who had control of the Mediterranean Sea for pirating and trade. Four hundred and fifty years later, hundreds of thousands of Middle and Near Eastern migrants who fled war-torn Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan for a better future, during the “refugee crisis” of 2015/2016, are to this date, regarded as a threat to the social fabric of European societies. Their values and behaviours are perceived to be inconsistent with the usual Western way of thinking and doing things. The Muslim population in Europe is feared to increase, and “they” might eventually change “us”, or worse even: what was not achieved in 1565 will now be achieved by stealth. There is also another element to this perceived threat linked to the terrorism debate. The past terroristic attacks by small groups of Islamist fanatics coupled with the radicalisation of native Muslim Europeans were another tipping point in the increase of anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiment in Europe (Abbas, 2005).

The arrival of the culturally and religiously diverse Other in Europe, thus, seems to have triggered a renewed interest in religion as a marker of cultural identity. This concern disputes the predictions made by some religious sociologists (see Davie, Heelas & Woodhead, 2003) that religion will vanish in our modern times. It also brought to the surface Europe’s unresolved tension between the reluctance to include non-Western immigrants, in many cases Muslims, in European societies, and living up to the liberal ideals of equality, human rights and multiculturalism. Policy proposals to introduce or tighten immigration restrictions are becoming a reality (Zanfrini, 2019), which, in turn, reveal the dehumanising aspect of Europe’s immigration policy. It frames the migrants’ lives as being less valuable and less worthy of protection. For instance, in summer 2018, hundreds of migrants, including unaccompanied children, rescued by non-governmental organisations’ (NGOs’) ships, remained stranded in the Mediterranean, waiting for European countries to allow them disembarkation. The nearest ports in Malta and Italy had often refused them entry for weeks, using the lives of those on board as political leverage (see e.g. “Ship carrying Migrants Stranded”, 2019). At the same time, the European Union (EU) and its Member States have drastically decreased their search

and rescue efforts while the latter are criminalising NGOs operating in this area for acting as “human traffickers” (Maccanico, Hayes, Kenny & Barat, 2018).

Additionally, there is an increased tendency to fortify external European borders, for example, through the drastic increase of the capacities of Frontex, being the EU border security management agency. Within their territories, Member States erect new boundaries through visas, language and citizenship tests, and a multitude of rules and regulations (Wodak, 2015), in their pursuit to make assimilation mandatory for the immigrants. The recent policy measures introduced by the former Dutch liberal government last year, to assimilate low-income immigrants living in “ghettos”, are a case in point. Children, as young as one, must spend twenty-five hours, not including nap time, apart from their parents, in daycare, every week. During this time, they will be taught “Danish values”, including the traditions of Christmas and Easter, and receive Danish language classes (Timsit, 2018). The government will fine parents if they refuse to comply and will also stop their welfare benefits. Such measures do not target other Danish citizens who are free to choose whether to enrol their children in preschool up to the age of six. By regulating life in these neighbourhoods, the government hopes these children will grow out of their ghetto status and will be “Westernised” into Denmark’s secular culture and society.

Populists, nationalists and far-right proponents, further fuel this climate of imminent cultural angst across Europe, as they move from the peripheries to mainstream politics, including the parliaments of Europe (Dustmann, Vasiljeva & Damm, 2019; Wodak, 2015). Such parties are nowadays supported by an increasing number of European citizens, coming from all walks of life, who are becoming sceptical of cultural pluralism and thus of modern democracy. They prefer instead to embrace nationalistic discourse towards Europeanness and nativism in their personal and political crusade against the cultural and religiously diverse enemy. Locally, the far-right party, Imperium Europa, managed to muster enough votes to become Malta’s third biggest political party, with the European Parliamentary elections of 2019, surpassing other small centre-left democratic political parties, such as Alternattiva Demokratika (Alternative Democracy) and Partit Demokratiku (The Democratic Party). Support for Imperium Europa is not limited to the casting of votes but is overtly manifested through public endorsements. For instance, a Maltese Catholic priest made the headlines locally as he went public with his support to Imperium Europa. Anxious that the ‘Maltese people [have become] foreigners in

their own country', Fr Muscat calls on the party's supporters 'to be the future of a big party that works to make Malta [for] the Maltese' (Vella, 2019). Similarly, a Maltese teacher, who is also a senior politician in the Partit Nazzjonalista (Nationalist Party) spoke publicly of the far-right Italian politician, Matteo Salvini, as a role-model that ought to be imitated. He passed his remarks in view of a sizeable group of asylum seekers who were to be brought to Malta after being rescued in the Mediterranean Sea (Jacobsen, 2019).

The modus operandi of extreme far-right parties reveals a profoundly ingrained intolerance, hostility and inclination towards hate speech, very often escalating to violence, directed against immigrants, because of their distinctive otherness. Indeed, according to the latest annual report of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), hate speech, and xenophobic populism remain significant concerns in Europe, to date (ECRI, 2019). A barometer survey carried out in June 2018 revealed that Malta has the highest online hate speech incidents in all EU Member States. Less than a year later, Malta witnessed the first racially-motivated murder. Lassane Cisse Souleymane, a forty-two-year-old Ivorian national and a father of three, was killed in cold blood by two off-duty soldiers of the Armed Forces of Malta because, as one of them admitted in court, he 'did not like black people' (Agius & Hudson, 2019).

By and large, this is the political and social climate in which European schools are functioning. Simultaneously, schools are in themselves, increasingly becoming culturally and religiously diverse due to the fluidity of today's realities. Malta is no exception. Recently, Malta has witnessed a large influx of mostly economic immigrants and also asylum seekers that impacted on the composition of Maltese schools. Some schools are being affected more than others. A comprehensive study carried out in 2018 by the National Statistics Office found that foreign students from kindergarten to secondary level have more than doubled in five years, now making up 10 per cent of the school-age population (Calleja, 2019). While the most significant number of foreign students come from EU Member States, African and Asian pupils register the most significant increase. The number of other third-country national students from European countries remains static. More than half of these foreign students in Malta attend state schools (Calleja, 2019).

The significant increase of foreign student population in schools adds 'race, culture and religion' as the newly added categories on the differences' list that schools have to deal with (Chircop, 2018, p.98). The increasing cultural and religious heterogeneity of Maltese state schools is showcased, for example, by the growing number of pupils opting out of confessional Catholic Religious Education (CRE) (Darmanin, 2015). In Maltese Primary and Secondary state schools, CRE is a compulsory subject although parents or students have the option to opt-out. This heterogeneity in Maltese state schools, and equally reflected in society, undoubtedly raises the pressing need for education to discover possibilities of how we can live together amidst our differences.

It seems, though, that this need was vastly ignored by the authors of the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) (Ministry of Education, Employment and the Family, 2012), who decided that those pupils opting out of CRE would now be obliged to take Ethics lessons instead. It is relevant to note that the same policy acknowledges that 'the teaching of religion in schools is [...] an important element in the integral foundation of the person' (2012, p.55). The option for Comparative Religious Education, which would be inclusive of non-religious and atheist worldviews, and would have involved students learning side by side in a mixed (religious/non-religious) context, was ruled out by the NCF. Consequently, despite being the first-ever institutional acknowledgement of the religious other in Maltese schools (Darmanin, 2015), the decision for Ethics Education (EE) further reinforces the fragmentation of our education system by segregating pupils along religious lines: the Catholics and the non-Catholics. Students opting out of CRE are discursively framed as non-Catholics, as their religious and cultural heterogeneity is reduced to such identity. Furthermore, the choice for EE as an alternative subject gives rise to two distinct and contrasting sets of morality in our schools. While Catholic students explore a morality based on the tenets of Catholicism, the Ethics students deal with a morality grounded in secular thought (Giordmaina & Zammit, 2019).

As a result, the Education Minister tasked members of the Department of Education Studies from the Faculty of Education at the University of Malta with the responsibility to design an Ethics Education Programme (EEP) not aligned to any religious, moral doctrine (Wain, 2014, slide 3). The concerned academics eventually turned to Western philosophical tradition and its tools, as a source of moral guidance, aiming to introduce students to ethical theories which serve as a strong basis for challenging situations or guiding decisions. Moreover, a

philosophical approach to EE seeks to develop an ethic of democratic mutual understanding which gives students the capacity to live with difference in today's pluralistic society (Wain, 2016).

It becomes apparent that the aim of the Ethics curriculum is to address the diverse religious and secular moral beliefs, traditions and cultures of students. As is suggested by the Learning Area Outcomes Framework for the subject, the programme perceives such differences as 'valuable and something to celebrate' and 'tolerate' (Ministry for Education and Employment, n. d.). The Ethics curriculum affirms the position that a just and well-ordered pluralistic society can only work well when people know one another, understand one another and get along agreeably. Consequently, the associated pedagogical approaches, highlight the rational side of human relations and make use of notions such as empathy, tolerance, social contract and mutual understanding to bring about what the subject deems an ethical coexistence. A zone is said to be created where students are encouraged to listen to others, to think reflectively on different beliefs, experiences and ideas, to clearly articulate their positions about issues and respond to others in a respectful way.

Following this conception of ethics, it, however, becomes legitimate to ask what the impetus for EE is. Is it a genuine concern to respond to the religious other, or is it driven by an underlying political ideology which functions to domesticate cultural and religious differences to preserve Western democracy and its values? Does EE feed into an assimilative discourse which supports the idea of Europeanness, democratic enculturation and adaptation? If this observation stands up, this would mean that the cultural and religious other in the ethics classroom is expected to transcend her particularities to attain a Western understanding of morality and a liberal democratic understanding of politics. But wouldn't this amount to symbolic violence? Should such infliction of violence on students become warranted in the name of ethics? And, what if the religious and cultural other come to symbolise ambivalence by being too different or strange? What if she cannot be assimilated and neutralised in any way? Could this lead to ethical paralysis and inertia?

These questions lie at the heart of this study and also of my profession as an Ethics teacher. They seem to reflect Usher and Edward's (1994) observation that education theory and practice operate from a modernist perspective. As such, education is very much 'the dutiful



child of the Enlightenment' by being the vehicle by which 'the Enlightenment ideals of critical reason, humanistic individual freedom and benevolent progress are substantiated and realised' (p.24). Education has, according to Usher & Edward, since been assigned a crucial task in forming students into a particular kind of subject: particularly autonomous, modern subjects. I, myself, am part of the continuation of the Enlightenment project, as my profession tasks me to pass on the European cultural heritage to my students. As much as my heart wishes things were different, I am in no way distant or immune to the normalising discourse, as teaching obliges me to determine the terms for my students.

## **1.2 Objectives of the study**

This study aligns itself to postmodern and poststructuralist thought to problematise the oversimplification by which the EE curriculum is said to create conditions of ethical encounters through its theoretical and pedagogical approaches, which run the risk of achieving violence rather than ethicality. It draws, especially, on the work of Emmanuel Levinas (1969, 1981): a Western philosopher whose thought reveal a vehement critique of Western philosophy for constituting a 'totality'. Levinas defines totality as the reduction of the other to the same through a conception of being. He argues that in order to understand and communicate deliberately with another person, we employ our powers of reason upon them. Nevertheless, through the very act of rational understanding we reduce the other to who we are, and the other becomes 'part of the same' (1969, p.96). This attempt to understand other people through categorising and objectifying knowledge unveils a desire to dominate and possess them and constitutes an act of violence.

In this vein, the study embraces a different understanding of ethics, one that is not understood as an academic subject but rather as an exploration of the possibility of a non-totalising relation between the self and the other. For Levinas, the source of the self is unquestionably located in the relation with other. In this regard, Levinas's philosophy could also be described as a theory of subjectivity first, and a theory of ethics second (Slote, 2016). Indeed, Levinas's thoughts are not 'simply intellectual exercises' for those who read them but are also personal because Levinas's philosophy calls the self as a starting point to any ethical encounter (Katz, 2003, p.ix). Hereof, this dissertation is not just an academic pursuit, but it is also a personal

journey of a work-in-progress self to develop a thinking of and response to the otherness of the other beyond multicultural and assimilation discourse.

Consequently, my aim is to build up a critical discussion on the teaching of Ethics in schools, in relation to these four research questions:

1. How are concepts of otherness and othering created in schools through the introduction of the teaching of Ethics?
2. Does the teaching of Ethics adequately respond to the otherness of the other?
3. What does it mean to be hospitable to the otherness of the other and how can this be achieved?
4. Is it possible to transcend othering and establish a genuine understanding with the other without assimilating the other to the category of sameness?

I hope that my dissertation will contribute to raising a critical consciousness of some of the normalising and assimilative factors in education, and possibly in the teaching of Ethics, that erase the differences of students through the accomplishment of a universal discourse. I also hope to contribute to the educational discussion on the ethical implications of ambivalence in relation to our social and cultural differences.

### **1.3 Who am I in this study?**

I was brought up and socialised in a relatively homogenous and devout Catholic Malta, where the face of the other was that of the regular tourist who visits our shores to soak up the sun. Nowadays, a mother of two young boys, I am no longer religious, having walked away from the Catholicism of my childhood a long time ago. I am trying to give my sons a secular upbringing which can be challenging, especially in a country like Malta, where despite the vast advancement in terms of social progressivism, its state-run schools still endorse a Catholic ethos, and an ethnocentric curriculum (Chircop, 2018). This, by and large, is equally reflected in other aspects of life in Malta, including political functions. To name but one example, each Parliamentary session is opened with a prayer.

Thus, the choice of EE, introduced in 2013, brought to me, as a parent, an initial sense of relief and justice. It did not just acknowledge the diversification of worldviews in our schools, but also offered non-Catholic students, like my sons, an alternative kind of road map to the art of leading a good life. Additionally, the subject's focus on rational ethical reasoning has the potential to address the lacuna of moral agency, highly observed when it comes to issues detrimental to the very fabric of our society. Whereas generations of Roman Catholic classes seem to me to have modelled adults who are not necessarily either selfless or ethical, the new subject's view on rationality as a criterion and motivator for ethical behaviour appears to be better equipped to expose and counteract indifferences, discriminations, oppressions, and social injustices in contemporary societies. These aspirations, later on, motivated me to become an Ethics teacher.

My professional encounter with EE started with a postgraduate course in The Teaching of Ethics in Schools, which I completed a year after its introduction. It was during this time that the programme's attachment to the Western tradition became evident and made me realise that, while it would suit non-religious people, like me, it might pose problems to particular religious minorities, especially non-Western, whose worldview might be distinctively different. What if the religious other wants to be recognised in her difference, and is not interested in being understood, explained or justified in terms of a Westernised Ethics curriculum? While these questions led me to extend my studies to a Masters level at the University of Malta and birthed the research behind this dissertation, it was later on, when I started teaching Ethics, that such questions became more pronounced. An anecdote from my own experience as an Ethics teacher illustrates this point.

One particular Ethics class of six thirteen-year-olds was quite challenging in their seeming resistance towards learning and unruly behaviour. All students, except for one, had a migrant background, having come to Malta to flee war or economic crisis. Four were Syrians and Muslims, one was Bulgarian and Eastern Orthodox, and the other was Maltese whose mother was a Russian immigrant and who identified himself with Russian Orthodoxy. I often felt it was a concoction of factors which gave rise to their resistance. For the majority, I was speaking an unfamiliar language. Although they could overall understand the discussions, they had only been to Malta for quite a short while to confidently engage in classroom discussions in a logical way, as is expected in the teaching of Ethics. Moreover, despite their age, they

were still struggling with reading, writing and academic performance in general, especially those who had never stepped inside a school before their coming here. However, a student's remark during a particular lesson sensitised me to the fact that such resistance could primarily be the result of their reaction to the content of the curriculum and the nature of teaching and learning in the Ethics classroom, as they contradict the beliefs and mental models that these students bring with them.

Stay out of this, Miss! You are not like us!

This was Khaled's<sup>1</sup> cross reply to me for being sympathetic towards his classmate, Khadija, who dared put a profile picture of her face on Facebook, unveiled. What she did was haram, Khaled said, now enjoying the support of the other Syrian boys. It goes against the teachings of Allah as it opens the gate to temptation and evil for Khadija and those who see her picture.

I felt it was an opportune moment to open a dialogue on tolerance and question if certain cultural or religious beliefs or attitudes could be powerful obstacles to achieving mutual understanding. I was hoping that, in the process, they would realise how irrational their argument was. But my attempt was looked upon with suspicion and resistance. There was no way that a Western female teacher could challenge their worldview and empathise with a Syrian girl who was "betraying" her native culture to fit into a new one. To them, it was none of my business. I was, in their eyes, an instigator of this cultural assimilative force which they seemed willing to resist.

As much as I was irritated by their exorbitant comments and sexist attitudes towards Khadija, I tried to shrug them off as immaturity and narrow-mindedness. When we are young, we often believe the ideological worlds said to us and which we repeat, unquestioningly. My students were still young, after all, and their worldview was still forming, and it did not seem to me that I was convincing them into any particular ethical view. Isn't challenging undisputed cherished fundamental beliefs part of what Biesta (2013) refers to as the beautiful risk of

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<sup>1</sup> All names and identifying details mentioned in this study have been changed to protect the privacy of students and research participants.

teaching and something to maintain? Isn't it also part of the philosophical reflection? I was, thus, prepared not to shy away from difficult ethical topics in future lessons.

Yet, I did feel like I was walking on eggshells each time I came face to face with this class, especially when tackling particular topics, such as animal abuse and diverse sexual orientations, from a rights perspective. Resistance did not always come from one specific religion only, but it seemed that there was a relation between resistance and students who were staunch in their religious beliefs. Khaled was one of such students who experienced the most discomfort. At his worst, he stormed out of the classroom whenever he sensed that the dialogue was taking a path which might contradict his beliefs.

Such experiences of discomfort did not just unsettle the students but had affected me too, because although these moments could have been openings for individual transformation, they seemed to involve some kind of ethical violence. My profession requires me to utilise pedagogical tools and resources to help students become more normative and rational to fit into the moral community of the Ethics classroom. But why, then, did it feel that I was, in a way or another, inflicting violence on them? Was my positioning, both as an Ethics teacher and as non-religious, concealing a kind of deceit in "helping" students side-line their particularities and come closer to "my", and the curriculum's, civilised Western tradition? Moreover, why was my encounter with the students putting to question my long-cherished beliefs and modalities of thinking? More specifically, what am I to do with this entanglement within this self-defeating dialectic of ethical transformation and violence? Could this uncanny zone of in-betweenness come to signify the presence of an unstated ethics that exists in the silent space between the teacher and the student?

#### **1.4 Outline of dissertation**

In the following Chapter 2, I discuss the design of the research process and demonstrate how the philosophy of Levinas, coupled with postmodern and poststructuralist insights, have worked both within myself and this thesis.

Chapter 3 outlines the development of EE since its conception in 2013 and its implementation in Maltese state schools. It also discusses some key aspects of the Ethics curriculum related

to its applied philosophical approach, Matthew Lipman's notion of community of inquiry, and Jerome Bruner's spiral approach to learning.

I then present the theoretical framework, in Chapter 4, which draws on Levinas's argument that 'ethics is first philosophy'. His ideas sit in contrast to most of the Western philosophical thought which regards otherness or alterity as something to be conquered through knowledge and understanding. Such an approach towards otherness is, for Levinas, subtle violence. Ethicality then is not a matter of following the rules for right demeanour but is manifested in my infinite responsibility towards the otherness of the other. Levinas's view of otherness goes against the grain of much academic discussion about the other. Thus, my theoretical engagement with Levinas serves as a personal reflection on the implications of my profession, whereby I am trained to teach students how to think critically about moral issues. Could my teaching perpetuate the violence that Levinas is so concerned about? How can I rethink my approach towards the different other who I encounter in my profession?

Chapter 5 draws from research participants' observations, as well as my own, to critically analyse structures and processes of othering in the Ethics classroom. The perpetuation of performativity and the production of the democratic citizen through the teaching of Ethics evidence the instrumentalist tendencies of the subject. Such tendencies are both means and ends to assimilate the other towards the same.

Chapter 6 analyses data from the theoretical framework, as well as postmodern, poststructuralist and feminist theories, to problematise what seems to be an oversimplified conception of community promoted in the Ethics classroom.

Chapter 7 builds on the previous one and discusses the role of empathy in the teaching of Ethics in schools, defined as the essential glue that holds the Ethics community together. Without disavowing the importance of empathy to feel with the other, it is argued that there are limits to an empathic understanding of the other. Moreover, it asks if such an understanding constitutes ethical violence.

By way of concluding, in Chapter 8, I argue that the teaching of Ethics in Maltese schools is of significant importance in contributing to personal and social change, through critical thinking and the fostering of moral agency. This notwithstanding the fact that it might exert ethical violence on particular students whose outlooks and beliefs are not in line with the ideas of the 'good' life promoted by the Ethics curriculum. Consequently, Ethics teachers are encouraged to think of their responsibility not only in terms of performativity, but also as an opening to the vulnerability of the otherness of their students.

## CHAPTER 2 | The research process

*Once again I stand at the gate that is ajar. Now that my life has followed the course of the winding arabesque, I find myself once more at the place where I started.*

(Shammas, 1988, p. 226)

Ellett (2011) quotes Anton Shammas to create an adequate analogy between the intricate patterns of the Islamic arabesque, with its intertwining and spiralling foliage and branches, and the intricacies and complexities of her role as a researcher. Very often, like Shammas, she feels she is still following ‘the course of the winding arabesque’ without having gone far away from ‘the place where [she] started’ (1988, p.226). I cannot but feel the same. Perhaps this is because, during the research process, as Ellett, evoking van Manen, observes, ‘things turn very fuzzy just when they seem to become so clear’ (Ellett, 2011, p.12). Yet, on the other hand, this very same process of researching, reflecting and writing uncovers possibilities, to borrow a phrase from Mercieca (2012), of my ‘becoming-teacher’ and ‘becoming-researcher’. This sense of becoming is the goal, that something, that you reach for during your lifetime and profession albeit the consciousness of the impossibility of ever arriving. Thus, this chapter is an account, written in hindsight, of the decisions taken at the outset of the research process which eventually influenced the collection and analysis of data. Furthermore, it discusses the ontological and epistemological assumptions underlying this study, and the tensions that I experienced throughout the process of research.

### 2.1 Betwixt and between

Due to the exploratory, moral and ethical nature of this study, it was decided from the start to embark on a philosophical inquiry and having Levinas’s philosophy of the other (1969, 1981) as my theoretical lens through which I would inquire into the ongoing tension between sameness and otherness. However, since the research questions situate this study in time and context, it was sensible to interview Ethics teachers in relation to the experience of



othering which occurs in schools as a result of totalising ways of knowing. According to Levinas, we tend to totalise the other, either by keeping the differences of the other separate from ours (an expression of relativism), or by putting emphasis on sameness and coming together (an expression of universalism) (Manderson, 2006). My engagement in dialogue with these teachers and a philosopher helped me to better understand the complex process of constructing otherness, sameness and belonging, and to further substantiate my argument in the chapters to follow. However, it must be noted that, in the process of this research, I myself was deployed as an Ethics teacher in Maltese state schools. For this reason, my personal observations and reflections have been taken into account, as well. This study draws upon both philosophical and qualitative methodologies and, in consequence, does not fit neatly into the typical understanding of each domain, mirroring the attachment of this study to postmodern and poststructural sensibilities.

Contrasting traditional scientific methods, philosophical inquiry does not generally use research techniques, such as interviews, to produce empirical data, but rather depends on one's natural abilities to think and reason about the world in which we live. This is the view of many late and contemporary philosophers who, as observed by Stoothoff (1966) in "The Autonomy of Philosophy", are of the conviction that 'one need never resort to empirical facts in order to validate a philosophical thesis' (p.1). Such an understanding of philosophical inquiry is questioned by Stoothoff himself as evidenced by his conclusive remark that the use of empirical data is 'possible, and perhaps indispensable' for supporting and clarifying a philosophical examination (1966, p. 22). It is in this vein that I approached this study. While empirical data was crucial to get better insights of conventional views that attempt to homogenise the image of the other in schools, philosophy offered conceptual and reflective tools to explore, clarify and dig deeper into these issues.

## **2.2 Thinking philosophical and philosophical thinking**

As previously mentioned, Levinas's ethical theory provided the backbone of the philosophical framework of this study and also informed the method of data collection and analysis, as discussed further later. But, why Levinas?

