The Significance of Context:
Moral Education and Religious Education
Facing the Challenge of Sustainability

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Abstract

Education for sustainable development as presented by UNESCO involves a value dimension which is both pivotal and problematic. Pivotal, because values concern what matters to beings, problematic because the values brought forward are formulated as universal values, with the risk of suppressing the plurality of context.

The first part of the article develops a theoretical approach for a research project on environmental ethical values in moral education which accommodates for both universality and context. While the scope is mainly theoretical, some empirical material is brought in to illustrate and exemplify. The school subject involved includes religious education, and the empirical material shows that religion is a part of the context. However, this aspect is not accentuated in the theoretical approach presented.

The second part is a mediation between this theoretical approach on moral education and the interpretive approach addressing religious education. The aim is to explore common ground, uncover factual tension and reflect on how both moral education and religious education may contribute to environmental and sustainability education.

Keywords: moral education, education for sustainable development, universal values, context, religious education, interpretive approach.

Introduction

What is education for sustainable development really about? Why does it matter? In the deliberation of such questions the values soon become present, implicitly or explicitly. As demonstrated in this article, UNESCO, which by United Nations has been designated as the lead agency for education for sustainable development (United Nations General Assembly, (2002)), is itself addressing decisive values which in key documents are normatively formulated, expressed as moral claims with a global reach. These universal values are the focus here.

Education for sustainable development is an interdisciplinary field (UNESCO, 2006; 2014) and as such, the accompanying values belong to all pedagogical activities. However, in some school subjects, the value dimension is more visible than in others. In the humanities a distinguishing mark is to let values be explicit objects of scrutiny, particularly in moral education.

This is the rationale for making moral education the context of this article. The first major concern is the relationship between universal values and context, a contested issue in the scholarly debate which I soon will show. *The aim is to present a theoretical approach as a response to this debate in a way which accommodates for both universality and context.* Here, the central reference is the moral philosopher Seyla Benhabib. (For Benhabib in educational research, see Vestøl, 2011; Wahlström, 2009; Englund, 2011. Particularly pertinent to this article is Karin Sporre's (2015, p. 238) suggestion to let Benhabib's moral philosophy be "a critical framework for discussing issues of citizenship, politics of identity, ethics, value formation and education.") In close connection to Benhabib's conceptions, *context* is here seen as an expression of the embodiment and embeddedness of human beings in a web of relations of time and place involving both environmental, cultural, societal and political conditions.

The second concern emerges from the anchorage of this study in classroom research. The discussions are performed with reference to an ongoing empirical research project on environmental ethical values in moral education, involving students in Norwegian lower secondary school in the mandatory school subject Knowledge of Christianity, Religion, Philosophies of life and Ethics (CRLE). This secular school subject includes not only moral education, but religious education as well, as also is the case in countries like Sweden (Osbeck & Skeie, 2014), Iceland (Gunnarsson, 2014) and Scotland (Conroy, 2014). In the Norwegian syllabus of CRLE the relationship is explicitly stated. The aim of this school subject, as formulated in the introduction to the syllabus (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2016, p. 8) is to enable the students to "hold a dialogue with others about the relationship between ethics, religion and philosophies of life." Philosophies of life here refers to non-religious traditions like secular humanism. (In this article the reference to the established field 'religious education' includes both religious and non-religious traditions, an alternative could be the more inclusive concept of worldviews, cf. Miedema (2017).)

As research fields religious education and moral education still appear as two distinct traditions. While religious education is the major issue in journals like *Religion & Education* and the *British Journal of Religious Education,* moral education is discussed in *Journal of Moral Education,* both with subsequent associations, societies, and conferences. Certainly there are overlaps. Existential questions, the significance of values and identity formation are raised within both fields. But precisely because of the obvious kinship, the establishment of parallel scholarly traditions is conspicuous.