As explained in Chapter I, I came to the knowledge of Levinas's philosophy at a postgraduate course at the University of Malta. There was no reference to his insights in the philosophy of education module which was part of my graduate teacher training course. I am left to assume that this could be because, as many commentators and critics of Levinas remark, his thoughts do not provide a straight forward application of philosophy to practice.

Levinas's appeal to be for the other connected with my motherhood status and the heavy burden of responsibility associated with it. As a mother of two young boys, I am conscious that there is no escape from my responsibility towards them. They claim me in ways that I could never have expected or experienced before. It's a never ending insurmountable responsibility which precedes any other responsibility which I might have towards myself. Further, it does not expect the same in return. Levinas indeed views the asymmetrical parent-child relationship as the ethical relationship par excellence, which translates into a heartening engagement between similar selves who, nevertheless, cannot be contained by or reduced to one another. Since my connection with Levinas, I have been engrossed thinking if this parent-child relationship could be transferred to the multitude of relations at a professional level. It seemed to me that Levinas's penetrating concern with ethics makes his thoughts essentially significant to education: a field that is ultimately concerned with the transformative dimension of human subjects.

As a preliminary step, I set up to introduce myself to Levinas's two major works translated to English and familiarise myself with secondary literature as much as possible. Having no background or training in philosophy, besides the flimsy, limited knowledge I acquired during my undergraduate course, my engagement with Levinas's insights proved to be an arduous, daunting and lengthy task. This was because: 1) his philosophy is so deep that I had to rely on various reader's guides to get me through the thickest of difficulties concerning his thinking; 2) reading Levinas demands at least basic knowledge of the history of Western philosophy from which to proceed; and 3) in the conduct of philosophising, I found myself led to an ever deepening cycle of questions, rather than settling upon a conclusive answer as to what would be the best approach to deal with religious pluralism in Maltese state schools. The hope of finding something out through my readings on Levinas, seemed to lessen by the day. As Chanter remarks on reading Levinas, '[t]here is a drive to continue reading despite the

diminishing returns it seems to yield: the more one reads, the less one understands. [...] The effect is to induce more reading' (2001, p.1).

Thus, this study is no more than a modest attempt to let myself open up to a new meaning of the practice of philosophy. This meaning is not simply an abstract set of principles to which we subscribe but one through which we can, as Ayers quoting Maxine Greene argues, 'shock ourselves into new awareness of what we take for granted and often do not see' (2013, p. 121). Segal and Jankelson (2016) translate these moments of interruption in our lives, when we are uncertain and even anxious, as openings through which we can explore the assumptions that guide our actions and open up new ways of being. It is with this attitude of mind, which admittedly creates a sense of vulnerability, that I approached Levinas's other-centred ethics. In this way, I see myself also part of the research, in the sense that I am not doing research for the sake of doing research. Rather, it is research that arises, out of disappointment, or rather my deep concern and care for the religious and non-religious other in Maltese schools. Further, with Levinas as an informant to my thinking, it is not the other as the problem that is the focus of my research, but myself. It is research that allows me to be, in Kristeva's words, 'the subject-in-process' (1986, p.13).

Many may ask if the process of philosophising, especially when coupled with postmodern and poststructuralist thought, has anything "real" to contribute to research. In his argument for philosophical thinking in research, Eisner (as cited in Koetting & Malisa, 2008) observes that some researchers within the social sciences associate philosophy with academic distraction, since, in their view, it "seduces" us into asking more questions about the nature of things which might produce more hesitations and paralyse us from taking any action. Similarly, Denzin and Lincoln (2005) assert that qualitative research grounded in postmodern or poststructural theory is being 'marginalize[d] and politicize[d]' by some because it is often seen to be concerned with 'political correctness, [...] radical relativism, narratives of the self, and armchair commentary' (p.16). Such perceptions could lead to the conclusion, as rightly noted by Schutz (2000), that postmodern research cannot contribute anything relevant to teachers or other stakeholders who wish to improve education. But, like Schutz, I believe this criticism is not thoroughly fair. While it might be true that approaching a philosophical inquiry in education from a postmodern or poststructuralist perspective runs the risk of being caught in

the contradiction of desiring and yet critiquing particular aspects of education, however, it seeks to explore attentively the undercurrents of tension involved in politics and education.

Very often it is the case that the hectic life in our schools and the ever increasing burden of loaded syllabi, “raising standards”, “attaining targets”, assessment and dealing with pupils’ behaviour leave us teachers feeling frustrated, worn-out and disheartened. Consequently, we tend to lose the sense of why we are teaching. We are so immersed in our determination to meet with all the demands of our profession that the theories and policies that guide our practice may go unnoticed and unquestioned. The importance of critical philosophy in educational research is exactly at this point. It takes thoughtful inquiry and reflection to become conscious not only of what and how we should teach but also to be ‘critical or suspicious of the institutional settings’ in which we practice (Burbules, 2007, p.15).

In this sense, this philosophical inquiry, grounded in the writings of Levinas, helped me to examine and question my previous understandings of difference, which, as Burbules argues, entail the idea of schools or teaching programmes as a ‘melting pot’ that bring pupils ‘together from different countries or backgrounds to become part of a common culture and society’, (2007, p.16) or a common curriculum. This study, thus, brought more clarity to my own biases and more awareness of the other’s vulnerability.

Levinas’s philosophy sits well with postmodern and poststructural thought in its critique of philosophical discourse of modernity. His non-prescriptive philosophy joins the subjective tradition of postmodernists. In fact, Levinas’s non-foundational ethics is shared by postmodern thinkers who insist that there is no grand narrative telling us what is real and how to behave, but only what Lyotard (1984) termed as little narratives, which each culture constructs to fulfil its needs. Many critics, though, equate the postmodern view of morality as leading to cultural and moral relativism. They argue that, if every moral view is as good as every other, then one’s own values and the values of one’s society have no special status. This seems to make moral relativism well suited to explain a “live and let live” attitude toward other people’s values and lifestyle. While I would personally agree that moral relativism is a condition of postmodernity, I do not agree that postmodern thought is suggestive of an “anything goes”

outlook toward ethics or politics. Rather, postmodern thought reminds me to examine those forces of influence within my own culture which lure me to assume that the world divides neatly into us and them or that I am in the right while the others, by default, are in the wrong. It is worthy of note that Levinas challenges the relativism and solipsism of postmodernism in acknowledging the other. In his exploration of Levinas's "Meaning and Sense", Blum (2000) exposes that, although I always meet the other 'within some particular culture', the other's face 'is not culturally relative' (p.91). For Levinas, the face transcends culture and history. According to Blum, Levinas does not reject the relativity of cultures, but rather warns against the tendency to reduce the other to her visible cultural or religious decoration. Levinas calls for a kind of moral humility and responsibility that asks of me to step outside of myself to receive the other who marks the limit of my identity. It is for such reason that Bauman (1993) argues that Levinas's ethics embodies a response to the postmodern condition. The fact that such ethics is not about moral codes or principles, nor is it governed by rationality, enables it to sit neatly in the ethics of postmodernity, whose aims are specifically to be without any foundation and to readmit the other as a neighbour (Bauman, 1993).

My openness to and engagement with Levinas, however, did not come without personal bias. It became evident, at the outset, that there are various readings of Levinas since the richness of his works allows for varied ways of interpretation. However, I recognised that my own background made me tilt towards a reading of Levinas which deals with his ethics in general, from a humanistic perspective. My interpretation of Levinas's ethics is one which promotes the service to the other, which in a sense is a manifestation of humanism, but, it is 'a humanism of the other man' (Critchley, 2014, p.181). I took on Critchley's claim that Levinas's first concern in his philosophical works is not religious but rather ethics. Although Levinas employs religious language to unfold the concept of the other, it can be argued that Levinas is not concerned with writing theology. By no means do I intend to dismiss the importance of Levinas's Jewish background for understanding his thought. Still, my status as a non-believer favours a secular reading of Levinas, one where God is not a necessary element in his fundamental ethics. Thus, following Derrida, when Levinas claims that the 'ethical relation is a religious relation', I understand a non-sectarian and a non-confessional nature of religion, one where 'being-together as separation' opens the possibility of ethics (Derrida, 1978, p.95).

### **2.3 Through the lens of Levinas: Theory-led thematic analysis**

To better understand how binary modes of thought, the 'us' and 'them', are constructed and maintained in schools, it was best to add qualitative methods to my inquiry which, as Schram (2003) asserts, work through complexity rather than around or in spite of it. Therefore, this study lent itself to three in-depth interviews with two Ethics teachers each to help me get a better sense of my questions, queries and assumptions in relation to the reality out there in schools. It may perhaps be observed that I had originally stated in the study proposal to carry an interview with one head of school, one assistant head, two ethics teachers and one learning support assistant in a school where EE is being offered. But, as my thoughts evolved, I started to realise that multiple interviews with the same participants would be more suitable to achieve a better understanding of the complex issues which are at stake in the construction of our understanding of the other in schools. In consultation with my supervisor, I thus settled on three in-depth interviews with a Primary and Secondary Ethics teacher, respectively, as these would allow me to follow-up on questions and probe for further meaning. The Primary Ethics teacher also had the experience of teaching the subject at a middle-school level. Also, my late decision to interview teachers was based on the fact that they could provide first-hand accounts of the multilayer nature of internal othering whilst also discuss pedagogical possibilities that promote hospitality towards the alterity of the other. In addition, although the participants and I share a sense of a common identity (that of being a teacher), their decision to shift to the teaching of Ethics made them ideal candidates for me to develop new and broader insights about EE in schools. After becoming an Ethics teacher, in the course of this study, myself, I was able to complement their insights with my own observations. Following Hiller and DiLuzio (2004), and as explained in more depth further on, I did not merely see the research participants as '[...] a container to be emptied of its relevant information' (p.3), but rather as co-researchers with whom I engaged in this project of meaning-making (Hiller & DiLuzio, 2004; Bondi, 2013). Somehow, both the participants and I were affected in this process as we conversed and thought deeply, as evidenced, for instance, by the teachers' commitment to ponder further and answer certain questions at subsequent interviews.

The six interviews, each ranging between approximately one and a half and three hours, were recorded and conducted over a period of five weeks. They were carried out outside school

hours in a variety of places chosen by the participants: private homes, university campus and cafes. Instead of employing a formal structure, the interviews were semi-structured in which a set of questions formed the interview guide and functioned as the main frame and structure of the interview. The further elaborations on the initial reactions provided by the teachers were left open and unstructured to elicit more thorough reflectively dense accounts. In this way, both informants and myself could formulate and articulate the web of meanings that construct our understanding of the other, otherness and the self. Considering that the interview questions were informed by the philosophy of Levinas, and also that some of the questions related directly to his philosophy, it was appropriate to share the interview guide with the teachers a few days prior to each face-to-face interview. The interviews produced an extensive body of text that was thematically analysed.

Usually, thematic analysis is the most widely used qualitative approach to analysing interviews, even though it is either stated as something else (such as content analysis), or not recognised as any particular method at all (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The reason I chose this method was that it employs a more flexible and reflective process and can encapsulate the richness and in-depth nature of qualitative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In addition, being a method that identifies meaning, thematic analysis complements the interpretive and constructivist dimension of this study. The type of thematic analysis that I chose to conduct was driven by my theoretical interest in the area of study, meaning that Levinas's ethical theory provided the themes of analysis which then structured the way that the data was explored. This required me to become, in Morse's (2002) words, as 'theory smart' as possible prior to the analysis, since it was not the type of analysis which centres on themes that arise naturally from the data. However, the fear of violating the data by imposing pre-decided themes was prevalent and very uncomfortable, especially because the same theoretical framework that I was exploring warns against the imposition of my rationality on the other. This knowing landed with a certain heaviness as these tensions seemed conflicting, until I decided to get going with this paradoxical, aporetic feeling and trust Morse's (2002) suggestion that 'a researcher might be able to build incrementally on a foundation of what is known yet still work inductively' (p.295). I tried to do this by approaching the data collection and analysis with an attitude of openness which helped me develop new unexpected insights and learn from the contributions of the teachers, even though, in part, I was concerned with discovering what the data had to offer within the bounds of my predetermined themes. Having said that, the latter brings me

to acknowledge that there is a real possibility that a theory-led analysis could bias and limit the interpretation of data.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded immediately after they took place. They were then provided to the participants to ensure they reflected their thoughts and feelings and to add further reflections that might have occurred after the interview. The coding at this stage was again suggested by the key foundations of Levinas's ethical theory. This study also focused on the expression of a Levinasian understanding of totalising ways of knowing in written material, such as educational policies, curricula, syllabi and newspapers articles. Levinas's ethical theory provided a structure for taking the thematic analysis beyond the semantic content of the data, as it makes explicit what's implicit and the taken-for-granted theories or set of conventions which guide our practice. Thus, the level at which the analysis revolves is described by Braun and Clarke (2006), referencing Boyatzis, as 'latent' (p.89).

Analysis and writing were non-linear processes, in the sense that I was constantly going back to the data set to reorient myself to the proposed purpose of the interviews and the other textual material. For the development of themes and flow of argument, excerpts from the different interview transcripts were lifted and brought together.

#### **2.4 Ethical considerations after Levinas: An alternative research-ethics framework**

Due to its qualitative side, this study involved gaining ethical approval which was sought from the University Research Ethics Committee at my academic institution. Additionally, permission was sought from the Malta Ethics Teachers Association Committee to upload on the association's Facebook page an information letter explaining the purpose of the study and emphasising the voluntary and confidential nature of the study. Eventually, the first Primary and Secondary Ethics teachers who approached me and expressed their interest in participation, were selected and their individual consent was obtained.



Incidentally, the informants were two female Maltese teachers whom I happened to know prior to the interviews, to varying degrees, from a postgraduate course that we attended a few years ago. Both teachers were in their thirties with more than a decade of teaching experience in Maltese state schools, of which more than one year was dedicated to the teaching of Ethics. In fact, the latter was the only requirement for this study. My acquaintance with the informants did not seem to encumber the quality of the research since, as Polkinghorne points out, '[...] it is not possible to achieve objective knowledge because the only knowledge available to humans is subjective and relative' (1989, p.27). On the contrary, it seemed to add positively to the process by easing thoughtful dialogue even when I asked questions that were somehow personal and sensitive. To this day, I am still affected and humbled by these teachers, who willingly gave of their time for this study, engaged wholeheartedly in discussions and trusted me with their interpretation of the world.

Nonetheless, contrary to the common perception that the research interview is quite a plain sailing method to carry out, in actual fact, it is not that straightforward or effortless. Engaging with the teachers in conversation, was both easy and not. Adding complexity, there was a deeper angst which surfaced at the outset of the interview process by my heightened awareness of power relations in interviews. If Kvale (2006) is right in pointing out that 'a research interview is not an open and dominance-free dialogue between egalitarian partners, but a specific hierarchical and instrumental form of conversation, where the interviewer sets the stage and scripts in accord with his/her research interest' (p.484), how could I then approach the other in conversation in an ethical way? Put differently, how could I be congruent between Levinas's theoretical orientation to ethics and the interview process if the interview encounter is always an 'asymmetrical' encounter (Kvale, 2006; Hiller & DiLuzio, 2004)?

It became evident that having Levinas as an informant to my research process, stirred me to start thinking of ethics in research not in terms of guidelines and codes, predetermined by ethics review boards, but as an 'experience of being open to irreducible otherness at the dynamic moment of the encounter with alterity' (Ajana, 2008, p.23). While informed consent, confidentiality and protection of research participants from harm, served to outline expectations vis-à-vis my relation to these teachers (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004), however, adhering to these rules did not equate to Levinas's conception of ethics. Furthermore, I felt these guidelines were somehow incomplete when it came to my own ethical struggle of how

to prevent the totalising knowledge of the other. Consequently, as I thought how to hold ethics central to the research process, I heeded Cannella and Lincoln's caution of the neoliberal individualistic discourses surrounding research ethics which give rise to regulations that create 'the illusion that moral concerns, power issues, justice, protecting other human beings (and so on) have been addressed with no further need for concern' (2007, p.316). Relatedly, Vermeylen and Clark (2016) contend that 'ethical sensibilities' unfold through my encounter with the research participants and thus cannot be foreseen (p.10). With Levinas in the foreground, it was useful at this point to be mindful of the fact that, even though a dialogue appears to be a harmless conversation between two people who desire the well-being of each other, it might still be totalising in the subjugation of the other for the benefit of the I (Biesta, 2003, 2013; Kaplan, 2006). During the dialogical interview, this manifests itself when the researcher forgets that the other is 'the stranger who visits me' (Peperzak, 1989, p.17) from outside my worldly concerns and plans, and whose desire is to preserve her difference, and her perception of the world, which are certainly different and separate from mine.

For Levinas, to approach the other in conversation means:

[T]o welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore *to receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity* [emphasis added]. But this also means: to be taught (Levinas, 1969, p.55).

Clearly, a Levinasian dialogue brings a disruption of the most common understanding of dialogue which takes after Buber's 'I-Thou' (1937) form of relationship, in which I make an effort to come into a relation with the other person as a unique being, *equal* to myself. In such a relation, both the other and I aspire to liberal principles like tolerance and mutual respect which, according to Buber, can only be attained if we look at the world through each other's eyes and comprehend each other's thoughts and feelings. In the subsequent chapters, more will be said about this approach to dialogue in the pedagogy of the Ethics classroom, where it is presumed that dialogue will at all times end up with us agreeing or feeling empathy or understanding for each other. This contrasts sharply to Levinas's view of dialogue which is concerned with what remains unspeakable in any relation and what remains unknowable about

the other (Burbules & Bruce, 2001). Levinas criticises Buber's interpretation of dialogical relations as being deeply rooted in mutuality, whereas, for him, the other is always present before the I. In his ethics, it is the I alone, and not the others included, that is responsible for the command of the other. It is precisely this asymmetry, Burbules and Bruce (2001) argue, this non-reciprocity that diverges also with Jürgen Habermas's unforced consensus and Hans-Georg Gadamer's fusion of horizons. It follows that a Levinasian dialogue is faithful to the ethical imperative that gives precedence to the other and is therefore based on a conversation between two different persons who do not seek, in the Gadamerian sense, 'to find a common thread between [their] discords' (Weber, 2011, p.6). Rather, it is a dialogue where the I recognises the alterity of the other and acknowledges her obligation to protect this alterity (Joldersma, 2001).

Undeniably, Levinas's ethical responsibility is difficult to conceptualise. In fact, during my research, it translated into many tensions and questions which arose before, during and after participant interviews that took me by surprise and led me on a trail of sense making. As Ellett (2011) rightly observes, along the research process there were tense moments where I resisted the Arabesquian windings and swirls, fearing the laborious path but mostly the destination. I desperately wished to go back to my comfort zone. But as trust built up, it becomes more natural to accept uncertainty. Immersion granted me a way to mature with these tensions such that after some months the load began to lighten as I opened up to new possibilities and understandings. This study changed me in ways I did not always understand in time, thus, embracing a patient mind-set was also essential.

## **CHAPTER 3 | Ethics Education within the local context**

### **3.1 The stronghold of the Catholic Church in Malta**

In Malta, the Catholic Church and its symbolic reminders exhibit a pervasive influence within all levels of society, from school colleges named after saints to religious statues found in many streets, religious house names or the amount of churches and chapels found on the Archipelago's two main islands, to name but a few.

Malta stands as an exception, when compared to other EU Member States: whilst the country is one of the most progressive when it comes to civil liberties, the Church's influence on much of Malta's populace and on political decision-making remains very strong.

Concerning the latter, it is pertinent to emphasise the strong accentuation of Roman Catholicism in Malta's Constitution of 1964 which, oddly, at the same time provides for the freedom of religion. Article 2 of Chapter I of the Constitution states that (1) The religion of Malta is the Roman Catholic Apostolic Religion; (2) The authorities of the Roman Catholic Apostolic Church have the duty and the right to teach which principles are right and which are wrong; and (3) Religious teaching of the Roman Catholic Apostolic Faith shall be provided in all State schools as part of compulsory education.

The latter sub-article is mirrored in Article 47(3) of the Education Act, Chapter 327 of the Laws of Malta, which states that '[i]t shall be the duty of the Minister to provide for the education and teaching of the catholic religion in State schools and to establish the curriculum for the education and teaching of that religion in those schools according to the dispositions in this regard of the Bishops in Ordinary of these Islands'. In fact, before the introduction of the EEP, state schools did not provide any subject alternative to CRE for those students who opted out of religious education. It is important to note that the Ministry yet lacks the capacities to respond to the expressed needs of many students (or their parents) to attend EE in their respective school.

Despite the rollout of EE, the Church and Roman Catholicism retain a stronghold in all state schools. This is exemplified in the scholastic calendar which is moulded around Catholic feast days, or the fact that schools are instructed to make the necessary arrangements with local parish priests to hold religious activities, such as pre-Easter Lenten talks. Many schools have reserved spaces within their premises for Catholic worshipping (Darmanin, 2013a). Adopting a case study approach, Borg and Mayo (2006) demonstrate how the Catholic culture in Malta - being the dominant culture - is allowed access to state schools and permitted to work through intellectuals, such as teachers, curriculum administrators and text book authors, to breed its privileged position within society. Borg and Mayo conclude that this is achieved through both curricular messages and pedagogical practices. Indeed, it can be argued that schools conduct much of their activities to fit the needs of their Catholic students and families, as if the Maltese people were '[...] an undifferentiated mass, a unitary subject, with one belief system' (Borg & Mayo, 2006, p.44).

### **3.2 Where do we stand?**

The first advancement at a policy level to accommodate non-Catholics and non-religious pupils in public schools came about in 2012 when the NCF proposed EE as an alternative programme to CRE. The authors of the NCF noticeably felt that these pupils should be given some kind of substitution for missing out religion lessons. They declared without going into any detail that 'an Ethics Education Programme is preferred over a Comparative Religious Education programme' (Ministry of Education, Employment and the Family, 2012, p.8).

Darmanin, who has written extensively about the closeness of the Maltese to Catholicism as an ethnoreligious identity and its implications in Maltese schools (see e.g. 2013a, 2013b, 2015) points out that no preliminary public discussion was ever held as to what kind of religious and moral education would best suit the needs of the Maltese populace (2015). Concerning what can be argued to have been a hasty decision or a politically intended move to adequately safeguard the hegemony of the Catholic religion, and indeed the culturally-Catholic Maltese majority, Wain (2017), one of the authors of the EEP, claims that a Comparative Religious Education would have been another pragmatic arrangement. Such an agreement would have seen children sitting together in the same class irrespective of their faith or lack of it, engaging

in a critical and comparative curriculum that would help them understand how and why people act and value in the way they do. This arrangement would not have had pupils segregated along the Catholic and non-Catholic divide as has happened with the introduction of EE.

However, Darmanin (2015) expresses caution about changing the current CRE to Comparative Religious Education to host the religious or non-religious other. She argues that this could see 'a rise in hate crime and a shift in voting patterns to the Far Right' (p.42); a trend, which as she had envisaged, and as outlined in Chapter 1, is taking up momentum both locally and in Europe. She backs up her conclusion by research (2013, 2015) which shows that with the ever-increasing immigrant population, Malta currently endorses a minimalist toleration discourse of the religious others which is mostly pigeonholed by the fall-back impression of the nation as homogenous, Catholic and white European.

In 2014, the implementation of the NCF's proposal was initiated by the Minister for Education and Employment, who commissioned the drafting of the new EE curriculum to a small number of philosophers of education, from the Department of Education Studies at the University of Malta and, specialised teachers. They were tasked to train teachers to teach Ethics in schools and to design the Learning Outcomes Framework for the subject. The latter would provide uniformity, through standardised language, as to what needs to be tackled and assessed in the teaching of ethics across different year groups.