The situation of parallel worlds emerges as a challenge even in a piece of research like the present one on a school subject including both moral and religious education. Following UNESCO's interdisciplinary call all the way into this specific school subject, the second aim of this article, then, is to mediate between moral education and religious education. I bring in the *interpretive* approach, a cogent contribution to religious education both as a practice and research field, by Robert Jackson recently presented in this journal (Jackson, 2016). *The aim here is to let the interpretive approach inform the theoretical approach already introduced in a way which accommodates for religion as part of the context.*

The present study is part of a larger project on environmental ethical values in sustainability education including analyses of education policy documents, with a corresponding theoretical and methodological framing as presented in this article. (Kvamme, forthcoming)

Methodological Considerations

The article is mainly theoretically oriented. My hope is that, through the discussion, vital aspects of the significance of moral education and religious education to environmental and sustainability education will become visible. Some empirical material will be referred to as illustrations and concretizations. I report from a lesson which exemplifies the relationship between universality and context, and present a small transcript which illustrates the presence of religion as part of the context being studied. However, because of the priority given to theoretical considerations, I do not give a full account of the empirical work which will be focused in a subsequent article.

Let me just sum up some important aspects of the methodology and design of the empirical research reported from here. In October and November 2016, I was observing seven lessons in a 10th grade class in moral education at a school situated in an urban community of Norway. The majority of the 24 students at the age of 14 or 15, had a multicultural background, many of them with links to countries far away. Most of the whole class lessons observed were video recorded, including, in some cases, group discussions. This design was supported by recordings made, using dictaphones. The recordings were transcribed and anonymized by the author. In the sixth and the seventh lesson, sustainable development was a main issue; in the seventh it was a topic for planning a written assignment. In this article, I refer specifically to the sixth lesson and present a transcript from the seventh lesson. Analysis of the sixth lesson has previously been presented in a paper at ECER, the conference of the European Educational Research Association (Kvamme, 2017).

Methodologically, this study is informed by the critical hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur (2009), emphasizing the interpretative contribution made by the researcher. This also includes the discussions based on the readings of the literature brought into the discussions carried out in the article.

Environmental Ethical Values

The understanding of values employed in this article has a foothold in an everyday context, conceived as something to be considered as good or worthy. Values may be seen as expressions of concerns we have, our hopes and fears. In that way, values are relational; they connect us to the world (Sayer, 2011). As mentioned earlier, the UNESCO values are normatively formulated. Consequently, the distinction between values and norms, the latter understood as rules of conduct, can be difficult to make. Significant is that the values addressed here are expressed as moral claims with a universal reach.

Values are considered to be decisive in education for sustainable development, linked to moral and social responsibility (Huckle, 2008, p. 350). But values is a contested issue as well, raising fundamental pedagogical questions concerning what education is all about. Historically the concept of education for sustainable development first was used by UNESCO in 1992, with a historical background in environmental education (Sauvé, 1996). The relationship between these two fields is complex and involves a salient discussion of the concept of sustainable development which goes beyond the scope of this article. But the debate on values has been carried out within both fields.

Scott & Oulton's (1998, p. 212–213) identification of two opposite positions within environmental education is elucidating. While one stance sees education as a process

which helps students to develop a personal worldview including values to adhere to, the opposite position is characterized by approaching education from the perspective of externally decided goals, which may include the students' adoption of certain values. Within education for sustainable development similar positions may be identified (see Öhman, 2006; Jickling and Wals, 2008; Kopnina, 2014), making the pedagogical concern for edification, *Bildung*, as discussed by Miedema (2017) in the previous issue of *Discourse and Communication for Sustainable Education*, highly relevant.

An aspect of this debate is the status of universal claims, which I here place in the forefront. Louise Sund and Johan Öhman (2014), referring to the United Nations Decade on Education for Sustainable Development (2005–2014), are summing up major positions, themselves problematizing universal values. In one respect they take first stance as identified by Scott & Oulton, being concerned about "a values education that is driven by and strives to inculcate preconceived universal values" in the students (Sund and Öhman 2014, p. 640). But even more decisive is their critique of universal values concealing conflict, plurality and individuality. In their article they call for an education which makes the political dimension visible.

In a condensed form, a central aspect of this debate may be formulated in the following way: How is the relationship between universal values and context to be conceived? Regarding education for sustainable development, this question is of vital significance, because in UNESCO's work in this field values are presented as universal, calling for action in a variety of contexts throughout the world. A major concern in this article is to contribute to this discussion.