The programme was designed as a standalone subject to run in parallel to Catholic Religious classes. Its design contrasts with any other national programmes overseas, where ethics is taught within non-confessional Comparative Religious Education programmes that usually include secular stances of life, besides the religious. However, because the NCF had explicitly ruled out the teaching of comparative religions, Wain (2016) argues that the only viable option left was to turn to philosophy and propose a secular, rational approach towards morality; one that is independent of religion. Consequently, the EE aims to form students with an ethical maturity that does not depend on whether or not one is a member of a faith, or how devoted one is to it. Therefore, the promotion of ethical values that are common to all great religions and different cultures and societies, such as respect for truth, honesty, fairness, compassion, responsibility, tolerance and generosity, and which are said to bind people together, becomes

significant (Wain, 2016). In this regard, EE feeds itself into a discourse that views the search for shared values as paramount in this age of globalisation and new kinds of diversity. Such discourse assumes that through the identification of shared principles and values, differently situated people can manage their differences and live well together, without resorting to violence.

The design process of the Ethics curriculum was, however, met with criticism from academics for failing to engage the religious and non-religious other. Darmanin (2015) argues that the Imam and a spokesperson from the Malta Humanist Association, for instance, were only invited to give their input on the proposed syllabus during the previously mentioned information seminar, once it was already set. Same applies for senior lecturers from the Faculty of Theology. In response, when interviewed by Montebello and Muscat (2014), Wain counter-argued the criticism by stating that the concepts on which the Ethics Programme is built have no connection with any religious dogma. Nonetheless, Michael Grech, a Junior College Philosophy lecturer, emphasised that notwithstanding the Ethics Programme's secular nature the Department of Philosophy was not consulted during the drafting process, neither (Montebello & Muscat, 2014).

Furthermore, Grech (2014) criticises the choice for EE based on equity and cultural heterogeneity. He argues that EE has created an unfortunate division between a faith morality and a secular one. Also, whereas pupils with a Catholic upbringing have a choice whether to take CRE or EE, non-Catholic pupils are requested to take the latter. It becomes obligatory the minute they opt-out of CRE through what appears to be some kind of forced inclusion. Furthermore, the reduction of the religious and non-religious identities of pupils to the non-Catholic category, is according to Grech (2014) inappropriate given the cultural heterogeneity of these pupils. This suggests that the Ministry for Education and Employment (MEDE) might have overlooked critical cultural differences and nuances in favour of the one-size-fits-all programme. Grech's argument (2014) contends that the concerns of Ethics students' parents given 1) the several interpretations of the good life presented in the Ethics curriculum as equally valid and, 2) specific issues such as homosexuality, being tackled from perspectives that are not following their own moral framework, may be utterly legitimate.

Despite the criticism, by the end of 2014, EE was initially introduced as a pilot project into two primary and two secondary schools at St Clare and Maria Regina Colleges. During the scholastic year 2018/2019, it was offered in 20 out of 67 (30 per cent) primary state schools, and in 19 out of 25 (76 per cent) middle and secondary state schools<sup>2</sup> across all colleges, bar St Margaret College. In that period, the programme catered for 1,271 primary students and 1,367 students in middle and secondary schools, according to information provided by the Education Officer for Ethics during a talk hosted by the Malta Humanist Association on 11 September 2018. It is pertinent to emphasise that these figures do not represent the total number of pupils in state schools who opted out of CRE, since, as stated above, Ethics is not yet rolled out in all state schools. This is the case especially for the primary level, mostly because of human resources limitations. Oddly enough, out of the around 110 teachers trained in Ethics, since its introduction, through a sponsorship by the government, to date not even half are employed as such. Whilst for some it may have been a personal decision not to pursue a career as Ethics teachers, others had their wish to be deployed as such denied, due to MEDE's concern that this will intensify the worrying vacuum already present in the primary sector. To help address the backlog of demand from schools that want to offer Ethics classes while simultaneously retaining qualified Ethics teachers as classroom teachers, MEDE has been issuing calls for Ethics supply teachers despite Wain's warning not to put the subject in the hands of teachers 'not specifically trained to teach it' (2016). Moreover, the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education is continuing, for the fourth consecutive year, to sponsor a one year course for teachers leading to a postgraduate certificate in teaching Ethics.

The situation in middle and secondary schools is not without problems either. There are students in schools that do provide Ethics who, for a variety of reasons, notably timetabling and setting, are denied Ethics classes. To give an example, a head of school can take a unilateral decision not to offer Ethics classes to students who have opted out of CRE because they follow a Core Curriculum Programme, and do therefore not follow a mainstream syllabus. Simultaneously, the same school would be offering Ethics to mainstream students. One can, therefore, ask whether such practices are implemented due to logistical constraints, which force the school's senior management team to take a decision which negatively discriminates against the most vulnerable pupils in the school, or worse even, whether these vulnerable

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<sup>2</sup> Statistical data retrieved from a letter circular sent by the Ministry for Education and Employment (2018) to all staff.



students are considered less worthy of being granted access to an alternative to CRE. In other instances, parents who had demanded Ethics being offered to their children ultimately opted to retain their children in the religion class as the only option for their children to have Ethics would have been by moving to a lower class level<sup>3</sup>.

As reported in local newspapers, when EE kicked off, demand was calculated only based on the number of students refusing to attend religion classes (Caruana, 2016), which number is observably high in schools with a culturally diverse student population. Subsequently, several parents of those children in schools with low demand for EE are being constrained to choose to have their children follow CRE, solely because it is the only educational option available (Leone Ganado, 2016). It was after repeated complaints by concerned parents and the Maltese Association of Parents of State School Students that the Education Ministry, two years after its initiation got in motion a study in state schools. Through a questionnaire, it asked parents for details on their religious beliefs and their preference between EE and CRE, to better understand the current and forthcoming needs of the subject (Leone Ganado, 2016). Three years on, the report analysing this needs assessment has not been made public in full. However, three parliamentary questions tabled in 2018 reveal that the majority of respondents do request EE, albeit not necessarily at the expense of CRE. The following table is an excerpt from the response of the Education Minister to PQ 3397 of 10 January 2018<sup>4</sup> (House of Representatives, 2018):

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<sup>3</sup> Students in junior years in Primary schools, as well as Middle and Secondary schools are set in different levels according to the marks achieved in the Annual Examination in English, Maths and Maltese, as well as their continuous attainment during the scholastic year.

<sup>4</sup> The table below has been translated from Maltese to English. It has been noted that the sum of the figures provided in some of the rows do not add up to 100 per cent.

| Colleges*               | I want my children to be taught Ethics | I do not wish for my children to be taught Ethics | I do not know |
|-------------------------|--|---|---------------|
| Gozo College            | 35%                                    | 24%   | 20%           |
| St Thomas Moore College | 52%                                    | 22%   | 26%           |
| St Benedict College     | 52%                                    | 17%   | 31%           |
| Maria Regina College    | 54%                                    | 29%   | 17%           |
| San Gorg Preca College  | 54%                                    | 21%   | 25%           |
| St Margaret College     | 56%                                    | 16%   | 29%           |
| St Nicholas College     | 56%                                    | 22%   | 22%           |
| St Theresa College      | 60%                                    | 21%   | 20%           |
| St Clare College        | 63%                                    | 22%   | 15%           |

\*The questionnaires from St Ignatius College did not arrive in time for data evaluation.

Table 1: Parents' response of the Ethics Education needs assessment survey (2016)

It is surprising that while the Minister in PQ 3396 (House of Representatives, 2018), refers to a coordinated effort in rolling out EE in Maltese schools, the above table indicates otherwise. It also reveals what seems to be a lack of clarity and coherence about how the subject should be implemented. Despite the majority of parents from St Margaret College are positively inclined to have their children attend Ethics lessons, the Ministry has not been accommodating their wishes. Meanwhile, Ethics was introduced in four state schools in Gozo despite a substantially lesser percentage of parents who would like to have their children attend Ethics lessons. It can, therefore, be argued that whilst policy documents, like the NCF, acknowledge the right of parents to decide not to send their child to CRE, MEDE and schools are undermining parental rights, as well as children's entitlement.

Since its introduction, EE has evolved into an established subject with the appointment of an Educational Officer and the requirement for students to sit for a Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate (MATSEC). Contrasting views exist regarding the question of whether or not EE should be assessed. Opponents note that the (self-) reflective nature of the subject regarding what decisions ought to be taken, requires time to develop and achievements

concerning what decisions ought to be taken cannot be neatly pre-specified. Conversely, proponents hold that students' understanding of the moral language and moral reasoning development can be determined. Moreover, such an assessment would also make students and teachers take the subject more seriously. The measurable aspect of Ethics endorses the prior suggestion provided by the NCF, namely that assessment should primarily focus on formative ways rather than summative. At the time of writing, this is the case for the primary level, where assessment is only done in a formative way. At middle and secondary levels, the final mark of the end-of-year examination is a mix of formative and summative assessment, with the former carrying 60 per cent and the latter 40 per cent of the total. The developmental component of the assessment is set in both Maltese and English, and there are two versions available, one mainstream and one simplified. The summative part takes place thrice a year, after the completion of each module. The Ethics teacher is encouraged to make use of various ways to measure students' learning and performance, such as project work, journaling, individual and group presentations, developing discussions, and designing a situation or a story individually or in groups.

### **3.3 The Ethics Education curriculum**

#### ***3.3.1 Turning to philosophy***

[...] once you've really come to understand that other people think differently from you [...] and they don't do that because they're wicked, or because they haven't been converted to Christianity or because they're primitive or for any of these old slogan-reasons. They have a completely functional, viable vision of the world. It's not yours and it is a marvellous liberation to be able to explore it, that you're enriched by this fact of difference. [...] Unless you're helped through that, and your taste for the other and the different is nurtured and your respect for people's right to be differently nurtured, what have you got? (Clendinnen, 2001)

The Ethics curriculum adopts a philosophical approach. It does not only sensitise students into knowledge and understanding of the moral domain, but it also presents Ethics as a process of

thinking and reflective practices that help students become skilful in ethical inquiry and action. According to Wain, this involves encouraging students to live, in Socratic terms, an 'examined life' (2016, para.6), by providing them with the opportunity to think about traditional values, as well as pay careful attention to their own private beliefs and consider the ethical dimensions of their experiences concerning oneself and others. Furthermore, a philosophical approach to EE could be regarded as the exercise of Aristotle's *phronesis* (Wain, 2014), or what may be translated into practical wisdom. It signifies the habit of making the right decisions and taking the right actions in context, coupled with the never-ending quests of excellence for the common good. As Dewey, to whose theories the Ethics curriculum owes much, notes:

Moral theory begins, in germ, when any one asks, "Why should I act thus and not otherwise? Why is this right and that wrong? What right has any one to frown upon this way of acting and impose that other way?" Children make at least a start upon the road of theory when they assert that the injunctions of elders are arbitrary, being simply a matter of superior position. (Dewey, 1960, p.5)

Following Dewey's line of thought, proponents of ethical inquiry stress that students who engage philosophically with ethical norms concerning their own experience will comprehend that there are different conceptions, principles and ways of looking at things. They will also realise that these can come in tension with each other. Moreover, students will gain insight into how these norms could be reassembled actually to offer meaning for their experiences. As Maughn, quoting Stefano Oliverio argues, through a philosophical approach to EE, 'subjectivity comes into being when the old (that is to say, the past) can be autonomously appropriated and translated into a 'personal' form' (2014, p.21).

The normative ethical theories that are at work in the Ethics curriculum and that students need to engage with throughout the programme are:

- virtue ethics, which focuses on the role of character and virtue rather than one's behaviour;
- consequentialism, which holds that any judgement about the rightness or wrongness of an act depend on the consequences of that act;

- rights-based ethics, which focuses on the respect for and dignity of human persons grounded in their ability to choose freely how to live their lives, and;
- Kantian ethics which, is an example of a deontological moral theory which holds that the rightness or wrongness of an act is not determined by its consequences but on whether that act fulfils our duty.

Throughout history, people have made use of these normative ethical theories to make and substantiate their moral judgements. Cam (2016) argues that when students are made aware of how these normative ethical theories have been utilised in different times and places, they will ‘enlarge [their] social, cultural and historical knowledge and understanding’ (p.11). They will also ‘learn to deal with the sources of disagreement over ethical matters in their own society’ (Cam, 2016, p.11). Similarly, Wain argues that the EEP would help students realise that disagreements are ‘endemic to a society that values freedom of belief and that tolerates cultural difference’ (2016, para.5). Still, they would learn to deal with them ethically.

Given this, it can thus be argued that a philosophical approach to EE differs from character education or values education; the latter makes use of educational activities that are designed to mould the character of students’ in what are considered to be desirable personality traits (Maughn, 2009, 2014; Cam, 2012, 2016). By contrast, EE as a philosophical practice is described as non-denominational; it does not seek to shape pupils’ ethical beliefs and conduct or conform their beliefs and demeanour to conventional norms. This does not imply that the Ethics teacher needs to disregard or pass as irrelevant conventional norms. Instead, she should involve pupils to think critically, reflectively and creatively about them.

### ***3.3.2 Community of Inquiry***

The Ethics curriculum acknowledges that ethical inquiry is not ‘purely a cerebral affair’ (Cam, 2012, p.82). In addition to thinking critically and thinking creatively, it involves what Lipman, the author of Philosophy for Children (P4C), calls caring thinking (1995; 2003); a kind of thinking which focuses on the social aspect of human personality and which takes place when pupils think collaboratively together. Pedagogically, the Ethics curriculum considerably

borrowed from the practice of P4C and its central interpretation of the classroom as a community of inquiry (Col). Following Lipman, whose approach to education has strong roots in Dewey's commitment to ethical enquiry to secure democratic justice in schools, Wain (2016) describes a community of inquiry as,

[...] one that values discussion, dialogue, debate, the exchange of ideas and outlooks in social environment which is free and safe and where participants feel that they and their views are respected; it is, therefore, a community of friends. The community is a place where understanding is built and consensus valued, but also a place of non-violent struggle where arguments are won, if at all, by persuasion. Participants in the community learn value rules and an authority to interpret and enforce them, the teacher in this case. Participation cultivates their intellectual *virtues* like honesty, respect for truth, loyalty in debate and to the argument, fairness, tolerance, trust, moderation, courage, consideration of other views and ideas, [...] and their intellectual and communicative *skills* like putting ideas, views, information, across economically (to allow space for others), reasoning, listening, weighing, exploring, arguing, evaluating, analysis, negotiating and so on. These virtues and skills are obviously also democratic besides being ethical [...] so that the community of inquiry is also a democratic community (hence the Ethics programme is also an education for democratic citizenship). (para.4)

The belief that, in a Col, thinking is not merely an inward absorption of the self about a subject matter or an ethical dilemma but also an activity in social communication and interpersonal exchange, is explanatory in the above quotation. Under the conditions outlined above, the Col can be a representation of lived democracy. Furthermore, when an ethical inquiry involves thinking which is not just geared towards the inquiry but also takes into consideration the emotional state of others, it becomes, as argued by Wain (2016), an ethical practice in itself, where 'ethical values are practised in its way of life' (para.4). The democratic and ethical dimension of the Col is also reflected in the shifting role of the teacher from the traditional idea of a knowledge provider to a facilitator and collaborator. Lipman (2003), in fact, argues that the teacher's purpose is to 'mediate [and] not to dominate' (p.84).

### **3.3.3 A spiral curriculum**

The Ethics curriculum is designed in a spiral way, which means that there is a revisiting of basic concepts, topics, themes, issues or problems throughout the years. This conception of the curriculum was advanced by Bruner (1960) who opposed Jean Piaget's notion of readiness and made famous the claim, '[...] any subject can be taught in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development' (p.33). He argued that schools waste a lot of precious time trying to match the difficulty of subject material to a child's cognitive stage of development. As a result, children are held back by teachers as specific disciplines are believed to be too difficult to understand and must be taught when the teacher trusts the child to have reached the proper disposition of cognitive maturity (1960, p.12). Contrary to this, Bruner believes that a child of any age is capable of digesting complex information, and this could be achieved through a spiral curriculum. The concept of such a curriculum does not merely imply a repetition of topics taught but also an increasing elaboration of it, hence the spiral analogy. Therefore, students in the Ethics classroom return to previous concepts again and again, each time reinforcing previous learning while adding a degree of complexity. For example, pupils in the early years are sensitised to issues of justice through picture story books and are then returned to this theme in their junior and secondary years by means of different resources which are used to inspire inquiry. At each return, the level of inquiry is deepened as pupils' intellectual and communicative skills would have developed further. The use of discussion as a primary teaching method goes through all grades but at secondary level a new emphasis – besides communication - is made on the importance of self-reflection, (Wain, 2016). Pupils are encouraged to view self-reflection as worthy in assisting them in making responsible life choices for themselves concerning others.

Given the above, the authors of the Ethics curriculum succeeded to embed in the syllabus an element of philosophy – a field which is generally perceived as advanced and proper only for tertiary students.

## CHAPTER 4 | A Levinasian understanding of sameness, otherness and difference

This chapter, which serves as the theoretical backbone for the study, starts with a short biography on Emmanuel Levinas to place his life and philosophy in context. It goes on to outline Levinas's forceful critique of traditional Western philosophy. It then looks at some of the fundamental concepts in his thought on the profound importance of the relational self. Since this is my first engagement with Levinas's work, my aim is not to provide an overview of the whole of Levinas's extensive work. I choose instead to explore key ideas and themes, using relevant texts, mainly *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, to elucidate his ideas. The discussion then offers a critique, made by some scholars, of Levinas's ethical project. This chapter, then, ends with a summary of the works of some academics who have used Levinas's works to propose an education otherwise.

Levinas asserts that the self comes into existence through the call of the Other<sup>5</sup>. His proposition counters the Cartesian Western philosophical thought summed up in the proposal 'I think; therefore I am'. Levinas takes issue with the logocentric perspective of the Western philosophical tradition for generating a totalistic discourse that dominates and reduces the Otherness of the Other to sameness and identity. To overcome this, Levinas accords primacy to an asymmetrical relationship between self and Other, whereby the Other is privileged. In this relationship, the self, or I, is held hostage to the Other's otherness because I am responsible not to appropriate or assimilate the Other to my worldly spheres. According to Levinas, this ethical recognition of the Other becomes the only way through which we can coexist in a peaceful and just way.

The philosopher Stanley Cavell remarks that philosophy is intertwined with the concerned philosopher's lived experiences. He writes that, in a sense, philosophy is 'to write your own

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<sup>5</sup> Levinas, very often, capitalises the word Other to highlight the asymmetry of relations whereby the Other is always above and before me, summoning me to respond to his call. In this chapter, I will use the word "Other" in its capitalised form, to reflect Levinas's notion of alterity and asymmetry.



words, to write your own inner voice' (as cited in Borradori, 1994, p.126). I believe that this intertwinement that Cavell speaks about is very real for Levinas. Thus, before proceeding, I trust that a brief familiarity with Levinas's personal, cultural and historical background might be helpful to understand his criticism of traditional philosophy and his re-envisioning of what it means to be human. Derrida has once pointed out, that 'no meaning can be determined out of context' (1978, p.81). Hence, I will continue with a short biography highlighting some events and influences that are relevant for a sympathetic understanding of Levinas's revolutionary thought.

#### **4.1 Emmanuel Levinas: A personal and historical context**

Levinas was born in 1906 in Kovno (now Kaunas), Lithuania, into a moderately affluent, enlightened Jewish family, at a time when Lithuania was still under the control of Imperialist Russia. In 1923, Levinas ventured to the University of Strasbourg, France, from which he received his first degree in philosophy in 1927. He then continued his studies in phenomenology in nearby Freiburg, Germany, where he attended seminars by Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. In the early 1930s, Levinas became a naturalised French citizen, fighting for France during WWII, during which he was captured by the German army and sent to a labour camp in Germany. His experience at the camp marked the beginning of his personal and intellectual detachment from the Western philosophical tradition. He would later mention this profound experience of ostracisation in a short essay in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* (1990), as follows:

There were seventy of us in a forestry commando unit for Jewish prisoners of war in Nazi Germany. [...] The French uniform still protected us from the Hitlerian violence. But the other men, called free, who had dealings with us or gave us work or orders or even a smile – and the children and women who passed by and sometimes raised their eyes – stripped us of our human skin. We were subhuman, a gang of apes. A small inner murmur, the strength and wretchedness of persecuted people, reminded us of our essence as thinking creatures, but we were no longer part of the world. (pp.152-153)

Upon his liberation, Levinas tragically discovered that the Nazis had killed his parents and brothers in Kovno; only his wife and daughter had survived, hiding in France. As Levinas would later confirm, his life and thoughts were 'dominated by the presentiment and the memory of the Nazi horror' (1990, p.291). In fact, whilst Levinas always retained his admiration for Heidegger's radical thinking in *Being and Time*, after the war, he would become one of Heidegger's fiercest critics. His criticism stemmed from the philosopher's active political commitment to National Socialism and his notorious silence about the Holocaust, after 1945, which had deeply affected Levinas. Although his post-war philosophy would not provide much discussion about the monstrous events of the Holocaust, it would but progressively reveal his attempt to address the evil that had happened in the Holocaust by a rethinking of what it means to be a human being (Paparella, 2008). His works would pronounce the need for thinking beyond ontology which would place ethics, expressed as an infinite responsibility to and for the Other, at the heart of any philosophy. In this sense, Levinas's post-war philosophical thought can be understood as a reaction to the Holocaust (Peukert, 1998; Bernstein, 2002; Shaw, 2010) and also as a 'mourning for the victims of National Socialism' (Caygill, 2002).

#### **4.2 The violence of totalising thought**

Affected by the trauma of the Holocaust, Levinas becomes profoundly concerned with our "natural" tendency to reduce what and who is different to the same. The term "the same", which Levinas borrows from Plato, refers to the subject's self-identity and also to the abstract concepts through which the self reduces the distinctiveness of the Other to universal terms (Drichel, 2011). Levinas claims that this inclination is rooted in various Western philosophical concepts that generalise and assimilate individuals to rational processes, negating their individuality (Paparella, 2004). Indeed, Levinas reminds us that 'from its infancy philosophy has been struck with horror of the other that remains Other' (1986, p.346). Consequently, throughout its history, Western philosophy has most often approached the Other through ontology, that is, through the study which tries to understand what it means to exist. Using this model argues Levinas, philosophers made possible the knowledge and comprehension of the other.

But Levinas insists that ontology constitutes ‘a reduction of the other to the same’ which is done through an ‘interposition of a middle or neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being’ (1969, p.43). This process serves me to fit in the unfamiliarity of the other in terms of my understanding, knowledge, and vocabulary. I would then re-identify myself in a way that safeguards my identity, my state of undisturbedness and freedom, hence, my state of security. The other becomes a problem for me to be solved. Interpreting Levinas, Treanor (2006), describes the assimilating forces that shape our minds and practices, as follows:

The shock of the encounter with otherness is mitigated by interpreting it through the mediation of this neutral third term, which makes it understandable by placing otherness within the known categories of the system. I see the other as “like me” in some respects and “unlike me” in others, but both these ways of seeing the other are in terms of “me”. After the initial shock of the otherness is reduced in this manner, the otherness is completely dominated by the assignation of meaning to the other in relation to my projects – by naming the other. For example, I begin to think of the other as “my student”, “my colleague” or “my doctor”. (p.16)

Ontology, then, becomes associated with my obsessive need to find in the particulars of human experience something which is fundamentally familiar, something which holds the other and myself together. However, Levinas holds that imperialistic tendencies motivate ontology, as it does not tolerate Otherness outside of its framework.

For instance, he identifies what he calls ‘ontological imperialism’ in Socrates’s conception of freedom, whereby to be free becomes to mean ‘to receive nothing of the Other but what is in me’ (Levinas, 1969, p.43). Freedom, in the Socratic sense, thus, becomes synonymous with autonomy. In safeguarding my autonomy, I must free myself from the Otherness of the Other.

As represented by Plato, Socrates approaches the Other in conversation through maieutic; a method consisting of a series of questions that are considered to elicit the intellectual rebirth of the Other. Such a technique, argues Todd (2003), still predominates dialogical approaches in educational practices. Questions are posted by teachers to encourage students’ critical

thinking skills, and also to elicit thoughts and underlying preconceptions. Biesta (2008), however, observes that Socrates was not interested in the answers his students gave unless they substantiated his argument. Connecting to this, Levinas advises caution against a maieutic approach to learning, specifically because of two concerns.

Firstly, the maieutic method forces conclusions out of the Other. Through an exchange of questions and clarifications, the Other is made to refine her views so that they become acceptable by myself. As Jeffrey Dudiak (1997) notes, through maieutic, the Other renounces being genuinely Other out of frustration brought about by the challenges to her ideas. According to Levinas, in Socrates's understanding of knowledge, there are echoes of a rational determination that is concerned with 'seizing something and making it one's own, of reducing to presence and representing the difference of being, an activity that appropriates and grasps the otherness of the known' (Hand, 1989, p.76). Secondly, this maieutic method reveals a conception of knowledge that is self-centred, whereby I rediscover the truth that I already possess with the help of a teacher. The acquisition of such knowledge, argues Todd (2003), would not alter me or the world but would facilitate my relation to the Other by absorbing the Other's alterity.

Levinas does not reserve his criticism just to Socrates but extends it towards a myriad of Western philosophical thinkers for being concerned with the ontological dimension of philosophy. According to him, the Western way of doing philosophy, in its entirety, constitutes a totality and has forever been a source of subtle violence because it mutes the voice of the Other:

Western philosophy has most often been an ontology: a reduction of the other to the same by the interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being. This primacy of the same was Socrates' teaching: to receive nothing of the Other but what is in me, as though from all eternity I was in possession of what comes to me from the outside – to receive nothing, or to be free. [...] The ideal of Socratic truth rests on the essential self-sufficiency of the same, its identification in ipseity, its egoism. Philosophy is an egology. (Levinas, 1969, p.43)

Individuals are reduced to being bearers of force that commands them unbeknown to themselves. The meaning of individuals (invisible outside of his totality) is derived from the totality. The unity of each present is incessantly sacrificed to a future appealed to bring forth its objective meaning. (Levinas, 1969, pp.21-22)

Critchley (2002) explains that the totality which Levinas speaks about is characterised by my tendency to grasp the unfamiliarity of the other through general concepts. This grasping would eventually lead me to perceive the Other as a reflection of myself, who looks to the world in the same way as I do. I grasp the other in terms of 'understanding, correlation, symmetry, reciprocity, equality, and [...] recognition' (p.13). In my eyes, the other exists only in her generality and never in her individuality (Levinas, 1969, p.44).

Levinas's most constant critique, however, is directed towards the thought of his two former teachers, Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. He critiques Husserl's *Fifth Cartesian Meditation*, particularly, the notion of 'representation' and 'intentionality' for asserting that the self (the monad) is an entire being and 'master of its own nature as well as of the universe and able to illuminate the darkest recesses of resistance to its powers' (Hand, 1989, p.79). The self is always in control and is driven by its pursuit to 'know thyself'. In this regard, Husserl explicitly ignores the possibility that knowledge can come to us from the Other, in a social moment. He instead ends up his Cartesian Meditations by quoting St. Augustine: 'Do not go outside. Return into yourself. Truth dwells in the inner man' (as cited in Smith, 2003, p.252).

Similarly, Levinas disapproves of Heidegger's work, *Being and Time*, because it suggests the idea of the self (Dasein) as being-with (Mitsein) the other. For Levinas, being-with the Other implies a kind of relationship which is grounded in similarity. It is a communion around something in common, whereby the self places itself side by side with the Other (Levinas, 1998, p.116). But, being a communion, this relationship does not engage with the otherness of the Other. It, somewhat, negates difference. Levinas writes that, 'just as in all the philosophies of communion, sociality in Heidegger is found in the subject alone, and it is in terms of solitude that the analysis of Dasein in its authentic form, is pursued' (1985b, p.93). Therefore, Heidegger's Dasein, just like Husserl's monad, is only concerned with its own being, and with being in power.

Levinas, thus, concludes that the distinct difference of the Other cannot be accounted for by the ontological dimension of philosophy. This model of thinking is concerned with the actualisation of the self even if this costs the negation of the Other's difference. Consequently, Levinas articulates a philosophy that gives precedence to the Other. To do this, he develops the notion of 'infinity', which he borrows from Descartes's *Third Meditation*.

Descartes's thinking concerning the self's awareness of an infinite God fascinates Levinas because it gives rise to the idea of a thought that thinks more than it can think. This notion of infinity does not originate from within myself but is given to me by someone outside the self. In this respect, the idea of infinity contrasts with Plato's theory of recollection, which, as explained above, asserts that the truth is within us waiting to be recollected. In thinking infinity, Levinas argues, the self 'thinks more than it thinks' (1987, p.54). Infinity, then, is associated with transcendence, with what cannot be grasped because it cannot be defined or reduced to my knowledge or my power. It, thus, remains outside, unreachable. Levinas, though, unlike Descartes, does not attribute the self's desire to the infinite to God, but, instead, he writes: 'the idea of infinity is the social relationship' (1987, p.54).

At this point, some scholars of Levinas interpret his notion of the infinite as God, while others refute such reading. Critchley (2004), quoting Putman, argues that the significance of Levinas's concept of infinity lies in the fact that he 'transforms the argument by substituting the other for God' (p.14). For Levinas, it is the Other who is radically different from me, who extends my sense of transcendence. The Otherness of the Other, thus, escapes my rationalisation. In his essay "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity", Levinas describes an encounter with infinity as,

[...] experience in the sole radical sense of the term: a relationship with the exterior, with the other, without this exteriority being able to be integrated into the same. The thinker who has the idea of infinity is *more than himself*, and this inflating, this surplus, does not come from within, as in the celebrated *project* of modern philosophers, in which the subject surpasses himself by creating. (1987, p.54)

The above describes some of Levinas's criticism towards the ontological feature of Western philosophy, which implies an understanding of the self as always in charge of her self-actualisation projects, and indifferent to the Otherness of the Other. As a response, Levinas inserts philosophy into a particular ethical sphere in which Heidegger's being-with is reconsidered as being-for-the-Other. Ethics becomes for Levinas 'first philosophy' and also 'an optics' (1969). Levinas's shift is radical, for two reasons: 1) it overturns twenty-five hundred years of philosophy, and 2) as already hinted above, it ties up the self in an ethical obligation to the Other. As elucidated by Peperzak (1993), Levinas provokes the ideals of rationality and autonomous thinking. In fact, he 'insists forcefully on the irreducible moments of heteronomy. Instead of seeing all realities as unfolding or surrounding elements of one basic instance called 'the same' [...] the irreducibility of all Otherness must be recognised' (Peperzak, 1993, p.19). This unfolding of Levinas's philosophical project is described in the next section.

#### **4.3 Levinas's conception of ethics: 'After you, sir!'**

For Levinas, ethics is more than a recipe which one shall follow to live a 'good' life. It is instead a radical rethinking of what it means to be human. Unlike Immanuel Kant, he does not conceive ethics as my duty to choose to be good. Instead, Levinas insists that I am called to be ethical before I can decide about it. Levinas, thus, reverses the Western idea that positions ethics in personal autonomy, to reorient it as 'first philosophy'. He reconsiders the primacies of Western philosophy to affirm that 'the opposition between "is" and "ought" is neither valid nor even possible' (Peperzak, 1995, p.xi). Ethics as first philosophy is, after Levinas, understood as 'a relation of infinite responsibility to the other person' (Critchley, 2004, p.6). Levinas's philosophical project is not intended to provide a new ethical system or a specific set of rules, but is instead an inquiry into a relationship where the Other constitutes my subjectivity and holds me hostage. In the following subsections, I will discuss some of Levinas's distinctive themes to elucidate the ethical depths of the philosopher's understandings of ethics.

### **4.3.1 Ethical responsibility**

To be human is, according to Levinas (1969), to be 'infinitely responsible' for the Other without expecting the Other to do the same in return (p.244). It is I who is responsible for the Other, and all Others, and this responsibility forms my subjectivity. When I accept responsibility for the Other, and all Others, and the unfreedom which it involves, I actualise my nature as an ethical being (Blake, Smeyers, Smith, & Standish, 1998, p.65). Thus, I am moral and free only when I respond to the call of the Other with "here I am" (Chalier, 2002, pp.78-79). Levinas, thus, posits responsibility for the Other as the necessary bedrock of subjectivity. As he puts it, 'I understand responsibility as responsibility for the Other, thus as responsibility for what is not my deed, or for what does not even matter to me; or which precisely does not matter to me, is met by me as face' (Hand, 1989, p.95). Before the Other, I have no choice but to be responsible for her. This is because I cannot be freed from responsibility. It is inescapable. 'To discover in the I such an orientation is to identify the I and morality' (Levinas, 1986, p.353). For Levinas, this asymmetrical relationship is a departure from myself to the Other without any return to the self. Thus, in Levinas's view, subjectivity must be conceived as a pre-ontological intersubjectivity, where being-for-the Other is given priority to being-for oneself (Chinnery and Bai, 2008). This latter condition of being, according to Levinas, leads to egocentrism and ethical selfishness.

In this regard, Levinas does not accept Aristotle's view that I must love myself first, if I am to love others properly. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle states:

[I]t is right for the good man to be self-loving, because then he will both be benefited himself by performing fine actions and also help others. But it is not right for the bad man, because he will injure both himself and his neighbours by giving way to base feelings. (Aristotle, 2004).

For Aristotle, selfishness, associated with self-love does not hold harmful implications, unless it rests under the guidance of reason. Rational egoism is justifiable. Aristotle attributes high values to reasonable self-centred people for their worthy effort to hold themselves in a stable equilibrium, and not harm Others for the sake of personal gain. This state of balance is how



people ascertain personal gain and assisting Others equally. Such an attitude, argues Aristotle, leads to virtuous action and could bring social enrichment. On the contrary, anyone whose egoism goes beyond the reasonable limit, which means gaining personal advantages through unjust and disgraceful means, is offensive and undesirable. Consequently, rationality, for Aristotle, plays a distinctive feature between the crude egoist who is driven merely by the irrational element of the soul and the rational egoist who decides for himself in accordance to practical wisdom.

However, Levinas insists on the asymmetrical nature of responsibility. To highlight this asymmetry, he is very fond of quoting Alyosha Karamazov in *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, where he says, 'we are all responsible for everyone else – but I am more responsible than all the others' (as cited in Kearney, 1984, p.67). However, Levinas clarifies that Alyosha's view of responsibility does not mean that every individual is more responsible than all the Others because that would imply a degree of reciprocity. It is solely I who am responsible more than the Other, and also for everyone else's responsibility (Levinas as cited in Kearney, 1984, p.67). During an interview with Philippe Nemo, Levinas was asked, 'But is not the Other also responsible in my regard?' To which Levinas replies, '[p]erhaps, but that is *his* affair. [...] I am responsible for the Other without waiting for reciprocity, were I to die for it' (Levinas, 1985a, p.98).

Elsewhere, Levinas says: '[I]t is impossible to free myself by saying, "It's not my concern". There is no choice, for it is always and inescapably my concern. This is a unique "no choice", one that is not slavery' (1989, p.247).

It is precisely because of my lack of freedom regarding my choice to be responsible or not that Levinas (1981) describes ethical responsibility as anarchy. In his words, 'anarchy is not disorder as opposed to order' (1981, p.101). If we act responsibly, it does not mean that we follow the tenets of anarchism, as a political organisation (Critchley, 2007), where we engage in a process that 'has no conductive principle or rationality [...] [and as such] is [...] without direction' (Dussel, 1985, p.61). Instead, Critchley, elaborating on Levinas's notion of the term, argues that anarchy refers to 'the negation of totality', which requires us to distance ourselves from the traditional ways of doing things and continually question our thinking and practices,

to avoid 'the affirmation of a new totality' (2007, p.122). Such an understanding of anarchy, is, therefore, of value. In this view, responsibility is anarchic, in the sense that before the self has any consciousness or choice in the matter, responsibility imposes itself onto the subject. Faced by such imposition, the subject is taken by surprise.

Levinas's conception of responsibility is unlike the idea of responsibility generated through significant figures of the Enlightenment, which conditioned people in the West to think of as 'a consequence of contemplative moral reasoning of autonomous person' (Kroftlić, 2009, p.28). Similarly, Burggraeve (2009) points towards the Enlightenment as the birthplace of the association of responsibility with 'the extension of, and even the synonym for, autonomy and freedom' (p.66).

In this regard, Levinas's idea of radical heteronomy contrasts with Kant's conception of autonomous morality, and the notions of exchange and mutuality dominant to social contract theories. Kant holds that my responsibility for the Other originates from my rationality following the "categorical imperative", which is a universal, supreme ethical principle. The categorical imperative claims that people should never treat Others as a means but always as an aim. This principle applies to all rational beings, and they should strive to abide by it despite their natural feelings to act in opposing ways. Moreover, Kant posits human free will as the prerequisite of ethical principles. What this means is that I am free to choose my actions and held responsible for my acts.

However, for Levinas, freedom does not constitute my subjectivity and shall never precede my responsibility for the Other. Unlike Kant, Levinas insists that my freedom arises precisely at the time when I respond to the call of the Other:

We must, therefore, emphasize here the fact that freedom is not first. The self is responsible before freedom, whatever the paths that lead to the social superstructure. [...] Freedom can here be thought as the possibility of doing what no one can do in my place; freedom is thus the uniqueness of that responsibility. (Levinas, 2000, p.181)

In a similar way to Levinas's critique of Kant's ethical ideas, Chalier (2002) argues that Kantian ethics lead me to view the Other as deserving my respect because she is rational and autonomous like myself, and not because of her distinct Otherness (p.68).

Furthermore, Levinas's position on ethical responsibility challenges the grounding of morality in social contract theories, such as those of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, as well as that of the contemporary thinker John Rawls. What these great thinkers say is that through reason, people can approve of and comply with necessary social, moral and political rules of behaviour of a given society so that people can live together. Rawls, building on Locke and Rousseau, argues that in a community, rational beings must put aside the conditions of their particularities, such as age, religious affiliation, education and income, under a 'veil of ignorance' and unanimously accept the general principles of justice (1971, p.118). The veil of ignorance serves people to lessen their bias and self-interest and contributes to the assurance of rights and liberties for everyone.

While such a theory of justice based on universal human rights and its notion of common humanity resonates with our common sense, Levinas unsettles this notion (Chinnery and Bai, 2008). He maintains that I am unable to consider the Other *as other*, if I rest my responsibility on perceived similarity, such as notions of common humanity, ideas of give-and-take, or reciprocity. I am unable to consider the Other *as other* in a way to preserve her distinct alterity. Levinas argues that it is not our similarity, generated by a human rights discourse, that has to be held, but our difference. Chinnery and Bai (2008), quote Peperzak to clarify Levinas's position as follows:

The ethical relationship cannot be limited to a practice that is based on the conviction that all humans are equal in having basic rights, being citizens of democratic institutions, members of one human race. ...The Other comes from 'on high,' is superior to me, not necessarily, of course, in the sense of superior intelligence, skills, talents, virtues or holiness, but as a human existence that, in its poverty and needs, surprises and inevitably obligates me. The relation revealed in any encounter is a relation of inequality and height, a relation of asymmetry.

The appearance of another in the world, which is also mine, reveals to me that I am a servant, responsible for this Other's life and destiny. (p.237)

#### **4.3.2 Substitution**

In *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, Levinas develops the notion of substitution to accentuate the asymmetry of the ethical relationship, whereby the self takes upon himself what the Other would otherwise bear. Substituting the Other does not mean that I am to replace the Other or stand in her shoes. Also, it does not mean being for the Other in need by sharing part of the wealth of my resources. It, instead, refers to myself being responsible for the responsibility of the Other to the point of being the Other's hostage. Only such relationality is ethical as it starts with the self, being responsible for the Other, rather than being for oneself. The ethical relationship, for Levinas, implies unconditional self-sacrifice on the part of the self, whom Levinas describes as:

Vulnerability exposure to outrage, to wounding, passivity more passive than all patience, passivity of the accusative form, trauma of accusation suffered by a hostage to the point of persecution, implicating the identity of the hostage who substitutes himself for the others: all this is the self, a defecting or defeat of the ego's identity. And this, pushed to the limit, is sensibility, sensibility as the subjectivity of the subject. (1981, p.15)

To substitute myself for, and be held hostage by the Other results in an ethical relationship that begins with myself being responsible for the Other rather than being, as Sartre would suggest, for myself. In Levinas's thought, the passivity means that, as stated above, responsibility takes me to the call of the Other without even realising it or having the consciousness to act on it. In Other words, passivity comes to mean that the self "participates" in a state of 'insomnia', which Levinas describes as a state of 'wakefulness without intentionality' (Hand, 1989, p.166). Therefore, the asymmetrical relationship does not bring harmony and security to the passive subject, such as a balanced relationship would do. Substituting myself for the Other renders me vulnerable and exposed as the Other

destroys my composure and self-confidence. This relationship does not foster the understanding of the Other but opens up a dimension of mystery reflected in the face of the other. In ethical relations, the Other is a burden which weighs upon me. But how far does substitution go? According to Levinas, 'I am in reality responsible for the Other even when he or she commits crimes' (1998, p.107).

### **4.3.3 *The Other and the metaphor of the face***

But, who is this other that Levinas insists so much upon?

For Levinas, the Other means any other person who is not myself. In everyday life, we encounter many Others. We either meet them directly or experience their traces. However, Levinas uses the singular Other to accentuate that we meet Others one at a time, face to face. Here, Veck (2014) argues that it is necessary to indicate that the way Levinas's conceives the Other is very different from the considerable academic discourse about the Other. In such discussions, the Other belongs to social categories deemed to be "Other-than-normal", and as such needs to be kept at a distance from the "normal-us". However, Veck refers to Todd (2003) to argue that the Other 'does not simply mean a sociological "other" who is marginalised or maligned', because as mentioned above, the Other is a mystery who resists assimilation (2014, p.455).

Levinas says that the Other comes to me as a face. It is not, however, the real face of a person, as in the colour of the eyes or the form of the nose. According to Levinas, I do not "see" the face but hear it as it speaks to me. On this point, Gschwandtner (2013) argues that the auditory aspect is, for Levinas, more important than the visual. Such bias reflects the philosopher's attempt to recuperate the prominence on "hearing" in the Jewish tradition as opposed by the importance of "seeing" which predominates the Christian and Greek convention. For Levinas, the face 'does not consist in figuring as a theme under my gaze, in spreading itself forth as a set of qualities forming an image' (1969, p.50).

Conversely, the face of the Other is faceless, without any form, or expression, or disguises. It, thus, 'is by itself and not by reference to a system' (Levinas, 1969, p.75). The face speaks to me 'in its very nudity' (p.75) and its defencelessness summons me: 'you shall not commit murder' (p.199).

So, the face, according to Levinas, implies that it always comes before me as it announces itself unexpectedly and interrupts my everyday activities and my reductive view of the Other by ordering me to respond to her call. On the other hand, the face exposes itself to me in its vulnerability. To capture this vulnerability of the Other, Levinas employs the Judeo-Christian language of care for the neighbour's needs, as exemplified by the concern for 'the poor, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan' (1969, p.245). Levinas seeks to extend, in a universal way, this biblical obligation to all persons needing my help (Gschwandtner, 2013).

The face, then, is a metaphor to imply the 'living presence' of another person which I experience on a social and ethical level (Levinas, 1969, p.66). This living presence indicates an unmediated encounter with the Other, whereby the Other exposes herself to me. Still, I find it impossible to understand or reduce her to images in my head. To represent this moment in time, Levinas writes about an unexpected knock at the door whereby, for a fraction of a second, before I can recognise the Other, I am taken by surprise or even fear by a presence that I cannot reduce to any knowledge or comprehension, because she is stripped of her particularity. At this moment in time, I am faced with an Other who is foreign to me, who is an infinite alterity.

Despite the anxiety associated with such an encounter, for Levinas, this is not a negative moment. Alford (2004), explains Levinas's reflection of this moment of infinite possibility in this way:

[Y]ou also feel gratitude for being released from your little world of pleasure and worries. It is a defeat of your self-satisfied little world that is ultimately a victory, as you now belong to another. You feel small and insignificant, but not devalued, because your life has now a purpose, to serve the other. For the first time in your life, you are free. Not to do what you want, but to put your very being into question, and so open yourself to the encounter with the other. For Levinas, that

is the true meaning of freedom, the investiture of freedom he calls it, as though you were a knight sent on a sacred quest to serve the other. (p.153)

What Levinas suggests is that the Other who turns me into an individuated self makes me unique, because she has chosen me and asked for my assistance. However, once the face confronts me, I have a choice to either attend to the Other or kill her. Killing the Other, for Levinas, does not just mean murder. It also refers to my refusal or neglect of my obligation to respond to the call of the Other. 'The separated being can close itself up in its egoism, that is, in the very accomplishment of its isolation' (Levinas, 1969, p.172). On the other hand, Levinas reminds us that when I am called upon by the Other, this does not initiate an I-Thou relationship, in the Buberian sense since it begins from the Other, by an unexpected disruption. Instead, the encounter is marked by separation and an asymmetry between me and the Other, to the extent that it becomes a 'relationship without relation' (Levinas, 1969, p.80).

#### **4.3.4 Justice: Between ethics and politics**

Throughout his life, Levinas was frequently asked if his theoretical proposal of an infinite responsibility could ever be possible in practice, and whether its implications are, for any human, too much to bear. His philosophy seems too demanding for any human person who is limited by various conditions, such as time, proximity and attention. Does my responsibility imply continual self-sacrifice for the well-being of the Other? How can this self-flagellation be ethical? Why do I have to be responsible also for the Other's irresponsibility, even more, if she commits a crime? How do I protect myself from the Other if she becomes too much to bear? And since my responsibility extends to all Others, whom shall I give priority to? What if, for instance, both my children and those migrants, rejected by many and stranded out at sea, summon me to respond at the same time? Who merits the most consideration and care?

These questions give rise to the political dimension of Levinas's ethical thought, and are brought about by the advent of 'the third'. According to Levinas, the third represents my duty to all Others. In his late works, Levinas admits that the third poses a problem to ethical relations:

[I]f there were only the two of us in the world, you and I, then there would be no question, then my system would work perfectly. I am responsible for everything [...]. But we are not only two, we are at least three. Now we are a threesome; we are a humanity. The question then arise – the political question: who is the neighbour? [...] When the third appears, the other's singularity is placed in question. I must look him in the face as well. One must, then, compare the incomparable. For me, this is the Greek moment in our civilization. We could not get by with the bible alone; we must turn to the Greeks. The importance of knowing, the importance of comparing, stems from them; everything economic is posed by them, and then we come to something other than love. (Levinas, as cited in Robbins, 2001, p.133)

Levinas's words in the above quote seem to suggest that in life, there are situations when responding responsibly to the call of all the Others at the same time, becomes impossible. I must, then, negotiate and compromise, which is only possible through justice, understood as that objective order that conserves and protects the freedom of all or a particular group of people. 'Comparison is superimposed onto my relationship with the unique and the incomparable, and, in my view of equity and equality, a weighing, a thinking, a calculation' (Levinas, as cited in Alford, 2004, p.156). This means that very often in life, I find myself having to speak up for a whole group of people who are unjustly treated, such as refugees. At other times, I might form part of a group whose rights are violated, for instance, by the state, for which I demand justice both for myself and for others. In the same manner, I must recourse to justice to stand up against the malicious Other for the sake of the community, or vice-versa.

Nonetheless, Levinas does not provide us with a clear recipe for when to be respectful to the community and when to be for the particular Other. To further complicate what seems to be already complex, he repeatedly reminds us that justice can also be violent, as it does not recognise the vulnerability of the face of the Other, but identifies 'types, statuses, and roles, such as a citizen with the right against self-incrimination' (Alford, 2004, p.155). By giving everyone equal consideration, justice contributes to the totalisation of the Other, annihilating the particular to universal categories. Justice is not able, Levinas writes, to 'see the tears of the Other'; it is 'I alone [who] can perceive the secret tears of the Other, which are caused by the functioning – albeit reasonable – of the hierarchy' (as cited in Alford, p.155).



Levinas does not wish to undermine the significance of justice, as it is always favourable to subtle discrimination. However, he insists that justice violates the humanity of the Other's particularity (Alford, 2004, p.155). For Levinas, the Other is unique and thus does not deserve to be treated the same as others. Alford (2004) argues that, at this point, Levinas unveils his 'neoliberal defence of liberal individualism' (p.155), in a sense, that only because the individual is the only one who can see the tears of the Other, makes her valuable. Given this, however, justice goes beyond the state's business and becomes my responsibility. I become responsible for the tears of Others, as I was responsible for the tears of the one Other.