What values is UNESCO actually addressing? In its current *2030 Roadmap for Implementing the Global Action Programme on Education for Sustainable Development* values have a prominent position, mentioned in the introduction and throughout the document, however, without qualification (UNESCO, 2014). But as a follow-up of the UN Decade on Education for Sustainable Development (2005–2014), claims formulated in key policy documents there still appear to be decisive today. In *Framework to the UN DESD* (UNESCO, 2006) distinct value statements are made. Pigozzi (2006) also refers to these specific values as an expression of the official UNESCO view of global citizenship education. Below they are quoted from the presentation in the UNESCO framework:

> *The underlying values which education for sustainable development must promote include at least the following: Respect for the dignity and human rights of all people throughout the world and a commitment to social and economic justice for all; Respect for the human rights of future generations and a commitment to intergenerational responsibility; Respect and care for the greater community of life in all its diversity which involves the protection and restoration of the Earth's ecosystems; Respect for cultural diversity and a commitment to build locally and globally a culture of tolerance, non-violence and peace.* (UNESCO, 2006, pp. 15–16)

The values are formulated as universal claims with universal validity. And they are formulated as norms; the moral agent shall pay respect to something. The key word *respect* in moral philosophy has been designated to persons (Dillon, 2016), and raises the question about not only *what* is to be respected, but *who* is worthy of respect. It is significant that the scope presented by UNESCO not only encompasses human beings in their cultural diversity and with their human rights here and now, but future gener-

ations and the greater community of life, as well, including biodiversity and ecosystems. All the values formulated by UNESCO above may be conceived as environmental ethical values – even those involving human beings here and now (see Kronlid and Öhman, 2013). However, within environmental ethics and environmental philosophy the latter two, concerning future generations and non-human life forms, are accentuated. They also have a primary focus in the empirical research project to which this article refers.

Whole Class Discussion: Rule and Context

Consider a 90 minutes lesson in moral education on sustainable development in a Norwegian 10th grade school. In this lesson the teacher shows a 30 minutes documentary about carbon footprint (Våge & Holte, 2016). In the first part of the film, the footprint of 24 year old Sigbjørn is calculated by an expert. With the premise that all human beings could possibly follow his example, the level of this young man is far too high. The second part is following Sigbjørn's efforts to reduce his footprint, with implications for transportation, food and clothing. The final part is about Sigbjørn's reflections when he realizes that he is not able to come down to a sustainable level, running into structural boundaries. He is told by the expert that he has to move into an energy-efficient passive house, which is beyond Sigbjørn's financial reach.

In the subsequent whole class discussion the teacher aims to legitimize carbon footprint as a valid yardstick in front of students, who question the calculation, and indirectly justify their own individual consumption. In moral philosophy, carbon footprint may be conceived as a universalization where the individual consumption is subsumed under a general rule, e.g. formulated this way, referring to information given in the documentary: *The consumption of an individual human being should not exceed a level with concomitant amount of greenhouse gases produced directly and indirectly equivalent to 1,5 tons of CO2.*

In this manner carbon footprint stands out with a clear message to the students, as a vigorous, universalizing expression. Due to the open invitation made by the teacher to contribute and the safe space established in the classroom, student experiences are shared in the whole class discussion. Context is made visible with several of the students taking active part. The framing is mainly facilitating confrontation and problematization of the context, focusing on what is relevant for the carbon footprint calculation; among the students mainly transport and food. This may be seen as characterizing the learning process in this lesson, to become aware of aspects of consumption patterns not complying with sustainable development. However, the students are not encouraged to discuss the premises involved in the carbon footprint rule, and their experiences are mainly seen as a problem, not as resources. In other words, there is a need to elucidate the relationship between a universal rule and context.

Interactive Universalism

In moral philosophy, the issue of universalism and context was a topic of dispute in the 1980s and 1990s. The universalist tradition with a history back to Immanuel Kant was challenged by a range of critics, representing various positions (MacIntyre 1981; Gilligan, 1982; Taylor, 1989; Young, 1990). A common concern was expressed in the claim that human beings always are situated in specific historical contexts.