While Levinas contends that justice provides the legal framework within which I can enact my ethical responsibility, he, simultaneously reminds me of its limitations for possible violence, and, thus, my obligation to respond to that violence. Critchley (2014, p.225) refers to this facet of Levinas's thought as the double structure of a community, whereby, I am in constant tension, mediating between what Levinas calls 'the saying', that is face-to-face, and 'the said', that is, the community. In Levinas's term, there cannot be just ethics without justice, but there cannot be just politics without ethics.

Richard Rorty, however, is severely critical of Levinas's rhetoric of infinite ethical obligation for the reasons discussed above. His theoretical concern does not provide any guidance on how to convert it into practical politics. Rorty (1998) argues that although Levinas's ethical project might be useful 'to some of us in our individual quest for private perfection', it is surely insignificant to any political consideration (p.96). Theories should not be abstract but rather practical for citizens to 'join forces to resist sadism and selfishness' (p.95).

#### **4.4 Some considerations**

If for many, Levinas's ethical conceptions fall under the general umbrella of moral perfectionism, for some others, his project is not noble enough (Sikka, 2001; Critchley, 2010). Levinas's critics are numerous, but due to word limitation, this section remarks some of the insightful objections directed to Levinas by two scholars. They charge Levinas for rethinking

a philosophy that, despite its insistence on the relationship between self and the Other, still roots in androcentric, parochial, patriarchal, and Eurocentric ways of thinking.

Arguing within the feminist camp, Sikka (2001) invokes Simone de Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray to criticise Levinas's ethical discourse for taking a male's perspective of women and the feminine, and thus, accuses him of androcentric, chauvinistic, and patriarchal blindness. Her reading of Levinas assumes men to be wholly ethical subjects, while women are accorded second-class status. The feminine, Sikka argues, takes a passive role in furnishing the masculine with the means to ethics, without having access to ethical subjecthood herself. 'She - or at least the dimension of the feminine - breaks the obsession of his self-assertive concern with his own projects and, through the gentleness of her welcome, points him toward the possibility of the ethical' (Sikka, 2001, p.103).

Such perception is reflected in the choice of language Levinas employs in his works. Through gendered language, the feminine is represented, almost entirely, in the realms of family life, maternity, and sexuality. She is the one who remains in her dwelling concerned with the particular needs of her family. She gives selflessly to Others. She bears a welcoming womb, yet, it is paternity, that safeguards tomorrow's history through the birth of a son who would later identify with his father. The feminine is also recognised as docile, facile, shy, a mystery who does not speak and lasting in virginity. On other accounts, she is animal-like, the lover of her man who arouses sexual desires and is shamelessly indecent (Sikka, 2001, pp.101-102).

Sikka concludes from this that there is a degree of violence implicit in Levinas's language, which he uses to define the ethical relationship. Through his gendered language, he totalises the Otherness of women and thus, ironically, ends up perpetuating the same violence he strives to overcome. In her words:

Far from leaving blank the space titled 'woman' and inviting her to fill it in herself, Levinas writes all over this space, inscribing it with his desires, his needs, his missions, in terms of which the feminine is never a for-the-sake-of, but always an in-order-to, a means rather than an end. (Sikka, 2001, p.103)

Another aspect that Sikka finds objectionable in Levinas's ethics relates to his assertion that when we meet the face of the Other, we do not notice her features, not even the colour of the eyes. Sikka views such an understanding to lead to an ethics which is blindly unsympathetic to specific differences, such as, nationality, race and sexual differences. 'This is a philosophy of the Other that, although it claims to be based on difference, is in another sense indifferent to difference' which results 'in a tendency not to do justice to faces that are specifically other' (Sikka, 2001, p.115).

Perhaps, Levinas's failure to cherish human diversity in its entirety is echoed, for Sikka and Critchley (2010) alike, in his ungracious remark in a 1991 interview. He is quoted to have said, 'I often say, although it is a dangerous thing to say publicly, that humanity consists of the Bible and the Greeks. All the rest can be translated: all the rest – all the exotic – is dance' (Levinas, as cited in Mortley, 1991, p.18). Here, Levinas is referring to the South African funeral traditions of singing and dancing, which seem to be of less value than Western customs and traditions. A similar view is expressed towards the philosophical traditions of Asia, especially China and India, whereby Levinas states that everything that comes to us from those traditions is 'idolatry' (as cited in Sikka, 2001, p.114).

Elsewhere, in another interview, Levinas said:

For me the essential characteristic of philosophy is a certain, specifically Greek, way of thinking and speaking [...]. But although philosophy is essentially Greek, it is not exclusively so. It also has sources and roots that are non-Greek. What we term Judeo-Christian tradition' (as cited in Kearney, 2004, p.70).

Such claims, argue Sikka and Critchley, unveil an underlying favouring of European culture and a monotheistic West. They also fail to consider all those who are not affiliated with Western culture and a Western literary tradition. Levinas leaves the readers with the impression that non-Westerners are not part of 'the relation between brothers,' because of their cultural and literary differences (Critchley, 2010, p.42). Consequently, Sikka, who identifies herself as an Asian woman and a Hindu, accuses Levinas of 'the same old imperialism, the same old absence

of hospitality towards the foreigner, lacking even the decency to suspend judgement when faced with one who is unknown' (2001, p.114).

#### **4.5 Impact of Levinas's thought in the field of education**

Although Levinas spent a significant number of years as a director and educator in a Jewish institution, he has not written widely on education, per se. Still, Ben-Pazi maintains that Levinas's philosophical and Jewish writings mirror relevant implications for education (as cited in Matanky, 2018). In fact, over the past two decades, international education scholars have taken an interest in Levinas' philosophical thought and used it to expand an educational philosophy that is, in a Levinasian sense, less violent (Zhao, 2016). In their distinct way, these scholars have thought through Levinas's works to critically reflect upon and provide a rethinking of educational theories and practices. In this regard, philosophy of education has, according to Nordtug, taken a 'turn towards Levinas's ethical perspective' to challenge the predominance of modern Western approaches in the field (2013, p.250).

There are various aspects of Levinas's philosophical thought which have been widely discussed, such as his idea of subjectivity, his notion of teaching as mastery, unconditional responsibility, the insistence of heteronomy over autonomy, the impenetrability of the Other, and the ethics of the face. For instance, Strhan (2012; 2016) explores the writings of Levinas to reconsider education in which ethics becomes an everyday occurrence for all involved. She suggests Levinas's ideas to be used in practical ways through pedagogical instruction.

Congruently, Joldersma (2001; 2008; 2014; 2016) repeatedly refers to Levinas to articulate a concept of transcendence in education, where the teacher experiences a 'call to responsibility' and is inspired by the students as Others (2014, p.44). The call Joldersma writes about refers to 'being called to normative responsibility' and critique, and inspiration relates to 'being inspired with a hope that motivates to action' (2014, p.4). This responsibility would have teachers make foundational changes in the way they learn and teach, design curricula and lead schools, for instance.

Also, other distinguished scholars, such as Todd (2003; 2014; 2016), Biesta (2011a; 2013; 2016a; 2016b; 2017b), and Säfström (2003) think through Levinas's notion of transcendence to enquire about the real purpose of education and the role of the teacher. They argue in favour of a transcendental understanding of teaching, whereby teachers nurture the virtues of humility and vulnerability.

Another critical feature of Levinas's philosophical thought that educational scholars deal with in terms of moral education, is his critique of rational, autonomous subjects. Chinnery (2000; 2003) notes that many traditional models of moral education, such as character education, are founded on a modernist understanding of subjectivity as propagated by Kant. They emphasise 'basic human similarity across difference' and seek 'to cultivate empathic perception as the primary precondition for moral judgment' (2000, p.71). Instead, Chinnery proposes Levinas's notion of heteronomous subjectivity to counteract the focus on self-autonomy in moral education. Consequently, she foresees schools as sites of ethics, where the rational, autonomous subject is disturbed by the unreachability of the face of the Other.

In agreement with Chinnery, Standish (2001) examines contemporary discourse associated with moral education, such as human rights and equality, and concludes that the promotion of a modernist conception of the self predominates. He suggests that, '[p]lacing ethics before equality [would] expose the limits of totality through its sense of infinite responsibility' (p.346). In subsequent works, Standish (2008) utilises Levinas's philosophical thought to build up a critique against the modernist approach to education as a reflection about the purpose of education itself and school curricula. He calls for a radical understanding of the curriculum, one that addresses the harms of totalised ways of thinking, as expressed through prevalent discourse on quality control and performativity.

Todd (2004) also explores the limitation of knowledge and empathy for community building within social justice education. She turns to relative ignorance as an instrument of teaching as a way of 'responding to the commitment I have for the other' (p.350). Utilising insights from the works of Levinas, Zembylas (2005) also recommends a 'pedagogy of unknowability' in educational settings as 'an act of being attentive to the Other' (p.158). Additionally, Biesta (2008) sets out to show how working through some of the features of Levinas's insights can bring us to a different understanding of what it means to be human and the educational

implications thereof. He suggests a pedagogy where teachers 'literally stand empty-handed' (p.208). As Biesta puts it:

[...] a concern for the uniqueness of children, of students, and of other "newcomers" requires that we give up, or at least hold back, all the "tricks of the trade", all the wisdom of the world, all national curricula and educational strategies, all recipes for "what works", in order to be able to approach newcomers without an agenda or preconception, but in a way in which we can ask them what they are bringing to the world. It is in this way that educators take a responsibility for something they cannot know. It is a responsibility without knowledge – but [...] it is a responsibility which has the potential to bring forth educational relationships. (2008, p.208)

Scholar Claire Katz (2003; 2014) explores Levinas's essays on Judaism and Jewish education that Levinas wrote when he was Director of the École Normale Israelite Orientale (a school for Jewish students), and makes a case for the Talmudic approach to learning. In it, she sees a method that has the potential to cultivate 'an ethical subject who is responsible for the Other' (2014, p.76), an endeavour which modern liberal education has shoved aside.

Zhao (2016) explores the use of language, communication and debate concerning the Levinasian concepts of singularity and multiplicity. She argues of possibilities to establishing ethical relations, in the Levinasian sense, that permit us to 'receive each other as unique subjects with whom we engage in communication and rational debate' (p.327).

Maltese academic François Mifsud (2017) utilises and builds on the work of Emmanuel Levinas, amongst others, to develop an argument for the significance of the engagement with the Other in education, through the construct of 'first hospitality'. Through such a construct, educational institutions are understood as 'educable space[s] through which *the self* and *the other* can teach and learn from each other' (p.290). Mifsud identifies with Levinas's notion of first philosophy, as 'the means to restore and reintroduce *the other* in the thinking operation through the assuming of *the other as first cause*' (p.282).

## 4.6 Conclusion

This chapter does not do justice to Levinas's extensive work and profound, radical thought. My brief introduction of some of Levinas's key ideas offers just a glimpse of what his philosophy is all about. However, it serves to appreciate, resist or reject Levinas's radical understanding of ethics, responsibility and subjectivity, which turns upside down our conventional understanding of such notions. As implied by the description of Levinas's historical and political contexts, Levinas's philosophy is a response to the violence and persecution he experienced as a Jew and witnessed around him. He constructs a new notion of moral responsibility which is not located with the rational and conscious self but is rooted in the call of the Other. Many education theorists and scholars have argued that Levinas's suggestion for ethical responsibility could offer an alternative to relations of dominance and assimilation within the educational sphere. In the following chapters, I think through Levinas's notions of alterity, face-to-face relation, ethical responsibility and subjectivity to explore if the teaching of Ethics in schools responds to the Otherness of the Other, or if it exerts, perhaps inevitably, a degree of violence on students.

## CHAPTER 5 | Identity, othering and belonging in the Ethics classroom

This chapter looks at the structures and processes of othering in the Ethics classroom, which make some students feel they belong while others are othered. Othering is often founded on otherness/difference and is usually exhibited in terms of ethnicity, culture, religion, and language, for instance. Practices of othering always take place in relation to the self, meaning that by defining the self, one also delineates the other (de Beauvoir, 2011). This process generates an “us” and “them” mentality, in which “them” is often pigeonholed. Through othering, a relationship of power is established, whereby some are included while others are excluded.

Levinas’s theoretical framework is used to describe and analyse, through data, and personal observations, how aspects of instrumentalisation in the teaching of Ethics seek to exclude, control or dominate students. On this level, the other is defined as those students who, for particular reasons, are not part of the dominant discourse that operates in the Ethics classroom. This chapter discusses two aspects of instrumentalisation in the teaching of Ethics: the reinforcement of a culture of performativity, and the production of democratic subjects.

### 5.1 Perpetuating a culture of performativity

I have been told that if there are no exams, then it will become a soft option. So, technically, let’s face it, *it serves the system* [emphasis added]. Pupils, I think, would become more relaxed and enjoy it more if there were no exams. Even the teacher would not feel so stressed. But, unfortunately, since we are all the time paranoid about comparing it with Religion, we tend to follow what Religion does. So we introduce exams, we introduce MATSEC, projects. It’s definitely not teacher-friendly. The final mark reflects more on the student’s input, even though, I know of refugee students who are seeking help in hubs. So a project might not be really and truly [done] by the student; many factors come at play.

(Quinn)



Minhabba li fil-prezent, fis-snin li ngħallem, 60% tal-marka finali għandhom jiġu minn “coursework” li jkunu għamli t-tfal matul is-sena, jiena bħala għalliema ma nistax nonqos u ngħid, ‘Isma’, u iva, 40% biss il-“written paper”. Jiena fid-dmir li nipprepara “tasks” li nissoponi joħorġu fil-karta tal-eżami. Allura, għalkemm nixtieq li l-lezzjonijiet tiegħi ikunu iżjed interattivi, ma nistax inħalli barra ċertu elementi mitluba mit-tagħlim tal-Etika, bħal li tagħti “notes” u “written tasks”. Dawn iridu l-ħin għalihom ukoll. Ukoll, x’ħin iqarrbu l-eżamijiet ma nistax ma naħdimx “past papers” mal-istudenti. Sakemm hemm l-eżami jiena ma nistax nonqos milli nwassalhom għall-eżami wkoll, sfortunatament.

Minhabba li l-“EE” mill-ewwel ġie mqabbel mar-Reliġjon [...] u ngħid li għalhekk daħal l-element ta’ assesssjar [...] minhabba li r-Reliġjon iwassal għall-MATSEC. Allura bl-istess mod l-Ethics irid iwassal għall-MATSEC ukoll ma jmurx l-istudenti jkollhom eżami inqas. Allura minhabba dan kollu, it-tagħlim tal-Etika joħloq l-istess pressure li joħolqu suġġetti oħra.

Due to the present situation, where 60% of the global mark has to be achieved through coursework done by students throughout the year, as a teacher, I can’t slack off and think, ‘oh well, the written paper is just 40%’. I am duty-bound to prepare tasks similar to the ones that crop up in exam papers. So, although I wish my lessons could be more interactive, I simply can’t ignore certain elements, determined by the teaching of Ethics, such as giving notes and written tasks. These do take their time. Also, when exams approach, I cannot but go through the past [exam] papers with my students. Unfortunately, as long as exams are there, I cannot fail in my responsibility to lead students to them.

Since its conception, EE was compared to [CRE] [...] and I believe that is the reason behind it being assessed [...] because [CRE] leads to MATSEC. So, Ethics must lead to MATSEC in the same way, [so to avoid the possibility of Ethics students] having one less exam. Thus, because of this, the teaching of Ethics causes as much pressure as other subjects do.

(Corinne)

Quinn and Corinne’s observations highlight the instrumentalisation aspect of the teaching of Ethics related to what Lyotard (1984) calls performativity. Their comparison of the measurable aspect of EE to CRE refers to the decisions of the Education Minister and academics from the Department of Education Studies to make EE examinable. Such a choice, they argue, had to be taken to ensure that EE would not be labelled as a soft subject which, as an undesired effect, may have seen a substantial shift of CRE students towards the subject (Montebello & Muscat, 2014).

The teacher's choice of words, 'it serves the system', 'so stressed', 'not teacher-friendly', 'causes [...] pressure', reveals the rising stress Ethics teachers experience to align students with the predetermined learning goals and have their students submit their coursework for assessment purpose. Moreover, they know that ultimately they share a degree of responsibility for the students' final marks, and might eventually have to justify themselves with parents, school management team, or educational officers. Quinn and Corinne's preoccupation is accentuated and also echoed by other Ethics teachers, who are concerned because of a significant number of students lacking commitment or experiencing challenges to complete and submit the ongoing coursework. Although, as is suggested by the learning and assessment programme, the nature of the coursework's activities should vary and must include individual-based assessment such as reflexive written tasks, and group-based evaluation, as in group oral presentations, the fact remains that any coursework requires a high degree of cognitive functioning. As I argue further on, assessing students through cognitively engaging coursework risks othering those who are not well articulated, have language barriers or culturally have a different understanding of knowledge.

Preoccupied with instrumental goals, teachers end up, as Quinn puts it, 'like a hamster looping the loop'. They become caught up in a system that grounds their teaching responsibility in task-orientedness, whereby they are mostly concerned with imparting knowledge on ethical theories and the moral language demanded by the syllabus, and with facilitating students' critical thinking and reflexive skills, through debating practices. The stress associated with meeting goals which are not set by them but defined by the Ministry, and, thus, often do not necessarily align with the particular needs of their students, allows teachers little time or encouragement to respond otherwise to their students. Quinn outlines a case in point where her task-oriented responsibility puts her in a challenging position vis-à-vis refugee students in her class who are 'broken souls' and whose needs she cannot cater for due to her duties concerning the rest of the class (see next chapter). Teachers, thus, become 'servants of the system', rather than 'key agents' in the educational venture (Biesta, 2017a). This servitude that exalts efficiency and productivity transforms, according to Higgins's interpretation of Karl Marx, 'our relations to self and others', in the sense that 'we turn ourselves into means' (2011, p.453).

Therefore, one might argue that, when performativity urges teachers to retain responsibility for pushing students toward the learning outcomes successfully, they might become less concerned with creating educational spaces, where they, as well as students, can engage with each other beyond that which is already determined. According to Ruitenberg (2010), who refers to Derrida and Arendt, '[o]utcomes-based education is, by design, inhospitable' (p.271). This is because this approach to teaching and learning is concerned with what learning should be and should be for, and not about that which is yet to come - the unforeseeable. This is particularly the case for EE, where self-reflection, regarding what decisions ought to be taken, requires time and cannot be neatly pre-determined. Outcomes-based education has, thus, ethical implications, as it does not provide space for a genuine encounter with difference and with what is yet to come. Moreover, although being aware that at times their actions are discriminatory, the research participants feel disempowered to challenge the status quo due to accountability issues, linked to the imposed task-orientedness and the students' abilities.

Corinne explains some of the challenges she has encountered in her Ethics classrooms as follows:

Ħafna mit-tfal mhumiex kapaċi jiktbu, mhumiex kapaċi jaqraw, allura kif jistgħu qatt imorru tajjeb? Jekk l-assessjar isir b'mod orali, xorta dawn it-tfal ma jaslux biex jużaw it-terminoloġija li nixtiequ. L-istess għall-istudenti li huma barranin... fejn hemm il-problema tal-lingwa fil-Malti u fl-Ingliż. Il-fatt li l-"Ethics" hu assessjat joħloq ħafna "issues" li mhux faċli tittakiljahom.

Many of the students are not able to write, not able to read. How can they, thus, ever do well? If the assessment is done orally, those students would still not be able to use the desired terminology. Same goes for foreign students [who] struggle with both Maltese and English. The fact that Ethics is being assessed causes many issues that are not easy to be addressed.

(Corinne)

The above suggests that the way EE is being implemented in schools, particularly the aspect of assessment, is putting undue pressures on both the teacher and her students to perform, neglecting the ethical necessity of responding to otherness. Moreover, challenges also arise due to the nature of the subject, which requires students to possess cognitive faculties. Biesta (2017a), observes that philosophical work with children 'can work quite well for children who

can handle words and arguments, concepts and conversations, but far less so for children who are not “there” (p.421).

Biesta’s argument can also be extended to raising concerns about the cultural and social dimensions of learning. Referring to several studies conducted within minority and non-Western contexts, Kirova and Prochner (2015), argue that the way children learn is deeply embedded in their cultural and social contexts. Children, who are socialised in a less wealthy environment, are more likely being raised in a paediatric model, whereby ‘learning relies on observation and participation in everyday life alongside parents and older, more experienced members of the child’s community’ (Kirova & Prochner, 2015, p.387). In this model, the teaching of morality is distinct from the pedagogical model, which characterises Western learning approaches in schools. The paediatric model does not promote, for instance, discussion, debates, questioning, and reading, which are intrinsic elements of the Ethics classroom. Instead, oral storytelling and respect for authoritative figures are being utilised. Considering all of the above, one can question to which extent the EE classroom can cater to culturally and even socially diverse groups of students.

Quinn recalls an episode in which she tried to respond to the language need of one of her culturally diverse students.

I asked permission from the Ethics Support Teachers to find some time, a common time. The girl or the boy has to miss a lesson, and I meet up with him or her [and] we do [the exam] orally. When there is a big, big problem, I try to find a translator to translate to the boy or girl [...] It happened. But then, I wasn’t really sure whether the translator is really translating what the girl or boy is saying rather than what...he might be telling his own opinion, for example, and I cannot get to know... It also depends on whether the student really wants to get a translator. It happened that, for the first year, this boy was willing to be the translator, but the next year he grew up disinterested. He didn’t want to remain any longer. I tried to bribe him with a certificate [laughing].

(Quinn)

Quinn’s decision to involve her students in responding to the needs of their culturally diverse peers can be interpreted as a showcase of her responsibility towards the particularities of

students. While acknowledging the limitations, and perhaps the impossibility of overcoming the challenge, motivated by the necessity to respond, she opens up to uncertainty. Without disowning the fact that Quinn could also have been driven by the need to assess the students, it can also be argued that she took her responsibility to a relational level to overcome the cultural obstacles, leading to inequity in the classroom.

## 5.2 The formation of the democratic person

Since its inception, the teaching of Ethics has also been framed as ‘an education for democratic citizenship’, where ‘the separation of ethics from politics is fine’ (Wain, 2016). Because of this, the teaching of Ethics, like modern education in general, becomes an instrument for the production of responsible and moral subjects (Todd, 2003; Biesta, 2008, 2011b). The teaching of Ethics suggests a norm of what it means to be human. This norm shall mould the identity of the subject into a rational and autonomous being (Kantian and Hegelian ideas), who possesses agency, while also endorsing a democratic way of life. It, therefore, becomes evident that the curriculum is imbued with ideas that root in the Enlightenment and humanism (Biesta, 2008).

The formula for the production of responsible, moral subjects lies on an all-inclusive interpretation of what it means to be a human being (Biesta, 2011b). It means that the Ethics curriculum resorts to principles and values that are understood as being universal, and which can be acquired, by everyone, through rationality. A universalistic discourse becomes promoted as the basis for peaceful coexistence among different people, and also as a basis of moral guidance vis-à-vis ethical dilemmas. In one sense, or, rather, at face value, it can be argued, that a universalistic discourse generates a spirit of inclusivity, as reflected in Corinne and Quinn’s observations, concerning the teaching of Ethics:

L-“Ethics” hu umbrella universali, fejn nistgħu nitkellmu b’mod shiħ u b’mod ħolistiku mingħajr ma nħallu lil ħadd barra [...]. F’dan ir-rigward, l-“Ethics” huwa iżjed inklussiv mit-tagħlim tar-Religjon.

Ethics is a universal umbrella, through which we can discuss in a wholly and holistic way, without excluding anyone [...]. In this regard, Ethics is more inclusive than the teaching of Religion.

(Corinne)

In Ethics, there is proximity. Students are sitting together, and I find it very amusing to see them becoming friends, at first, then they get to know towards the end of the year that, for example, student X is Muslim, or student Y is Reborn Christian. So, there is this element of seeing the human being first, and then we see post-religion or post-belief. There is a friendship grounding first. Religion or the lack of it comes later.

(Quinn)

However, this 'holistic' discourse (Corinne), which shall come 'first' (Quinn), seems to have ethical implications since it is founded on an idea of being, which, as explained above, is rooted in modern Western tradition. This notion favours the common characteristics of all people over their particularities. Invoking Harvey Siegel, Kroflič (2007) argues that a 'universalistic discourse [...] overlook[s] the peculiarities of different, particularly marginalised groups and individuals and exclud[es] their views, values, needs, and opinions' (p.38). Therefore, he argues:

[A] model of ethics which is based on the faith in uniform rationality of the autonomous subject is particularly prone to the exclusion of those individuals or groups which for any personal or culturally specific reason develop an alternative life sense, life style, or communicative code. (2007, p.39)

If we are to consider the above-implied consequences for the teaching of Ethics, it becomes apparent that those students, who cannot live up to the norm delineated by the curriculum, because they are culturally different, feel excluded or othered, unless they use their rational faculties to transform themselves and endorse such standards. However, as I have outlined in Chapter I, some students, like Khaled, might interpret the curriculum as a tool for Western imperialism, whereby their cultural differences are domesticated through an emphasis on what they should know and what they should become to live well together with others. In this regard, the teaching of Ethics creates an advantage for those students who align themselves with a Western way of life. At the same time it alienates, or violates, those who are culturally different.

The religious and cultural other is, thus, doubly rejected and doubly othered, firstly by the NCF, and secondly, by the teaching of Ethics. Although on policy paper, the NCF

'acknowledges Malta's growing cultural diversity, and values the history and traditions of its people' (2012, p.50), is still highly influenced by the Catholic Church and does not, as yet, allow 'provisions for the teaching of religion to those who are not Catholic' (Chircop, 2018, p.103). Secondly, the only alternative available, that is EE, seems to require the religious and cultural other to transcend their particular otherness and accept a Westernised value system. Given this, it, thus, becomes apparent that the real impetus behind the implementation of EE in schools, was, and still is, to 'equip newcomers with the cultural tools needed for participation in [our] particular form of life, and at the same time secures [our] cultural and social continuity' (Biesta, 2008, p.198). The teaching of Ethics becomes an instrument by which these newcomers are perceived as others and consequently reduced to the instrumental category of sameness. It becomes a tool to perpetuate a Eurocentric 'cultural hegemony' (Chircop, 2008, p.75; Borg and Mayo, 2006, p.36).

Interestingly, Quinn recalls her encounter with a Catholic priest who is convinced about the alignment of the values promoted by EE with those of Christianity:

I was at confession at school [...] and, I remember I was telling the priest how heavy I was feeling about this tension to smoothen out othering issues in my classroom [...] and he told me, 'U iva, inti mhux Roman Catholic values qed tgħallimhom!' He told me, like, 'Relax you're teaching them Roman Catholic values at the end of the day!' I wasn't sure what to think. Okay, I teach about the Golden Rule which is present in the Abrahamic religions, and I think across the board [...]. But short term, it was a release for me, like a sigh of relief, although, thinking deeply about it, the Roman Catholic authorities always want to make sure that we're not teaching about something else.

(Quinn)

Following this line of thought, one can conclude that philosophy is indeed not neutral but can serve as an instrument for challenging cherished beliefs and worldviews to transform subjects to identify with Western culture. This, intentionally or inadvertently, may cause discomfort for students whose identities are questioned and, therefore, eventually ruptured in the process. Exemplifying this discomfort, Corinne retells about a situation that occurred during one of her lessons with Year 7 students, which focused on the topic of child marriage.

The lesson started with screening a documentary featuring interviews with parents who were about to marry off their daughters, some as young as 12. Asked about their motivation, these parents mentioned elopement, exogamy, and the loss of dowry. Their girls had no other option than to accept what the parents referred to as a cultural tradition.

Following the documentary, those students in the class who had a Western cultural background, expressed shock and disbelief, blaming the parents for forcing their children into something they could not bring themselves to imagine.

Corinne, then, involved her students in a discussion about how this practice violates the girls' mental and physical health. Many of her students felt that early marriage prevents the girls from obtaining an education, burdens them with an adult's family responsibilities, and puts them at health risks due to early pregnancies. The discussion then moved on whether they think if certain cultural practices should be abolished due to their violation of human and children's rights, to which most of the students expressed their agreement.

After the lesson, Corinne was approached by a Syrian girl who was quiet in class. Slightly embarrassed, the girl told Corinne that her mother and grandmother had both been married at the age of 13. She also explained that she had not wanted to discuss this in class for fear of judgement by her peers. What until then seemed normal to her, has suddenly been put to question.

Għall-bidu nħsadt. Għalkemm wieħed jassumi li ċertu studenti fil-klassi li ġejjin minn kulturi u religjonijiet differenti jistgħu jkollhom esperjenzi simili, ma tkunx qed tistenna li xi ħadd minnhom se javviċinak. Dak il-ħin, ħassejtha nqabdet qisu bejn żewġ dinjiet. U li d-dokumentarju u d-diskussjoni ta' wara ġiegħluha tħossha skomda, hekk ħassejt. Ma kontx qed nistennieha.

Initially, I was surprised. Although one would assume that those students in a class who belong to different cultures or different religions, might have similar experiences, you would not expect them to approach you. At that moment, I could sense that she was caught between two worlds. The documentary and the discussion which followed have made her feel uncomfortable, I could sense. I had not expected this.

(Corinne)



Corinne admitted that particular topics while offering a possibility to bring about personal and social change, might also disturb and discomfort some students as these make them question their identity. Their cherished beliefs and practices become interrogated by a dominant moral yardstick. Corinne's experience, thus, puts to question the understanding of the Ethics classroom as a safe place to discuss and debate different practices. The girl's inhibition to join in the discussion points towards a perceived conception of superior norms of behaviour. Her relating with the documentary's storyline, coupled with her peers' reaction to the stories, could have made her feel inferior and othered by a discourse in which people from other cultures are seen as offenders of the rights of people. It is pertinent to emphasise here that students who are othered by a liberal Western discourse may be both, foreigners or Maltese, but whose cultural or religious background differs from what is considered to be the norm.

Zembylas (2015) argues that pedagogy which induces discomfort, or even pain and suffering, might be 'valuable in learning about victims of injustices' (p.163), in that it allows students to critically reflect upon and challenge their beliefs and perceptions, and possibly their ways of living. Nevertheless, building on Butler's notion of 'ethical violence' (p.164), he emphasises that teachers need to be aware that such pedagogy may constitute ethical violence against students. Zembylas acknowledges that a certain degree of ethical violence is necessary if pedagogy is aimed at transformation, but questions the ethical implications of such a process. He suggests that teachers 'become critical and strategic about ethical violence' (p.172) to exert the least possible violence on students.

Pedagogical exercises, such as the above that aim to cultivate a tolerable human rights culture, gravitate towards the principle of equality, suggesting that people should be treated as neutral subjects, without giving too much importance to societal and cultural influences. However, according to Kubota (2002), the idea that everyone is equal (sameness), brought about by a 'colour-blind liberal discourse of individualism, equality and meritocracy', constitutes othering as it focuses on similarities, rather than contextual differences (p.87).

Given the above, the ethical implications for pedagogical decisions and strategies are significant because although the Ethics teacher should be objective, her desire to align the students to a Westernised curriculum could result in othering the experiences of students. Teachers, as well as students, with an individualistic mindset, might be unable to comprehend subjects

whose cultural backgrounds and practices differ from their own, and could judge them as illogical and immoral. They might, willingly or not, try to “cultivate” the “uncultured” other through logical persuasion. This is no argument for moral relativism but a call for caution and sensitivity when encountering the otherness of the other. Indeed, Ethics teachers should be aware of the violence committed on students through structures and practices of othering. Perhaps, adopting a critical stance towards the culture into which we have been socialised and which dominates the curriculum could open up possibilities of seeing students as different, through unforeseeable encounters.

This chapter looked at the instrumentalist tendencies of the teaching of Ethics. It demonstrated that by predetermining the kind of knowledge students should acquire to live well together, coupled with the measurable tasks to assess students’ knowledge, it risks being inhospitable and othering some students. Moreover, by favouring a Western value system, the Ethics curriculum seems to presume that those who are not aligned to the Western tradition do not yet know how to act morally. Ethics is reduced to an instrumental engagement with the contents of the curriculum and with the production of democratic citizens. It must be questioned, though, what kind of democracy it aims to cultivate if it accepts the otherness of subjects only once they are assimilated. Perhaps, a different understanding of democracy is required, where we do not need a shared understanding of ourselves but instead can recognise one another’s uniqueness.

## CHAPTER 6 | A community of difference or more of the same?

*We must ask ourselves if liberalism is all we need to achieve an authentic dignity for the human subject[...] [L]iberalism tends to place the human spirit on a plane that is superior to reality.*

Emmanuel Levinas, *Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism*

*The only absolute value is the human possibility of giving the other priority over oneself.*

Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous*

Through the theoretical framework explained in Chapter 4, as well as the lens of other postmodern, poststructuralist and feminist theories, this chapter problematises what seems to be an oversimplified conception of community promoted in the Ethics classroom. Weaving in observations from the research participants, the discussion points to the underlying tendency to reduce the otherness of students to the category of sameness. This reduction is achieved by the assumption that every member of the community is equal and share a common understanding of justice. This discussion centres on the question whether violence, in a Levinasian sense, shall be permitted for the sake of achieving commonality to promote justice for liberal societies.

Zygmunt Bauman introduces his book, *Community: Seeking safety in an insecure world* (2001), by suggesting that the word 'community' conveys the image of a 'warm' and 'comfortable' place where 'we can relax [and feel] safe' from the insecurities of today's world (pp.1-2). As he puts it:

In a community, we all understand each other well, we may trust what we hear, we are safe most of the time and hardly ever puzzled or taken aback. We are never strangers to each other. We may quarrel – but these are friendly quarrels, it is just that we are all trying to make our togetherness even better and more enjoyable than it has been so far and, while guided by the same wish to improve our life together, we may disagree how to do it best. But we never wish each other bad luck, and we may be sure that all the other around us wish us good.

(p.2)

Educational theories widely celebrate this somewhat idyllic notion of social togetherness, and educators are exhorted to build communities in their classrooms ‘to promote democracy, moral development, better learning and citizenship’ (Fendler, 2006, p.305). Similarly, the EEP tasks teachers to turn their classroom into ‘a moral community [...] in which the values learnt are experienced in practice’ (Wain, 2014). This community must also be ‘a community of democratic inquiry where students feel that they can speak comfortably and safely’ (Wain, 2014). A comforting feeling of stability and belonging is considered to be indispensable for the Ethics classroom to counterbalance its pluralistic nature. A sense of community gives the culturally and religiously diverse students peace of mind that their differences are welcomed and, thus, valued. An appeal to shared values which are supposedly ‘uncontroversial in principle’ (Wain, 2014) is believed to build this sense of belonging. These values are considered to be standard across national, ethnic, cultural, and religious boundaries, and have the potential to ‘unite people in conversation’ (Wain, 2017). Such values include truth, honesty, fairness, sense of justice, compassion, solidarity with others, tolerance and respect for others, understanding, loyalty, courage, and generosity. To cite one example of how this set of shared values translates into the curriculum is through its endorsement of the principles of the Golden Rule as the basic standard of behaviour for different religions. The Golden Rule implies an ethics of reciprocity and expresses the idea that we should treat others as we would want to be treated in similar positions. It, thus, is believed to be a unifying factor in our diverse world as it provides a kind of starting point on which the diverse members of the moral community can all agree (Gensler, 2013).

Simultaneously, the EEP acknowledges that the shared framework of the Ethics classroom can only be reached experientially, through the actual practice of exchanging opinions. Borrowing from the pragmatist tradition, the EEP conceives morality as a social inquiry where all the

members share a prevailing attitude towards inquiry, that is, according to Misak, the universal fact that “we search for right answers” (2000, p.131). In this view, the Ethics classroom is understood after Charles S. Pierce and John Dewey’s fundamental notion of a community of inquirers as the condition to overcome disagreement and make way for practical reason. Congruently, Wain (2017) argues that a community of inquiry ‘is a place where understanding is built and consensus valued, but also a site where disagreement is negotiated and where arguments are won, if at all, by persuasion not force’ (para.4).

Evidently, as suggested in the above quote, the fact that such community allows space for ‘disagreement’ and negotiation implies that, although specific values are widely recognised, it does not mean that students instinctively welcome them as held in common. As exemplified by the research participants’ observations, students, often, generate controversies out of the supposedly uncontroversial values. Quinn states that ‘students can make everything controversial [...] There were moments before going to the lesson when I used to pray, “God help me” because the teaching of Ethics is always cropping up with controversial issues’. Such incommensurability arises because our frames of reference in the moral domain are contextually varied and, consequently, based upon different assumptions. Situations vary, and in different situations, different actions may be appropriate. So, in a sense, a pragmatic understanding of ethics does not demand moral uniformity between people and across cultures and instead endorses a ‘not perniciously relativistic’ dimension of morality (LaFollette, 2000, p.418).

Thus, a certain degree of moral relativism, within the community of the Ethics classroom serves as the starting point upon which moral inquiry shall follow. Moral relativism can be defined as the idea that members of societies make their own moral choices on the basis of practices and beliefs. However, this does not necessarily infer a commitment to a relativistic understanding of the community. On the contrary, through what seems to be a double gesture, the community of democratic inquiry seems to arise at the moment its members sideline their particular identities to give precedence to the preservation of an a priori knowledge of what is right or good. It takes little effort to realise that what is considered as deserving to be universally good is grounded in liberal democratic principles. As a result, the community of democratic inquiry finds itself unable to tolerate the singularities of the cultural and religious others without first affirming themselves to a liberal democratic identity. Such notion of

community, thus, becomes imbued with value and ideology-driven discourses of human rights, freedom, rational autonomy, mutual understanding, justice, and equality, as is exemplified in the Learning Outcomes Framework on the subject. Additionally, these discourses reflect the Ethics curriculum's commitment to the heritage of the Enlightenment, which focuses on a Westernised concept of the self as a rational, autonomous person.

A rather lengthy observation by Quinn, which follows, helps to further understand the point above. It was made in relation to a question regarding the possibility of the Ethics curriculum being designed in a way to aid the acculturation of Western values,

My starting point, especially as a wife of a foreign husband, is always, 'Do as the Romans do'. If you are not in your own country but [...] in another country, there is a protocol to follow. I believe there is nothing wrong with imparting and showing that, 'Listen, in this country that is the way we do it!' I mean if someone googles on the internet what the belief of Malta is right now, it is Roman Catholicism. Islamic philosophers are trying to show that a reform is needed in their religion so they are speaking of Islam for Europe. They are speaking of Western Islam. So, I think, a positive change has to happen on everyone's side. We have to accommodate that little bit, and they have to accommodate a little bit as well, because, as I told you, they are not in their country. They are living on someone else's soil.

(Quinn)

Quinn's remark reflects what Liisa Malkki (1995) calls 'the national order of things', whereby, the nation state is the given source of identity and culture. As a result, culture (understood here as encompassing religion) becomes a representation of community and a yardstick of identity boundaries. People joining the host country are included in the community of sameness once they minimise, or side-line their distinct differences to comply with the national order of things. To name but one example, the Maltese young woman Sara Ezabe is often the target of racist slurs and inhospitable attitudes, simply because she is a Muslim, and openly expresses her faith (Carabott, 2019). This national sentiment and rhetoric reveals, as argued in Chapter I, assimilative undertones and a drive towards homogeneity in relation to control and security, and which is becoming increasingly significant as a force in shaping policies relating

to the accommodation of the radical different other. These assimilative undercurrents are reflected in Quinn's above observation which might bear ethical implications for the Ethics classroom.

There is no denying that the creation of democratic learning communities has a particular constitutive and significant value in creating responsible citizens for their future role in a pluralistic world. Nevertheless, critiques from various fronts cannot be casted-off as superfluous, as they shed light on the double bind of community. On the one hand, we need the community to reconstitute our sense of safety and refuge which, according to Bauman (2001), we have lost by our attachment to the values of individual freedom and flexibility. However, on the other hand, we cannot deny the totalising implications of a traditional conception of community. On this point, Derrida (as cited in Caputo, 1996), reminds us how community translates into the erasure of difference as we enclose ourselves within a common wall which we protectively build to guard ourselves against the incoming, different other. It is, in other words, assimilation in another guise. For Derrida, as well as Levinas (as cited in Cornell, 1992), the community's totalising impulse to erase difference induces a form of metaphysical violent response onto the other, as in what seems to be a Hegelian move, it creates a new identity grounded in sameness. On the surface, this new identity appears to be inclusive of difference through its promotion of the idea that, at the end of the day, we are all basically the same because we are all humans. For this reason, its mechanisms of 'exclusion' and 'normalisation', amongst others, are not readily available for critique (Fendler, 2006, p.309).

Similarly, other postmodern and poststructuralist, as well as feminist theorists, point out how communities contain an ingrained force to suppress difference by oppressing, excluding or reducing persons considered different from social norms (see for example, Young, 1986; Ellsworth, 1992; Abowitz, 1999; Boler, ed., 2004). Young (1986) also highlights the point that notions of communities do not question prevailing ideas of rationality which employ the experiences of the classical white, Western, male perspective. Additionally, Fendler (2006) quotes Sergiojanni's book, *Building community in schools* (1994), to accentuate the normalising impulse of community. In his words, '[c]ommunity building is the secret weapon that can help domesticate the wild cultures that now seem so omnipresent in our schools' (p. xiv).

This domestication of difference is exemplified by Quinn, who believes that the ‘messiness’ and ‘complexities’ that arise in the Ethics classroom, due to the students’ cultural situatedness, should not take priority over the view that human nature is substantially common to all. She brings the example of the Theory of Evolution concerning Islam, Christianity and atheism. Quinn argues that such a theory can divide Christian and Muslim students in conversation while finding a degree of common ground between Christian students and those with non-religious views. It can also, or otherwise, bring closer together Christian or Muslim students with conservative views in their rejection of the Theory of Evolution for being essentially materialistic and atheistic. These students, instead, are faithful towards the Theory of Creation, which on the other hand, is rejected by students with atheist views. So, according to Quinn, a return to sameness discourse is essential to overcome the complexity of the Ethics classroom. In her words:

At the end of the day, I think analysis brings paralysis. So, during some critical times, I always [turn] the class atmosphere into focusing on what connects us rather than on what separates us because I think there are more similarities than differences. It is like, ‘Let us agree to disagree’ or ‘We beg to differ, no problem about that. Life goes on [...] The most important thing is that during the lesson you do not impose your views but rather give a creative space for the pupils to talk. In return, you would give them a sense of belonging because they feel accepted.

(Quinn)

Quinn recognises that disagreement in the Ethics classroom, stemming from cultural or religious embeddedness, cannot be resolved and instead adopts a ‘let us agree to disagree’ stance towards the tension that goes with such incongruity. But what seems to be happening is that, when students agree to disagree respectfully, they receive the reality of the others’ opinions, beliefs or behaviours. However, they simultaneously accept that no one is going to change the other’s mind. As a result, they stop arguing and move on. According to Quinn, this stance, better known as tolerance, becomes a precondition for the maintenance of harmony and security within the community of inquiry.

Nevertheless, does such understanding of tolerance not run the risk to reduce the students’ and the teacher’s encounter with each other to just a matter of getting along? Is conflict



avoided to keep everyone happy and feel they belong and are accepted? Moreover, is the understanding of a creative space in the Ethics classroom just a matter of exchanging ideas which is followed by our affirmation to respectfully tolerate that which we do not agree with? Does this not imply a sort of closure towards that which is entirely different from my understanding of the world? And if so, would such closure not divest students of the opportunity to be free and creative in their becoming?

Relying on Levinas, Holland (2003) argues that discourse based on a liberal position on tolerance may well reflect a strategy to camouflage the expulsion of the unacceptable other. Albeit a liberal view on tolerance intends to welcome the other in her difference, it inadvertently contributes 'to the ontological foreclosure of the other's alterity, and [...] ironically, [...] [refuses] the radical openness and exposure to profound difference that accompanies genuine encounter' (p.166).

Consequently, when we tolerate the differences of others, we are not committing ourselves to be challenged by the existence of radical alterity, which for Levinas is the source of ethics. We, instead, remain stuck in our subjectivity while adopting an attitude of superiority in being in power to decide what is accepted and what is not. In the process of deliberation, we exercise our powers of reason upon the other, which, according to Levinas, leads to the reduction of the other to who we are. The other, therefore, becomes 'part of the same' (1969). Tolerance brings the self above, and before the other and, consequently, the other is incorporated into the self. As such, her differences are domesticated. In doing so, we convey a 'partial negation' of the other which adds up to an 'act of violence' (Levinas, 1998, p.9). Therefore, ethics is not possible whenever the relation between the self and the other reflects a degree of totality.

This point is further elucidated by considering Corinne's description of her classroom experience to accentuate the importance of democratic dialogue in the Ethics classroom. She declares that dialogue is central in multicultural communities of inquiry for students to acknowledge the different, cultural perspectives and experiences of each other. Dialogue makes learning across a community of difference possible. During a lesson on animal rights, which is part of the Year 7 and Year 8 syllabus, Corinne describes how students confronted each other on the practice of halal, whereby one of the female students expressed utter shock

to hear her classmate defend this practice. However, this custom, the teenager explained, is part of who he is as a Muslim, as is the avoidance of eating pork, an animal which the girl finds no objection to eating. In somehow a defensive mode, the boy challenged the girl by saying that if she thinks it is barbaric to slit an animal by its throat, then maybe she should reconsider eating meat since other forms of slaughtering are as much as horrible. Taking a step back but vigilant at the same time, Corinne was pleased by the dialogical process between these two students, which was engaging enough to bring more students into the conversation, eventually. Consequently, another teenager shared his experience of the time when his family moved from England to India, and how he has not eaten beef since his time there since cows are considered to be sacred.

[Waqt] li bdejna noħorgu dawn id-differenzi, bdejna naraw kemm hu sabiħ li qed nitgħallmu minn xulxin, u kemm hu sabiħ li ma naqblux ma' xulxin u għandna r-raġunijiet tagħna għaliex ma naqblux ma' xulxin. Avolja, imbagħad irridu naraw x'inhu etiku u x'mhuwiex!

When eliciting these differences, we could come to understand how enjoyable it is to learn from one another, and how enjoyable it still is to realise that we disagree but we do so because of our particular reasons. Even though we have to then deliberate over [which practices] are ethical and which are not.

(Corinne)

One cannot deny the pleasant tones associated with Corinne's portrayal of what seems to be described as a democratic dialogue where students are invited to listen to, exchange and comprehend different ideas. Nevertheless, her last remark, 'we have to then deliberate over [which practices] are ethical and which are not', seems to suggest that students are ultimately led to what the EEP considers to be ethical. It is, as if the students in the ethics classroom 'do not already know what they need to in order to act morally' (Todd, 2003, p.7). In doing so, the EEP risks putting teachers in a position of specialists who are 'in the know' of what it means to act in an ethical way. In this way, ethics enters education from the outside, through a set of normative principles or through calls for ethical relations, such as empathy, to guide students about suitable relations (Todd, 2003). Through what Todd (2003) calls 'practice in the art of persuasion,' students are led to become more normative and rational, and hence, more ethical (p.7). However, following Derrida, Todd (2003) warns that this dialogical pedagogy is violent because 'it seeks to shape, influence, and "lead" the other in a particular direction without consideration for persons as distinct subjects of difference' (p.7). Similarly,

Biesta (2004) contends that the so-called 'rational community' still compromises the otherness of the other and thus cannot be a viable educational community.

## **Chapter 7 | Ethics Education: A violence of knowing and understanding?**

This chapter, which builds on the previous one, delves into the role of empathy in the teaching of Ethics in schools, defined as the essential glue that holds the Ethics community together. Data analysed from a Levinasian lens, however, shows certain limitations concerning the extent of an empathic understanding. It also argues that an empathic understanding of another risks overlooking the unique situatedness of the subject.