A salient contribution in this debate was the seminal work *Situating the Self* (1992) by the moral philosopher and political theorist Seyla Benhabib. Benhabib has a background from critical theory and extensive studies of Hegel, and her moral philosophy is to a large extent a critical rethinking of the communicative ethics of Habermas (Benhabib, 1986). On the one hand, Benhabib acknowledges and takes part in the critique of the exclusion mechanisms involved in universalization processes. On the other hand, her claim is that a universalism – which allows for the significance of context – is valid and necessary. An important reference here for Benhabib, as a feminist critic, is the emancipation of women.

In *Situating the Self* the main argument is a defence of this possibility, presented as an interactive universalism. With the designation "interactive", Benhabib is replacing the rationality of a disembedded and disembodied autonomous male – most famously exposed in the legislative universalism of Kant – with situated selves, depending on and living in interaction with others. A consequence of this priority of context is that the exercise of moral judgment does not proceed according to a model of a particular which is subsumed under a universal (Benhabib 1992, p. 128). Moral judgment begins in context, not at a distance from context. "Moral judgment is what we 'always already' exercise in virtue of being immersed in a network of human relationships that constitute our life together" (Benhabib 1992, p. 125).

Pivotal in Benhabib's conception of moral judgment is *enlarged thought,* which is the exercise of bringing in actual and possible others who may be influenced by the moral action. Benhabib qualifies context with reference to narrativity, visualizing the situatedness of the self: "To identify an action is to tell the story of its initiation, of its unfolding, and of its immersion in a web of relations constituted through the actions and narratives of others. Likewise, the whoness of the self is constituted by the story of a life – a coherent narrative of which we are always the protagonist, but not always the author or the producer. Narrativity is the mode through which actions are individuated and the identity of the self constituted" (Benhabib, 1992, p. 127).

Benhabib's critique of previous universalistic moral theories is performed from a feminist perspective. Important here is the naming of the generalized and the concrete other. While Western moral philosophy continuously has accentuated reversibility of thinking (that is to consider the dignity of the other in moral judgement). Benhabib's claim is that the other has been a disembodied, disembedded self, in other words abstracted from the specific contexts of living beings. Herewith, the concrete other embedded in the web of relations has been made invisible. The result has been a privatization of women's experience and the exclusion of its significance for moral judgement.

As a political theorist Benhabib has named the time we live in as the era of cosmopolitan norms (Benhabib 2006, p. 47; 2011, p. 124), a period started with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by United Nations General Assembly in 1948 and a range of subsequent covenants. Reflecting on this situation, Benhabib once again draws attention to the significance of context. A key concept is *jurisgenerativity,* borrowed from Robert Cover, referring to how laws acquire meaning in specific contexts which the laws themselves cannot control. Thus, "[t]here can be no rules *without* interpretation" (Benhabib 2011, p. 125), and subsequently – because of the multitude of hermeneutical contexts – a variety of interpretations emerge which the rule cannot control. Herewith, the human rights norms "can empower citizens in democracies by creating new vocabularies for claim-making" (Benhabib, 2011, p. 126).

The other key concept of Benhabib, closely related to jurisgenerativity, is *democratic iterations*. Here her attention is directly oriented to the iteration of universal norms in new contexts:

> By democratic iterations I mean complex processes of public argument, deliber-
> ation, and exchange through which universalist rights claims are contested
> and contextualized, invoked and revoked, posited and positioned throughout
> legal and political institutions, as well as in the associations of civil society.
> (Benhabib 2011, p. 129)

While jurisgenerativity refers to the capacity of norms to establish a space charac-terized by interpretations and meanings beyond the control of the norm-giver, democratic iterations signify democratic processes brought in play, made specific in the particular iterations.