### **7.1 Empathy: the salient precondition for responsible community**

Empathy, as a concept, is ingrained in various philosophical and psychological traditions (Oxley, 2011). Its evolution traces back to the Greek word 'empathia', which translates to 'to suffer with' (Cunningham, 2009, p.681). Yet, in the English language, 'empathy' came into existence only at the start of the twentieth century, when Cornell University psychologist Edward Bradford Titcher introduced the term, in 1909, like an English translation of the German 'Einfühlung', in order to capture the German meaning 'feeling one's way into another' (Oxley, 2011, p.4). Although different meanings associated with empathy were given over its relatively recent history, it is hereunder understood to refer to the human capacity to think and to feel with the mental states of another individual and looking into the other's mind to enter his or her embodied, storied world. In this perspective, empathy often demands a deliberate and conscious act of cognitive and emotional effort that could, in turn, induce moral judgement and inspire moral conduct. This activity, in which oneself imagines herself in the place of another, was regarded in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by David Hume and Adam Smith as the foundation of prosocial behaviour. Back then, though, they referred to it as 'sympathy' (Coplan & Goldie, 2011). Consequently, their interpretation, together with subsequent works, conceived of empathy as an activity that accomplishes a dual role: facilitating an understanding of another person's state of mind and cultivating a habit of ethical action towards the suffering of others.

Over the past few decades, the concept of empathy has gained considerable attention in education, including the field of moral education, which identified empathy as the pivotal emotion and essential prerequisite to addressing the challenges of living well together amidst our differences (Chinnery, 2007). Suffice to mention John Dewey, Martha Nussbaum, Cornel West and bell hooks, who wrote and spoke optimistically and endorsed empathy as the foundation for democracy and social change (Boler, 1997). The promise of empathy bears a significant role in today's culturally diverse classrooms and social pluralism at large. It is understood as the 'glue that holds communities together' (de Waal, 2009, p.x) through a shared understanding, which, according to Todd (2004), advances the moral and political project of justice (p.339).

In this vein, the EEP identifies empathy as a pivotal emotion and salient prerequisite to promote the idea of ethical responsibility towards the other. Its perspective is congruent with the NCF and is perhaps best expressed by Harvey Siegel. The philosopher argues that the development of empathy is essential to moral education because 'the mature moral agent must be able to put herself in the position of others, and grasp their perspectives and feelings if they are to take seriously into consideration the interest of others' (1990, p.43). Both the NCF and the EEP think of empathy as a cognitive habit that should be taught in order to cultivate moral reasoning. Moreover, the earlier it is taught, the better. Their standpoint can be supported by recent research, which established that children between the ages of five and seven increasingly perceive feelings of concern for other people (Kienbaum, 2014). It follows that, if empathy can be taught, then teachers can assess its development, as is suggested by the recent measurable learning outcomes for EE (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2015). Two, in particular, set out that learners should "[show] empathy towards the different other' (2015, p.15), and 'communicate with people who are different to understand how [they] are the same and to understand [themselves] better' (2015, p.62).

Wain (as cited in Borg, 2016), argues that literature and even more successfully visuals, help students to identify with the pain of others and consequently they will be able to show compassion. Likewise, the learning outcomes approach calls Ethics teachers to use 'a number of diverse resources, such as visual materials, e.g. stories, documentaries and dramatisations; and written materials, e.g. short stories, plays, novels, poems, case-studies [and] reports', to facilitate the empathic process (2015, p.29). It assumes that these resources will assist pupils'

understanding of the most profound dimensions of the other person's point of view. They will also assist pupils in replicating the experiences of the other empathically.

So, on the surface, empathy seems to provide the moral community in the Ethics classroom with the emotional adhesive that holds together its members. In their coming together, students will realise that "I am responsible to you for the reason that you are like me". As explained in the previous chapter, this is assumed to be possible since the moral community consents to its members the same consideration and respect. It accepts that students share a commonality of values, experiences and feelings through which they come to see the other as basically like them, as part of a common humanity. Consequently, in a Kantian logic, they would be motivated to see the other's wellbeing as their moral concern and would be inclined to respond, as they would want others to respond if they were in that situation. According to the EEP, this process is essential for the students' ethical development.

Nevertheless, is it indeed possible to take the perspective of a real or fictional character and imaginatively replicate her subjective experience? Moreover, how can Ethics teachers ensure that an empathic understanding of the other is being achieved within the classroom? Based on their past personal or professional experiences, both research participants do not deny that empathy is possible. However, on the other hand, they do not think we can fully empathise with the differently situated others. For these reasons, they claim that empathy proves challenging to teach.

Inti tipprowa tgħaddi l-valur tal-empatija lit-tfal – [il-kapaċita`] li tpoġġi lilek innifsek fiż-żarbun ta' ħaddieħor. Imma għalkemm tipprowa tifhem u tipprowa tempatizza, [tasew li] jirnexxielek tidħol fiż-żarbun ta' ħaddieħor jekk ma tkunx esperjenzajtha inti [l-ħaġa]? Jekk ma tkunx "first-hand", ma naħsibx li inti tista` tempatizza mija fil-mija. Kif tista` tagħmilha din?

Well, you do your best to impart the value of empathy to the pupils – that is, the capacity to put yourself into someone else's shoes. But, let's say you try to understand and empathise, do you succeed to step into someone else's shoes if you have not experienced the situation yourself? If it's not first-hand, I do not think you can empathise a hundred per cent. How can you ever achieve this?

(Corinne)

I have been told that empathy can never be a hundred per cent which might be true because I felt this sort of canyon separating my best friends and me, when, for example, I had a miscarriage. I realised that even your closest friends could never understand you wholly if they never passed through it [...] [Having said that], you can come very close [to empathise] if you converse to the person about it. Information plays a big part here. Behind a screen, you can easily judge, but if you had to dig deep into the reasons and into the context of why such a person, for instance, did such a thing, you might come close to empathising.

(Quinn)

The above quotes reflect Corinne and Quinn's view on the significance of the uniqueness of experiences which, however, could eventually point towards the impossibility of complete empathy. Quinn, though, further on, clarifies her thought by stating that contextual information could help us empathise, albeit not wholly, better with the different other. At this point, one could argue that holding your experiences as personal is not reason enough to discard the possibility of empathy. After all, as Todd (2003) acknowledges, we all, to some degree, engage in projections of some kind or another. We do attempt to imagine how others feel in one situation or another, and this could trigger us to reach out to individuals or groups who need help. For instance, Todd (2003) argues that teachers often try to 'feel with their students' in order to get an understanding of how to act in the students' best interests:

Indeed, projectively imagining what a child living in poverty might be suffering can inform a teacher's decision about how to make life better for that child. Providing food in the classroom, starting a clothing exchange at school, offering time and space at school to do homework, and connecting the family to community supports are some of the direct benefits that can accrue from these feelings. (p.60)

However, she goes on to say that we shall never assume that what we think how others feel is indeed what they feel (2003). This unreachability sums up the research participants' take on empathy. Although Quinn makes reference to the significance of information for an empathic understanding of the other, it seems that it is the uniqueness of the experience and not lack of information that is responsible for the inconceivability of empathy. Their concern

is echoed in postmodern, poststructuralist and feminist thought which critique the notion of empathic understanding.

A major point of critique revolves around the premise that we share universal feelings and experiences, irrespective of our situatedness. It can thus reproduce each other's most-rooted perspectives. This points towards an element of presumptiveness as the self assumes a position of privilege that transcends time, gender, as well as cultural, ethnic, and social conditions. Such transcendence allows the self to set foot in the subjective mindset of the other and genuinely understand her feelings. Moreover, it risks disregarding the real circumstances and the absolute singularity of the other (Houser & Mendelson-Maoz, 2014). The representation of the other, argues Lather (2009), which is based on 'comfortable, comforting, empathetic, mutual, dialogical knowing' can still lead to 'violence' and 'imperial sameness' (p.17). This violence happens because, in seeing empathy as a liberal effort to know and understand the other, the self becomes obstructed from genuinely listening and paying attention to the other's distinct experiences. Empathy pushes the self to deconstruct the other's experiences by holding to our assumptions regarding the prerogative we assume to have in knowing the other. In the book, *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics* (2006), Rosi Braidotti, states her disagreement with the illusion of unity and connectedness associated with the notion of empathy since it annihilates social injustices and, thus, perpetuates cultural hegemony.

The conception of empathy endorsed by the EEP might have Ethics teachers trust that empathy is what gives their students access to the lives of others, who are differently situated. It is through empathy that they feel connected to the underprivileged and marginalised others, and, that a sense of social justice is triggered. Moreover, the curriculum provides plenty of avenues where an empathic understanding could be incorporated. As a result, through various pedagogical means, teachers regularly ask students to experience a mode of 'being-with' others who come from culturally underprivileged backgrounds (Todd, 2003, p.47). In such cases, students are required to enter the mind-frame of children and young adults, whose rights are violated through, for example, the exploitation of labour, early marriage, oppressive governments, and hostility towards them seeking refuge. The others awaiting an empathic response, often, are persons whose alterity is different from the students in the classroom. Nevertheless, teachers seem to trust the capacity to be moved and touched by another life's



story and expect from the students some transformation and responsible commitment towards social justice causes. However, as the participants argued, this process is never easy.

Let us consider Corinne's pedagogical exercise, which she uses to support the curriculum topic on the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Through a video documentary, her students are asked to identify with the feelings of Pakistani children, as young as six years old, who are forced to work as bonded labourers in the carpet-weaving industry. The documentary depicts how vulnerable families, crippled with extreme poverty, trade their children for the equivalence of ten Euro to work in servitude as carpet weavers to pay off the family's debts. Children "sell" fast in the carpet industry for two reasons. Firstly, their small, nimble fingers are ideally suited to hand-weave threads. Secondly, children are controlled and compelled to work long hours for little money, in illegal and unjust conditions every day more easily than adults. For these children, the prospect for compulsory education is non-existent, and, sadly, most of them die while enduring a miserable life, as a result of poor health and exhaustion.

Corinne hopes that, by seeing the world the way children bonded in labour see it, students will stand a better chance to understand them, and eventually build a juster and safer world, where everyone is accorded equal treatment, respect and dignity. Corinne links the experiences of the Pakistani children in the documentary with the realities of children forced to work for major sports brands favoured by students. She wants to make them aware that child labour is closer to home than they realise. They, too, are indirectly involved in this exploitation whenever they buy a football or a pair of trainers from companies which employ children for a higher profit. Arguments pointing towards an ethical leap to responsible consumerism shall then be reflected in the students' journal writing, in which they indicate new perspectives, thoughts or affirmative, just actions for the future.

However, to her dismay, Corinne realises that most of her pupils did not interpret the documentary's storyline in the educational way she anticipated. How can they remain indifferent before other children's suffering and exploitation, as they exemplified by their own words, 'so what?' Why does her pedagogical practice fail in enabling students to become other-oriented? What happens when empathy fails?

Corinne seems to have come to terms with the unexpected feedback by blaming today's individualistic and materialistic outlook of life, whereby individuals see themselves as distinct and separate from others, in their pursuit to live a good quality life in comfort. She argues that her student's concern to look cool in a pair of branded trainers tampers their understanding of the distinction between making the right, responsible choices and wrong ones. According to her, it is, thus, possible that materialism, coupled with individualism, can conceal the commonalities that we share, which could then lessen our readiness or capacity to feel any consideration for others. Nevertheless, in view of a recent study carried out by lead researcher Daryl Cameron (2019), the students' suppressing feelings of empathy could be also understood as a result of its 'inherent cognitive costs' (p.11). The point being is that, for some, an empathic understanding of others is either mentally demanding or it can make them feel unconfident, anxious or upset.

Connected to this, Galea (2012) writes about her pedagogical experiment where she read narratives of migrating women in class. The aim was to conscientise readers of Maltese women who migrated to Australia in the 1950s with sub-Saharan women who lately have been risking dangerous journeys due to desperate situations back home. Primarily, Galea wanted to move the readers from their privileged position and making them feel with the traumatic experience of one particular woman whose child got sick on the sea. This woman was consumed with fear that if her son dies, the other women on board would throw his body into the sea to avoid the spreading of disease. However, Galea thought that the narrative could also make the readers aware that the Maltese were migrants too. She hoped that the implication of an empathic understanding of migrants could counter the anti-immigrant sentiment and racist attitudes towards sub-Saharan migrants prevailing in Maltese society.

Nevertheless, as Galea argues, the readers refused to relate to the stories of migrants. She interprets this as the unwillingness of listeners to feel with the migrants due to their fear that an empathic understanding of the latter might alter the perception they have of what it means to be Maltese. As such, 'narratives can be rejected as fictional or simply as irrelevant to my world and my concerns' (Galea, 2012, p.235). Thus, although Galea acknowledges the pedagogical opportunities of narratives to promote empathic understanding of the different other, she also highlights their limitations. Moreover, she recognises that the inkling that the otherness of the other can never be known constitutes an 'ethical position that the educator

should also consider when thinking about the reader or student' (2012, p.235). She explains that the pedagogical outcome can, thus, never be determined by the teacher because,

[...] the student is a *who* and not simply a *what*, and what makes her unique is also her particular reading of the story. The different reading constitutes who she is. The *who* is also constituted through the particular connections she chooses to form with others, not only those within the story whom she perceives as women and mothers as well as migrants but also affinities that take place with other readers or students within the classroom. (p.234)

Another concerning issue relates to how far we can confidently say that the process of empathic understanding of others is ethical. The point is that some students in the Ethics classroom, especially foreigners, who face language barriers and cannot yet make themselves understood, seem to be burdened with the requirements of empathy. Students must have sufficient basic vocabulary and a good grasp of orality and articulation, to make their lives comprehensible so that others can recognise their fundamental similarity and eventually respond to them emphatically.

Indeed, Quinn and Corinne both report language as one of the most troubling barriers to communication in the Ethics classroom, which in itself poses challenges for learners and teachers alike, in particular for assessment purposes. At the time of data collection, Quinn was in charge of nine Ethics classes which included students coming from slightly over twenty different Western and non-Western countries. Similarly, the majority of students in each of Corinne's Ethics class were foreigners, albeit the fact that, unlike Quinn, the school where she taught was less culturally diverse. Quinn captures the varying complexities related to language in the Ethics classroom:

You have to mix [English and Maltese] because through Maltese you can reach some pupils and through English, you can reach others. The Arabs are a mix. Some of them know only English and might find Maltese hard; some others can be reached through Maltese. However, English was the primary language [of instruction] and with those pupils who did not know anything of the language it had to be through pictures and body language, or pupils translating in class. That was very, very important and necessary for pupils to translate. (Quinn)

Among these foreign pupils who experience language difficulties are those to be considered to be most vulnerable, namely asylum seekers and refugees, who have just relocated to Malta from war-torn countries, and who, in the case of both participants, continue to enrol in schools throughout the year.

[W]e receive refugees, for example from Syria and Libya, who had bombs flying over their heads a few weeks before us meeting them. They did not have anything. We also gave them files and papers which the school provided and these students were sort of “dumbed” – to use a pejorative word – on a table and chair, and the teachers regrettably had to expect them to conform to the lesson that was being carried at the time. You can imagine how uprooted they must have felt in such a dehumanised way and we expect them to understand, for example, what internal dissent means, at Year 9, when even I struggled as a teacher how to explain this term. It is very disheartening for the teacher to see broken souls, yet, the teacher gets caught up like a hamster looping the loop and still has to continue with her duties because she has the other students under her wing [...] and there are times when they come in the class like popcorn. You can never have an established class list, for example. They are always popping.

(Quinn)

In a similar vein, although not explicitly talking about refugees or asylum-seeking children, Corinne mentions that questions of language difficulties are pertinent, especially nowadays when the emphasis by policymakers and school administrators on the significance of learning outcomes and assessment for learning has intensified.

“Issue” li qed niltaqgħu magħha hija li matul is-sena qed jibqgħu jiżdiedu u jidhlu studenti barranin għax ikunu għadhom ġejjin joqogħdu Malta u l-Ingliż tagħhom ma jkunx daqshekk tajjeb. Ma tantx jifhmu u ma tantx ikunu kapaċi jesprimu ruħhom bl-Ingliż. Fl-

An issue which we are encountering each scholastic year is the increasing number of foreign students who come to live in Malta and who keep enrolling in schools. Their English is not very good. They do not understand much and cannot express themselves in English. In the secondary school where

iskola sekondarja fejn ngħallem, studenti li kienu ilhom ħmistax biss [hawn Malta] riedu wkoll ipoġġu għall-eżami tal-Etika, bl-Ingliż ovjament, għaliex is-sistema hi dik li hi. Madanakollu, il-marka ma tistax tirrorfletti l-ħsibijiet tagħhom, lanqas xejn.

I teach, those students who have been living in Malta for just two weeks still had to sit for the Ethics exam in English because the system is what it is. However, the mark could never reflect their thoughts.

(Corinne)

The above realities experienced by the participants seem to accentuate DeCapua, Smathers, and Tang's (2007) assertion that refugee and migrant students with language barriers often face several social and emotional challenges. These include separation from family, uneasiness with new cultural norms, exposure to Western-style education, post-traumatic stress triggered by war or violence and, teachers' hostility as a result of negative societal beliefs about immigrants. Thus, in light of the complex situatedness of these vulnerable students, must we still assume the Ethics classroom to be an open space where students inquire cooperatively and communicate purposefully about issues of concern to all of them? What happens when vulnerable students, who have experienced racial discrimination, injustice, bullying or bigotry in their countries of origin in the past, or even in their host country more recently, are requested to swiftly engage in the community of democratic inquiry and trust everyone around them? What if students, habituated by the hostility of communities they had previously encountered, resists the teacher's call to trust the other members of the community of the moral community? And if so, does that mean that these students are less likely to engender empathic responses from their peers and teachers alike?

As argued before, the prevalent conception of empathy relies on the logic of "I am responsible to you because you are like me". This perception is believed to develop a sense of responsibility for the other. However, Levinas contends that responsibility shall not arise out of what we get to know about the other but in the fact that the other is radical different from me. An ethical responsibility towards the other, thus, constitutes a radical openness and humility towards the unique singularity of each individual within a community where students share nothing in common (Biesta, 2004). Implied in Biesta's notion of community is that of individual singularity which contrasts with the notion of sameness orbiting around the

traditional view of the community. As Levinas asserts, 'pluralism implies a radical alterity of the other' (1969, p.121). The absolute alterity of the other guarantees that the individual has a sense of unreachability which cannot be reduced to comprehension by the self. Because of her irreducible radical difference, the other can never be fused or assimilated into commonality. Thus the relation among the individuals has to be one where the uniqueness of each singular individual is 'maintained, received and respected without truncation' (Zhao, 2016, p.350). Quoting Todd, Zhao argues:

For Levinas, the experience of the other, and specifically of the other as irreducible to my own experience, is the ethical experience par excellence. It is the confrontation with what resists the imposition of my own categories, and thus my own conceptual control. The fundamental ethical decision everyone must confront is whether to recognize and come to terms with this experience, [...] or instead to refuse this experience and try to force the other into one's own categories, a project that Levinas calls 'totality.' (2015, p.350)

Consequently, the otherness of the other calls me to adopt an attitude of "I cannot get to know the other". However, the encounter with the others challenges me and obliges me to ask, "who am I?" concerning them (Todd, 2004). Through my response, my subjectivity is incessant 're(defined)' alongside the others' absolute alterity.

Given this, Chinnery adopts a Levinasian conception of compassion to argue that compassion, as a moral attitude, might provide a beginning for educating towards a community that does not negate difference. Similar to Biesta, she refers to such a community as a 'community without identity' (2006, p.330). In her view, compassion lies 'not on the capacity to see similarity instead of difference, but rather on the capacity to live with the unexpected and unknown (2006, p.335). This way of being breaks in the prevalent discourse on commonality and identity with a discourse on responsibility.

However, Chinnery (2006) adds that such a position entails 'profound suffering' (p.336). She contends that teachers shall help students to live with ambiguity and uncertainty while resisting the urge to reduce the other to sameness. In her words, teachers 'need to suffer with them

in the tension of not knowing who they/we are, and with the impossibility of ever truly knowing the other' (2006, p.336).

## **7.2 “I have no idea who you are and how you feel”**

This chapter aimed to problematise and deconstruct the notion of a community tied to identity and the communitarian invocation of empathy that the Ethics classroom aspires to. Drawing from various epistemological standpoints, including Levinas's thought, it necessarily brings attention to the EEP's concern to see similarity instead of difference. This subtlety of sameness risks perpetuating the antithesis of ethics: metaphysical violence. Perhaps, we shall open ourselves to a different understanding of ethics, one that is not violent towards students. This attitude would call for us to question the over-optimistic and romantic conceptions of the role of community and empathy in the Ethics classroom, and consider questions like: 'What is requested of students to become nominated members of the Ethics classroom community? Who is eligible as a candidate for empathic feelings or behaviour? Who decides who is eligible? Attending to such questions with caution and care might move us away from a totalising perspective in regards to the experience of the other, which would otherwise require the other to assimilate. In doing so, we would be resisting the possible reduction of EE to a normalisation tool aimed at furthering a common secular humanist life stance.

If we are to preserve the alterity of the other, the empathic position becomes one in which we know we are not the other but also know at this moment that we have to go on learning and relearning who we are and what we actually care about. Empathy, in this sense, is not a matter of opening up ourselves to receive the emotions of the other, but of acquiring a critical capacity in respect of the unreachability of the other's perspectives, even our own. Perhaps, the best way would be in saying not “I know how you feel” but “I have no idea how you feel”. In standing before the other in a very particular kind of care, close to what Simone Weil calls 'hesitation' (hooks, 2007, p.14), we acknowledge that we can never fully understand the other, and that there is no alternative but to humbly desire *to listen* even to that which is not intelligible to us (Todd, 2003). Embracing an attitude of knowing and not knowing, opens up a possibility of a just response, one that not only respects the other's alterity but indeed attends to it (Todd, 2003). Nevertheless, such an attitude is, undoubtedly, endless and demanding.

## CHAPTER 8 | Anarchic education?

### 8.1 Failing better: A personal reflection

The overarching theme that emerges out of this study is the inherently violent nature of education, also evident in the teaching of Ethics in schools. Although unseen, its presence is felt, and the implied pain associated with it is manifested in different ways. The pain that Khaled experienced as he came face-to-face with a liberal aspect of a Westernised morality, as described in Chapter 1, is just one example. Any encounter which challenges our most cherished foundations of who we are is violently painful. In this sense, this study has indeed been a violent experience for me. Encountering the philosophy of Levinas, as remarked in Chapter 2, and also the complex situatedness of students in the Ethics class, made me, to use a Derridean word, 'tremble' (Derrida, 1978, p.82). The perceived strong foundations that framed my life were suddenly rigorously questioned through the insights of Levinas. Further, they unveiled a high degree of violence associated with the Western tradition into which I was socialised and trained to teach. As Derrida says of Levinas, '[a]t the heart of the desert, in the growing wasteland, this thought, which no longer fundamentally seeks to be thought of Being and phenomenality, makes us dream of an inconceivable process of dismantling and dispossession' (1978, p.82).

Consequently, this study required me to unlearn and rethink my multiple identities, particularly the one as a teacher. I have been the other to my self. This process of unlearning and rethinking is never done because, as Levinas reminds us, it is not initiated by me but by the other, whose distinct otherness I face. Levinas's philosophy has provided me with the vocabulary to explain the unnerving feeling I experienced because of Khaled's unpredictable response, that is: the teaching encounter carries with it an inherent responsibility which comes before my awareness of responsibility. My face-to-face encounter with Khaled, and all other students, has been marked by such ethical responsibility. Although my beliefs, which are context-bound and situated, could not make sense of Khaled's intolerant remarks and attitudes, I still could not bring myself to give up on him and felt responsible for his well-being in the classroom because as Edgoose (2005) remarks, '[o]nce we have interacted with the



other, we are responsible to her or him because our interaction never gains the status of closure that, in our interactions with objects enables us, to discard them' (p.123).