What is the relationship between the interactive universalism of the 1990s and the subsequent concept of democratic iterations? In a remark in *Dignity in Adversity*, Benhabib comments on the resituating or reiterating of the universal in concrete contexts, stating: "This is a project I have called "interactive universalism" in *Situating the Self* and "democratic iterations" in subsequent works" (Benhabib, 2011, p. 73). Even if these concepts seem to be closely related, Benhabib may be said to conflate two concepts, a critique often addressed to other thinkers in her critical readings. An important distinction may be said to be that democratic iterations are processes, which presuppose a universal claim which already has been established. Interactive universalism is the practice of moral judgement with regard to a moral action which is to take place. While the latter is a universalizing activity starting in context and including all who actually and possibly may be affected by the moral action, the former is a recontextualization embedding the universal claim in a specific context.

The influence of Hannah Arendt on Benhabib's work is obvious and explicit, the key concepts of enlarged thought and narrativity are drawn from her. Benhabib is also a well-known critic of several of Arendt's distinctions (see Benhabib, 1996), most import-antly those between the public and the private, the political and the moral, the right and the good. According to Benhabib, such distinctions confirm societal structures which have made the experiences and life-worlds of women irrelevant and invisible. This critique is particularly pertinent to the dynamics of sustainability, involving both private and public, moral and political, values and norms.

Summing up, Benhabib's theoretical framework may open up decisive aspects of the moral claims made in education for sustainable development with a sensitivity for context and the positioning of the learners. In a classroom situation in moral education, her interactive universalism presupposes participatory learning where the students them-selves partake in the universalizing processes of moral claims. As an activity of enlarged thought, this activity also includes the perspectives of possible others outside the classroom who may be influenced by the action in question. Ideally, the universalizing process is performed with a sensitivity for the concrete others situated in contexts expressed by the plurality of human life. Here the concept of narrativity refers to the embeddedness of the selves and their actions in a web of relations.

Also significant is Benhabib's concept of democratic iterations. In education for sustainable development, the universal values formulated in the UNESCO policy documents are supposed to have impact at all levels. Here Benhabib's openness for the interpretive

activity which is involved may be said to encounter the problem of the inculcation of values, as mentioned above.

Whole Class Discussion Revisited

Returning to the school context of a 10th grade classroom, using the theoretical conception of Benhabib, certain aspects become visible. First of all, as a yardstick for whether or not Sigbjørn in the documentary – and the students in class – are responsible for climate change, the rule of the carbon footprint stands out as a version of the Kantian position Benhabib is criticizing, i.e. a universal under which the particulars are subsumed. The whole class discussion demonstrates a major problem with such a procedure; restrictions are placed on context, which according to Benhabib, should be the *starting* point for practicing moral judgment.

A consequence is that the environmental ethical values in play in the classroom discussion, actually remain mostly hidden inside the rule of the carbon footprint. A link to sustainable development was drawn by the teacher in the beginning of the lesson, but during the lesson the rule to a large degree is linked to an abstract activity, expressing a calculation which defines whether or not the individual is complying with a justifiable – i.e. a sustainable – level. Seen from the perspective of interactive universalism, an implication is that the discussion is solely oriented to the individual's consumption pattern. The others who are influenced by this consumption are not made visible. In other words, the application of carbon footprint seems to obstruct the exercise of enlarged thought, as we have seen, pivotal in the interactive universalism of Benahbib.

This impression is strengthened when the discussion is examined in the light of democratic iterations. Because the carbon footprint rule is an abstract expression of values understood as universal claims, the *jurisgenerativity* – i.e. the rule's capacity to establish a space of interpretations – is reduced, and the possibility for democratic iterations restricted. The students do not get the chance to discuss the premises of the carbon footprint, except as an expression of demands and supply in a market economy. The underlying universal values are not made visible.

The restricted scope on the individual consumer could have been modified if the whole part of the documentary shown had been brought into the classroom discussion. Despite all his efforts, Sigbjørn is unable to comply with the carbon footprint rule. His problem turns out to be a structural problem, which exhibits that he is facing both a moral and political problem. But this political dimension is not brought in.

The interpretation above may be further developed while drawing on the concept of narrativity, how we are all embedded in a web of relations with others. Conspicuous is how the web of relations within the class extends national borders. Some of the students have close ties to family in other parts of the world and bring in experiences from here into the discussion, which makes the global dimension visible, highly relevant for sustainability education.

These remarks should suffice to exemplify how Benhabib's theoretical framework offers a critical perspective on classroom activities in moral education. A major observation is the obstructing function of the carbon footprint rule. Even though the teacher allows for class discussion, and hereby grants the students a prominent position in the lesson, their situatedness and experiences are not brought in as a positive resource in the performance of moral judgement.

The Significance of Religion

In the lesson referred to so far, religion plays a minor role, but, in the subsequent lesson, religion was introduced as an issue when the students were preparing a written assignment on sustainable development. Here is a transcript from a scene where the teacher is supervising a group of four students. The teacher encourages the students to reflect on various ethical theories which they have worked with previously in class. The students, however, also want to bring in religion.

> Marjori: If we talk about the way which you mentioned once, when I referred to religious rules and deontological ethics, and you said I could include that. Can I?
>
> *Teacher: Mmm… (confirming).*
>
> *Jasmin: For instance, in Islam as well, one must take care of nature and the future and things like that.*
>
> *Teacher: Exactly. [To the whole group:] Love of one's neighbor in Christianity, Islam. Hinduism, ahimsa, non-violence.*
>
> *Jasmin: I don't know if I commit a sin when I contribute to CO2-emissions.*

The teacher is here confirming the relevance of religion. She refers to previous work in class on Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. However, this issue also makes visible the students' own religious background. Marjori, in the group discussion, refers to herself as a Hindu, and Jasmin to herself as a Muslim. In the transcript, Jasmin brings the concern for non-human life-forms and future generations into her own religious context, gaining support from the teacher. Subsequently, she raises the question of sin, which the teacher does not comment upon.

The religious dimension is not *prima facie* captured by the theoretical approach informed by Seyla Benhabib. As a post-foundational moral theory, religious references are not accentuated. A major concern here, as in Habermas' discourse ethics from the 1980s, is that the universal claims are validated through a procedure which does not refer to authorities other than those which are expressed in the interaction between rational selves (see Benhabib 1986, p. 296).

Confronted with empirical material which obviously includes religion, the question is raised as to how religion may be positioned within the theoretical approach presented so far. In the final part of this article, I will discuss this issue while mediating between the moral philosophy of Benhabib and the interpretive approach developed by Robert Jackson (1997; 2004; 2016).

The Mediating Exercise

The interpretive approach to religious education was developed within the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit in England (Jackson 2016). It has been extra-ordinary productive, and has stimulated numerous initiatives. The journal *Religion & Education* published in 2013 a special issue on the interpretive approach with an editorial listing projects on pupil-to-pupil dialogue, citizenship education, intercultural education, RE and action research, assessment, community cohesion and teacher education (O'Grady, Miller & McKenna, 2013). Moral education is, however, not included on the list, con-

firming the impression of religious education and moral education as somehow parallel worlds.

According to Robert Jackson, the interpretive approach is "essentially an approach to understanding the ways of life of others and is intended as a complement to other aspects of religious education" (Jackson 2004, p. 87). In the following, this invitation is understood also to include moral education with an emphasis on *understanding the life of others*. Despite obvious differences, Benhabib's theoretical conceptions and the interpretive approach do merge on decisive points, which I will demonstrate.

An important theoretical background for the interactive universalism of Benhabib is her thorough analysis of the normative foundations of critical theory in *Critique, Norma and Utopia* (Benhabib, 1986). Here, a recurring theme is the critique of the philosophy of the subject. One of her major objections is that Hegel, Marx and the Frankfurt School suppress *the interpretive indeterminacy* of action. "Human actions, unlike objects and things, are not the property of their agents, or their "work". They do not embody or express a univocal meaning or purpose. Such a meaning or purpose can only be determined interpretively: in this sense, human action is fundamentally indeterminate" (Benhabib 1986, p. 87). From this claim follows the emphasis on narrativity, plurality and context which characterizes Benhabib's subsequent works.