As elucidated in Chapter 4, Levinas considers this responsibility to be a burden. He draws our attention to the fact that being responsible makes us vulnerable as we are required to open up to the unexpected and unfamiliar otherness. Levinas stresses that the other can resist us. He 'can oppose to me a struggle, that is, oppose to the force that strikes him not a force of resistance, but the very unforeseeableness of his reaction' (Levinas, 1969, p.199). Khaled is an example of how a student's reaction to the EE curriculum can be considered to be a form of ethical resistance in a Levinasian sense (Edgoose, 2005, p.123). No amount of preparation and consideration to reach the lesson's learning outcome can guarantee the certainty and predictability that I desire from my students. This uncertainty arises because students, in their otherness, disrupt the linear control of teaching and summon the teacher to respond to their call. Or to put in a Foucauldian sense, students such as Khaled interrupt the production chain's schedule (the curriculum) which the teacher ought to deliver in school (just like in a factory). The control and performativity aspects of education, mirrored in measurable objectives and referred to below, reflect the supremacy of totalised ways of thinking (Standish, 2008). Such a perspective fails or refuses to acknowledge that students' interaction with the curriculum and the student-teacher interaction are uncharted territories; they are complex, nuanced and mysteriously unpredictable. The students are others to teachers, just as teachers are others to students.

This unexpectedness of outcomes can also be elucidated in the following episode, which happened recently in one of my Ethics classes.

As the students settled for the lesson, Craig burst into the classroom, late and sobbing. Before I could be irritated by the late disruption, I was taken aback by his distress. I asked what the matter was and was told that he had just fought with another student during break time who had offended him by cursing his grandma. He was having an emotional meltdown in front of everyone in the class. Just a few days earlier, his beloved grandma had informed him about her advanced illness and that she would soon be going to die. 'I just want to know when it is going to happen. I want to know how much time left I have with her', Craig sobbed. It was evident that this waiting time was excruciatingly painful for him.

For a moment, I simply did not know what to do. Words failed me, yet I knew I had to speak, even though no words seemed appropriate. All I managed to say was that I was sorry about his grandma, while I accompanied him to his usual place, where I stayed for some time. Yet, after a while, I was growing hesitant whether to walk away from him to continue the lesson - after all, I am also duty-bound to the other students - or support him through my presence, even though I did not know what else to say.

At that point, Luca, noticing my hesitation, offered to sit by Craig and comfort him. Like this, he said, I could go on with the lesson. He put his arms around Craig, who was still sobbing, whispering: 'It's okay. It's okay'.

This unexpected encounter suspended the whole class, for a short while, in a zone of undecidedness until the students decided to direct the 'lesson' to a place where I had no plans to go. Hashem, a usually timid boy, stepped in to share his story of how he lost his father at the age of three. Other students had stories to tell, as well, about losing a loved one; a grandpa, an uncle or a brother who was bombed in Syria. We all sat quietly listening to these stories of pain and loss and the emotions and connections that arise from them. The moment in the classroom was jarring and emotional for many. We cried.

To say that the lesson did not go to plan is an understatement. However, following Levinas, Edgoose (2005) states that the unpredictability of the other can always surpass my assumptions, in different ways and scales. The uncertainty surrounding the other in the Ethics classroom results in feelings of vulnerability, as teachers are vulnerably 'haunted' by this fickleness of outcomes (2005, p.123). This vulnerability is reflected, for instance, in Quinn's remark, in Chapter 6, when she confided that before each lesson, she prays to God for a smooth-running experience.

Nonetheless, isn't this vulnerability also part of what it means to be human? Mercieca (2007), inspired by Derrida, would answer this question to the affirmative, as he argues:

There are moments when silence or tears need their space. Space needs to be given so that certain issues are approached with a degree of awe. [...] Teachers need to rekindle these possibilities of discourse, and to note their absence. Let us keep this astonishment and silence, and perhaps also the experience of pain as they are. [...] Let us allow ourselves and our students to be surprised – to be violently surprised by the advent of the Other. (p.156)

Likewise, in moments like these, Levinas seems to offer help in assisting us to see that this astonishing aspect of teaching does not merely frustrate our plans. Still, it is also the relentless opening to the novel and the unforeseeable (Edgoose, 2005). Admittedly, it is an uncomfortable truth, but it constitutes responsible, ethical teaching and exposes ethical sensitivity. In this view, the future is 'both my own and non-mine, a possibility of myself but also a possibility of the other' (Levinas, 1969, p.267).

This understanding of teaching as an act of responsibility towards one another is distinctively different from the technical and instrumental role I have, that is, to align students to the academic content (Säfsröm, 2003). Unfortunately, both research participants and I note that the teaching of ethics gives priority to the technical aspect of education over relationality. For instance, most of the training that we, Ethics teachers, received as part of our continuing professional development was tied to the performativity aspect of the subject. This generates a discourse of teachers' responsibility which is positioned in task-orientedness.

The task-orientedness of the subject is further emphasised by Quinn who points out that 'bouts of racism' do exist amongst the Ethics teachers' community. This observation might indicate that having negative racial attitudes does not impact negatively on one's recruitment for teaching the subject. As long as I am task-oriented, and have grasped the content knowledge, I get on board. The recent decision to open the Master in Teaching and Learning course in the teaching of ethics to anyone who has a university degree reinforces this point. But how can I ensure that students in my care develop desirable moral values if I lack them myself? How can I combat racial and cultural inequalities ever-present in schools, if I have problematic attitudes towards the ethnically and 'racially' diverse other? Shouldn't we, Ethics teachers, nurture a relational responsibility, one that opens itself to the vulnerability of students? Should we teach ethically and not just ethics? Quinn's observation is corroborated

by Chircop (2019), who argues that Maltese schools are not free of racial prejudice and inequalities. Cultural racism in schools is, indeed, present and is reflected in ways teachers interact with their students. For instance, according to Chircop (2014), teachers, often, 'associate different cultures with anti-social behaviour, persisting in the essentialist approach to Muslims' (p.75).

The technical aspect which is prevalent in the teaching of Ethics, described in Chapter 5, has to do with my responsibility to implement the content of the curriculum in the classroom by exploring with the students the ethical issues and dilemmas within it. Further, I am responsible for choosing pedagogical strategies and resources to build students' abilities necessary for fostering ethically right demeanour. Such examples include perspective-taking, moral reasoning and empathic understanding. Ethical competence is then assessed through formative and summative assessment via the means of a set of pre-determined criteria. Although the decision taken by the Education Ministry to include EE in national testing can reinforce the position of the subject, I argue, that there is a significant risk that the teaching of EE is reduced to the meeting of predetermined learning outcomes. The mounting stress to prove the outcomes of teaching in measurable forms, as in, through project writing, tasks on handouts, oral and written presentations, and journal writing, risks skewing the classroom experience towards industry. One is left to wonder how much time is left for us, teachers, to create educational spaces where students can relate and astonish each other. The teaching of Ethics, thus, becomes merely a technical exercise, requiring skills of content knowledge, behaviour control, classroom management, and of meeting the predetermined targets (Howard, 2005). This mirrors the perception of knowledge as a commodity, whereby, although invested in, it is controlled through recognised standards that serve a neoliberal agenda.

Ruitenbergh (2010), critiques the outcomes-based model of education, because it reveals to be intrinsically inhospitable towards students. It concerns itself with predetermining what kind of knowledge and learning should take place in schools. It 'compartmentalises knowledge and forecloses the unpredictability of thought' (p.273). Instead, Ruitenbergh, working on Derrida's notion of hospitality, argues that schools should open up to give students a place where they feel welcomed to be themselves, and where 'they can make themselves at home without the space becoming their home in a permanent sense' (p.273).

Correspondingly, Forde, McMahon, McPhee, and Patrick (2006), argue that the performative dimension of teaching creates a culture whereby, 'we laud that which can be measured and ignore what cannot be measured, even though it might be as important in the educative process' (p.25). Similarly, following Todd, I argue that the current emphasis on the instrumental aspect in the teaching of Ethics, risks putting teachers in a position where they consider themselves knowledgeable in the moral concepts, theories, and the associated language, and yet 'ignor[e] the way moral relations transpire through the lived realities of everyday life' (Todd, 2003, p.6). Such relations, Todd argues, do not require any specialised knowledge or formal knowledge at all, since they are motivated by a kind of subjectivity that is effective and caring. As the anecdote above shows, the classroom experience is replete with ordinary contingencies through which both the students and the teacher encounter ethicality. In this sense, ethicality is seen as a practice, as a way of life, where the people involved respond to each other.

Linking to this, Benjamin argues that relationality has always existed in the history of philosophy, but still presented 'as philosophy's other possibility' (2015, p. 2). He advocates for a different idea of relationality that fosters a kind of philosophical thinking that gives precedence to the relations among people and their needs. Perhaps, then, a move towards, what Diedrich, Burggaeve, and Gastmans (2006), call, 'a Levinasian care ethics', could help Ethics teachers to respond to students. This response could be expressed as a form of resistance to current inhospitable ways of teaching and thinking, which perceive students as consumers of education.

Thus, the ethical perspective that revolves around the well-being of the other has crucial implications for knowledge and pedagogy (Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence, 1999, p.40). The discussion in the analysis chapters 5, 6, and 7, brings attention to different othering processes relating to the teaching of Ethics, which assimilate the other through a totalising system of knowledge. The discussion argues that the Ethics curriculum and its associated approaches to teaching and learning favour a Westernised notion of knowledge and education. It promotes the idea that morality can be reached through rationalisation, and holds the concept of the student as an educated adult-to-be who values personal autonomy and competition, and who favours democratic ways of thinking and doing things. The Western tradition becomes the ultimate culture to which everyone ought aspire to.

However, this conception of knowledge fails to respect the multifaceted mould of intricate contexts that constitutes the otherness of our students, as in, culture, language, society, economy, politics and history. On the other hand, it assumes that we can get to know the other through comprehension and assimilation (Young, 1990). For instance, Ethics teachers, as well as students, with a Western mind-set, might have difficulty tolerating something that goes against the Western ideas of 'good'. We might conclude that practices such as child marriage or female circumcision are unnatural, and irrational, and thus, immoral. In such cases, I argue, we fail to fully comprehend that events and traditions are shaped by social and cultural narratives, and are believed to be rational from within such cultural realities. We might feel the urge to push students towards more liberal thinking and practices, which our students could interpret as cultural imperialism. However, this does not mean that we shall shy away from discussing such topics, but we need to explore the whole issue surrounding it and not just take it as wrong. Ethics teachers are, therefore, positioned in a precarious zone and should navigate this zone with great cultural-sensitivity, reflected in the choice of pedagogical resources and teaching strategies. Specific pedagogical approaches that we utilise in the classroom, to help students revisit their beliefs and worldviews, might induce discomfort and entail what Zembylas, invoking Judith Butler, calls 'ethical violence' towards students (2015). According to Butler, ethical violence is the idea of violence committed in the name of ethics 'against those who do not conform to the dominant ethical norms' (as cited in Zembylas, 2015, p.167).

## **8.2 Some final words**

As argued before, the aim of this study is not to discredit the importance that must be attributed to EE in Maltese schools. It is my own experience, and that of Quinn and Corinne, that many of our students love the subject. In fact, in Quinn's words, most of her students 'adore' it. The curriculum seems relevant for them as it connects in a direct and meaningful way with their everyday life. It offers them the space to learn about important topics that no other subject dares tackle, such as animal rights, and life and death issues, as in capital punishment, assisted suicide, contraception and abortion. Wain is right to say that such topics

are ‘arguably the most urging and challenging ethical issues we have today’<sup>6</sup>. EE plays a significant role in socialising students into the complex and ever-changing realities of today.

Moreover, I go on to add, that, considering the moral and intellectual bankruptcy of Malta’s current societal context, EE matters – it matters, more than ever. Our society is plagued by the dreadful hostility towards migrants; our choice to remain silent over violations of human rights including those of future generations; a Machiavellian way of doing politics; the worship of corrupt politicians by people; political polarisation; the spin of fake news to discredit factual accuracy; and much more. The poet and author, Immanuel Mifsud, blames local politics for suppressing Maltese people’s capacity to think freely and critically. He succinctly describes the situation as follows: ‘In the past, we had a church we followed blindly. Today, we’ve turned our two (main) parties into a church with two leaders who have morphed into our bishops’ (Grech, 2018, para.4). Thus, a kind of moral awakening is urgently needed, and the seed for such a process could lie, I believe, in the teaching of Ethics. This is because the philosophical dimension of the subject equips students with the necessary cognitive and reflexive skills for decision-making and discernment of right and wrong.

However, as Stokes (2019) argues, one has to be sensitive that, since part of philosophy’s forte is in challenging strong-held beliefs and assumptions, this might cause discomfort and distress, and thus, a degree of harm for some students. For instance, the challenge of homophobic views, which might stem from conservative, religious beliefs, can give rise to students’ discomfort and pain. This is because, for some students, their religious beliefs form their very conception of who they are. In this sense, as argued in Chapter 7, the understanding of the Ethics classroom as a place which is free and safe is problematised. Still, Ethics teachers might argue that, since our role is not to influence students into any particular ethical view, but, instead, to teach them how to think for themselves, we are, somehow, in a neutral zone. We assume that students can, through their rational faculties, metamorphose smoothly into responsible young adults, by comprehending and abiding by the Enlightenment’s heritage of universal principles. But, as Stokes rightly argues, ‘[p]hilosophers, accustomed to suspending their beliefs for the sake of argument, can forget how distressing it can be to see the foundation of a long-cherished assumption thrown into question like that’ (2019, para.3).

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<sup>6</sup> Ministry for Education and Employment (MEDE) (Malta). (n.d.). *Ethics Education Syllabus, Year 11*. Retrieved from <https://curriculum.gov.mt/en/Curriculum/Year-9-to-11/Pages/default.aspx>.

### 8.3 Recommendations

If we are to trust that EE has the potential to change students' views and understandings, then we must acknowledge that it encompasses a dimension of transformative experiences, which, nonetheless, is driven by a liberal, democratic agenda. That being the case, I argue that Stokes's (2019) suggestion to be honest with our students and their parents, and to let them know that the experience of EE might transform them is valid and of relevance. A way how this could be done is through periodic meetings between the Ethics teacher, students and their parents throughout the academic year. Further, there could be more media exposure and the creation of dialogue between leaders of different faiths and secular worldviews which could transform the syllabus into becoming representative of a wider polis, thus giving it more legitimacy.

Thus, given the above, this study, which sits somewhere in between a Levinasian thematic analysis and a personal philosophical reflection, concludes that, in various ways, the current EEP, does not respond to the otherness of the cultural and religious other in schools. Instead, it contributes to multi-layered processes of othering, primarily because it embraces differences only once they are domesticated. This conception of otherness side-lines cultural and religious differences of individual students to the private sphere in favour of an essential humanistic worldview.

Therefore, the policy decision to introduce EE as a response to the increasing voices that had asked for an alternative to CRE, together with the growing number of students opting out of the latter, in reality falls short to respond to the plurality of worldviews in our schools. A rethinking of religious education, as being proposed by Mifsud, as an 'understanding of other cultures' where students 'understand the phenomenology, history and anthropology of religion', would better suit the non-Catholic students (Diacono, 2017, para.4). Nonetheless, since this proposal is still in the pipeline, and may actually not materialise, it might be a sensible decision to enrich the Ethics curricular content with non-Western ethical, theoretical standpoints. The reason being is to reach further the plurality of worldviews in the Ethics classroom.

I am conscious that a limitation of this study could be the fact that my analysis of the EEP is most biased, since, as Todd highlights, once you work through the thoughts of Levinas, you



will always land in a zone of violence and trauma concerning education (2003, p.40). Nevertheless, I argue, it is through this unveiling of violence that Levinas could assist us teachers to recognise and respond to, what Burbules calls, the 'tragic perspective' of education (2018). In the teaching of Ethics, this tragedy manifests itself in the reality of students having to give up parts of their identity to experience, what the curriculum deems to be, a qualitative transformation in viewpoint, belief and attitude. Moreover, the value-laden nature of the Ethics curriculum warrants that Ethics teachers face challenging choices whereby opposing values are set in tension with each other. If we are aware of this tragic dimension in the teaching of Ethics, then we acknowledge that our endeavour can do as good as it can harm. We become critical of the oversimplification through which students are believed to graduate in ethical, responsible citizenship, and instead vigilantly remind ourselves of both the possibilities and the limitations of the EEP. A tragic perspective, which makes us accept that doubt and uncertainty are part and parcel of education.

Consequently, since the teaching of Ethics entails violence, concealed in the reduction of multiplicity to sameness, teachers must act courageously and embrace some degree of anarchy within the totality in which we work. This space of anarchy opens up the possibility to keep the desire for responsibility alive. It might encourage us to resist current ways of thinking about education and ethics, which seem colonised by a discourse of modernity. Further, it humbles us when we come face-to-face with our students and makes us desire to be more attentive, sensitive, and well in tune. This desire is never accomplished, but we can always, as Samuel Beckett famously put it in *Worstward Ho!*: Try again. Fail again, Fail better.

For these reasons, I recommend that the course leading to the teaching of Ethics in schools is balanced with regard to different philosophical perspectives. Understandingly, teachers are introduced to the thoughts of those Western philosophers onto which the Ethics curriculum is built. However, considering the uncertainties and aporias that teachers might experience in the Ethics classroom, equal importance to postmodern thinking might be beneficial for teachers in challenging their assumptions, but also the power of identity and state-endorsed certainties.

This study reflects my struggle, as an Ethics teacher, to concede to my liberal bias and the more conservative beliefs and attitudes of my students, as they emerge in the Ethics lessons. I

hope that this reflective study stimulates further reflection, discussion and additional research into ways how to make the teaching of Ethics, and education in general, less assimilative and more hospitable, and better suited for the uncertainties of tomorrow.

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## **List of Appendices**

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## Appendix I

### INFORMATION LETTER FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

**Project Title: Ethics Education in Maltese State Schools: A response to otherness or a contribution to othering?**

17<sup>th</sup> October, 2016

Dear prospective participant,

I am a primary teacher, currently reading a Master Degree in Education in The Teaching of Ethics in Schools. Part of the M.Ed includes a research study. My research interest is in exploring whether the Ethics Education Programme is adequately responding to the religious otherness of students. This study comes at a time when the face of our classrooms is changing as a response to secularisation and the increased influx of the new religious *others*. This study is being conducted under the supervision of Dr Duncan Mercieca (duncan.mercieca@um.edu.mt).

**I invite educators who have been teaching ethics education in *primary and secondary schools* for at least one year to participate in this study**, where I would be holding with each participant in-depth, semi-structured interviews over three sessions. During the interview meetings, I will be asking participants questions regarding different aspects of religious diversity and religious othering inside and outside the classroom. There is no strict order of questions, but, through the questions, educators would be able to share their experiences, stories and perspectives.

Each individual interview should last approximately one hour and will be held at a place and time convenient to participants. The interviews will be audio-recorded and then transcribed. After I have analysed all the information and the dissertation process is complete, I will destroy the recordings. Please, note that:

- Participation in this study is entirely **voluntary** and you are free to decline participation and ignore this correspondence;
- All the collected original **information will only be seen by me and my supervisor**;
- **Anonymity** will be respected and identities will not be disclosed at any point. Participants will be given the option of choosing their own pseudonym (alias name);
- Participants have the **right not to answer** any questions they would not like to answer;
- Participants **may withdraw** from the study at any time without having to provide an explanation for their withdrawal. Their data would then not be used;
- Participants will be given their transcripts for **feedback** and verification;



- Participants will be given a **copy** of the study on request, once the correction process is complete.

If you would like additional information about the study or to express your interest to participate please contact me on mobile number 998XXX52 or email me on [bernardette.mizzi.xx@um.edu.mt](mailto:bernardette.mizzi.xx@um.edu.mt). I will be very happy to answer any questions that you may have. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Yours truly,

Bernardette Mizzi  
Mobile: 998XXX52  
Email: [bernardette.mizzi.xx@um.edu.mt](mailto:bernardette.mizzi.xx@um.edu.mt)

**Appendix II**

**CONSENT FORM**

I,

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the undersigned, am willing to participate in Ms Bernardette Mizzi’s dissertation: “*Ethics Education in Maltese State Schools: A response to otherness or a contribution to othering?*” conducted under the supervision of Dr Duncan Mercieca (duncan.mercieca@um.edu.mt). I am aware that this is part of her Master in Teaching Ethics in Schools degree coursework and that my participation is totally voluntary. I confirm that I have read the information document carefully and am fully informed about this research. I understand that:

- Each of the three individual interviews should last around one hour and will be audio-recorded;
- Ms Mizzi will meet me in my preferred setting;
- The information I provide shall be used solely for academic research purposes;
- There will be no deception of any form in the data collection process;
- No identifying information shall be disclosed and anonymity will be guaranteed;
- All audio-recorded material will be handled confidentially and shall be destroyed after completion of the project;
- I have the right not to answer any questions should I wish to do so;
- I am allowed to withdraw from the project at any time, and without an explanation;
- If I withdraw, my data will not be used;
- I will be given my transcript after each interview to confirm or amend as needed.

I confirm that I have been briefed about the nature and aim of the study and have had the opportunity to ask questions and obtain clarification from Bernardette Mizzi. I am satisfied by these conditions and consent to participate in this study. I am aware that Ms Mizzi’s signature below is a confirmation that she will abide by the content of this consent form.

|                     |                    |                    |
|---------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
|                     | Bernardette Mizzi  | Dr Duncan Mercieca |
| NAME OF PARTICIPANT | NAME OF RESEARCHER | NAME OF SUPERVISOR |

|                          |                         |                         |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
|                          |                         |                         |
| SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT | SIGNATURE OF RESEARCHER | SIGNATURE OF SUPERVISOR |

**Appendix III**

## **Topic-list / Guideline for semi-structured interviews**

### **Project title: Ethics Education in State Schools: A response to otherness or a contribution to othering?**

The following six questions provide an overall structure for the three interview sessions held with each participant. Other questions and points of discussion will arise in the process of the interview.

#### **Q-1: Could you talk about yourself?**

(personal backgrounds, philosophy of teaching, motivation for deciding to teach Ethics Education, religious affiliation, teacher experiences, etc.)

Suggestion: draw a time-line with key moments

#### **Q-2: How would you describe the students in your Ethics classrooms?**

Suggested questions / remarks to deepen and expand the topic

- Are your students groups homogenous groups with regards to religion?
- Are there other observed differences between students, other than religious differences?
- Could you elaborate on one of the observed differences between students?
- Could you describe a student and his/her background more concretely?
- Given the diverse religions in your classes, how do you feel about religious diversity?
- How do you deal with the religious diversity in your groups?
- Do the different religious beliefs in the ethics classroom, unsettle/challenge you in any way or do they enhance your teaching experience? How?

#### **Q-3: Who is the other to you, in general?**

Suggested questions / remarks to deepen and expand the topic

- Does the decision you had taken to teach Ethics make you othered? And if so, what do you think are the reasons for that? How do you deal with it?

#### **Q-4: Maltese State Schools have a predominantly Catholic identity? Would you agree on that? In what ways is this exhibited in your school?**

Suggested questions / remarks to deepen and expand the topic

- Do you feel that this Catholic identity is othering the religious other?
- Could you describe ways how schools could address religious diversity better?

**Q-5: Do you believe that the introduction of EE was a step in the right direction? If yes, in what ways? If not, why not?**

Suggested questions / remarks to deepen and expand the topic

- Can you briefly describe the syllabus / syllabi that you are teaching?
- In what ways is the Ethics Education curriculum addressing religious diversity?

**Q-6: According to the Ethics Education curriculum, the ethics classroom should be a community of inquiry. What's your understanding of this?**

Suggested questions / remarks to deepen and expand the topic

- Is your understanding of a community based on shared similarities among students or is it perceived as a space where students can live together with the unfamiliar other?  
Ask to elaborate:
  - ✓ How do you do this in practice?
  - ✓ Could you illustrate this by an example?
  - ✓ Could you tell me a story that is a good example of what you mean?
  - ✓ Could you describe an ordinary lesson during an ordinary day?

## Appendix IV



Room 229, Faculty of Education,  
Old Humanities Bldg,  
Tal-Qroqq

1 November 2016

To whom it may concern,

This is to confirm that the Malta Ethics Teachers Association (META) will be supporting Ms Bernardette Mizzi's research concerning her MA thesis entitled "*Ethics Education in Maltese State Schools: A response to otherness or a contribution to othering?*".

Specifically, META will be disseminating Ms Mizzi's invitation, including all necessary information, to primary and secondary school ethics teachers to participate in interview sessions.

Sincerely,

Kathleen Micallef  
META Committee Secretary