The significance of interpretation is signaled in the entitling of Robert Jackson's interpretive approach, and this approach is also sensitive to plurality and context. A major step in the development of the interpretive approach was the move away from a phenomenology of religion which neither paid sufficient attention to the plurality of the religious context to be studied nor the interpretive contribution made by the researcher or the student in the study of religion (Jackson, 1997, 2016). Hereby follows the emphasis Jackson places on representation, interpretation and reflexivity. Both as a practice and a research field, religious education involves considerations on the positioning and contexts of researcher/teacher/student and of those who are studied.

It is possible here to see a parallel in Benhabib's reference to the generalized other and the concrete other. While the generalized other in Western moral philosophy has been an expression of a disembodied, disembedded commonality, the concrete other is the self as embedded in specific contexts constituted by a web of relations. Benhabib's critique of the tradition from Kant to Rawls is that the generalized other is an empty mask making it "meaningful to define a self independently of all the ends it may choose and any conceptions of the good it may hold" (Benhabib 1992, p. 161).

A challenge in Benhabib's moral theory is how conceptions of the good which possibly refer to other authorities than the communicative action between rational selves, are to be positioned within her moral theory. In other words, what is the relationship between the generalized other and the concrete other (here including a religious other)? Benhabib herself calls for an interactive universalism which "acknowledges the plurality of modes of being human, and differences among humans, without endorsing all these pluralities and differences as morally and politically valid" (Benhabib, 1992, p. 153). However, justification of moral claims among rational selves is decisive in Benhabib's theoretical conception, raising the question of how far the acknowledgement of the various modes of being human goes. Within discourse ethics, which Benhabib's work is continuing with explicit references to Habermas, the concern is "which norms and normative institutional arrangements could be considered valid by all those who would

be affected if they were participants in special moral argumentations called discourse" (Benhabib 2011, p. 67).

Returning to the interpretive approach certain normative assumptions are involved. There is no invitation to a value-free activity, as demonstrated in Jackson s emphasis on an ethical "grounding" of religious education in a societal consensus of values (Jackson 1997, p. 91). However, the purpose is not to settle truth claims (although it does not exclude a student-centered discussion of truth claims), but fundamentally to understand the life of others.

The implication is that although the approach to moral education informed by Benhabib and the interpretive approach to religious education do correlate on certain points, fundamental ambitions involved nevertheless seem to differ. According to the latter approach religious education is aiming at understanding the life of others. The ambition of the former approach involves the universalizing practice of settling moral claims. However, as distinct as this difference may be, as obvious is the possible mediation between these two approaches. The moral claims cannot be reached, according to Benhabib, without a factual or imagined discourse involving the life of concrete others influenced by my actions.

The mediating exercise, then, has not been closed, but is to be continued. The final question to an approach to moral education informed by Benhabib s conceptions and challenged by a school subject including religion, remains exactly to be how to mediate between the concrete and generalized other. An intriguing aspect of education is that such an issue inevitably becomes specific, to be settled by the teacher and the students. As part of a research approach the question may as well remain open, to be further explored in the study of classroom interactions.

Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to develop a theoretical approach to environmental ethical values in moral education which fulfils two concerns. The first is to acknowledge both universality and the significance of context. The second concern is to elucidate the role of religion within this theoretical approach. While the first concern has been elaborated with decisive reference to theoretical conceptions by Seyla Benhabib, considerations related to the second concern have been articulated while bringing in perspectives from the interpretive approach to religious education developed by Robert Jackson. The discussions have been illustrated with examples from an ongoing research project on moral education in lower secondary school in Norway.

A main conclusion is that the theoretical approach here presented seems to represent a critical perspective which makes it possible to identify salient aspects of moral education concerning sustainability. The roles of student experience, student agency, plurality, and the premises of the classroom discussions are all regarded as significant. Within education for sustainable development, it is also pertinent that Benhabib's concepts of jurisgenerativity and democratic iterations establish an approach through which moral claims may be considered to be recontextualized at various institutional levels. When it comes to the role of religion, the interpretive approach of Robert Jackson has strengthened the conception of the concrete other as an aspect of the context of the moral judgement

taking place. Here, however, a tension seems to remain within Benhabib's theoretical conceptions, which has not been resolved.

Finally, the author hopes to have accommodated for the potential contributions of moral education and religious education in the meaning making processes among students engaging in sustainability issues.

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