Some Aristotelian reflections on teachers' professional identities and the emotional practice of teaching

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Teachers of morality – moral teachers

Aristotelianism has exerted a powerful influence on moral education during the last quarter of a century. So pervasive has this influence been, that two of the most popular trends succeeding Kohlberg's developmentalism are avowedly Aristotelian in origin: *character education*, based broadly on the tenets of virtue ethics, and *social and emotional learning*, derived from the concept of emotional intelligence. Devout Aristotelians, and I include myself among them, may grumble that those trends have rushed off too quickly in their own homemade directions. Character educationists seem at times to be overly concerned with the inculcation of a body of set traits but concerned too little with the development of critical moral wisdom (*phronesis*), and EQ theorists typically fail to heed Aristotle's warning that emotional competence without moral depth is the mere calculated cleverness of a knave. Nevertheless those two approaches have unleashed an unprecedented interest in practical methods of moral education that clearly deserve to be labelled 'Aristotelian': moral habituation, sentimental education, service learning and the emulation of moral exemplars (see Kristjánsson, 2007).

People sometimes speak of the 'moral dimension of teaching'. In so far as that concept refers to the teaching of morality, then, whether directly (through special classes in such areas as 'moral education', 'citizenship education', 'life skills') or indirectly (by conducting oneself as a moral exemplar to one's students), Aristotelianism has become one of the guiding lights of educational practice. There is, however, another understanding of the 'moral dimension of teaching' that has less to do with didactic moral considerations than with morality in a more basic sense: with the *moral teacher* rather than with the *teacher of morality*. Teachers engage daily in interactions with other persons within their school walls: colleagues, administrators, students, parents. Irrespective of the example they set to their students by the way they behave – critically important as that is – there are surely independent reasons why any good teacher

would want those interactions to satisfy the requirements of morality: reasons that have to do with general moral duties to others, professional duties and last but not least duties to oneself (in striving to flourish as a human being). It is a matter for some surprise and disappointment that Aristotelianism has not informed recent discussions on this facet of the moral dimension of teaching to the same extent as it has the didactic one (for a notable exception, see Carr, 2000; cf. Hansen, 2001). Before analysing the discursive situation, it is in order to begin with a short illustrative example, the story of 'Runner Fan'.

In the aftermath of the Sichuan earthquake in China on May 12th 2008, many stories of individual heroism emerged. Especially heartening were stories of brave selfless teachers using their bodies to protect students as classrooms collapsed around them. One of them, teacher Tan, was found dead with four students alive, shielded under him. In glaring contrast to those tales of heroism was the story of teacher Fan Meizhong – a story he told unrepentantly after the quake. As the tremors began, 'Runner Fan', as he came to be known, yelled 'earthquake', abandoned his students and ran for his life. No thanks to Fan, none of the students was hurt. In subsequent interviews, Fan explained that were no formal legal or ethical obligations on teachers to sacrifice their lives for their students in such situations. He would have sacrificed himself for his one-year old daughter, Fan argued, but it would be totally unrealistic to expect him (or any normal person) to do the same for what was merely a group of students in a classroom. What upset many people was not so much the act of running away, which Fan could have done spontaneously in the panic of the moment. Rather, they were offended by his relentless insistence that this had been the right thing to do, and the fact that he did not regret his decision. Fan's defiant stance provoked a spate of replies, and for weeks weblogs in China and all over Asia were flooded with divisive responses to his argument (Datong, 2008).

Among Asian educators, reflections on Fan's story quickly evolved into discussions of more abstract topics such as the notion of professional versus personal duties and the emotional burdens that the profession of teaching places upon its practitioners. Indeed, this story connects well to at least two recent discursive traditions in education: concerning 'teachers' professional identities' (see e.g. Beijaard, D., Meijer, P. C. & Verloop, N., 2004) and the 'emotional practice of teaching' (Hargreaves, 1998). My previous comments on the lack of Aristotelian insights referred precisely to the discursive situation that I rue within those two traditions. Not only has the relevant literature been driven by concerns that often neglect the moral dimension of teaching in general and Aristotelian moral theory in particular, but both traditions have become saddled with a domineering paradigm that I consider at once theoretically dodgy and practically unwholesome. I call it the 'constructivist-cognitive paradigm', and take serious exception to it in what follows. One must be careful about terminology here, however. By 'constructivist' I am referring not to a plausible if somewhat trite didactic constructivism (according to which teaching is most effective when it connects to students' existing knowledge structures), but rather to a form of anti-realist epistemological constructivism. Similarly, by 'cognitive', I do not mean the sense invoked in such locutions as 'cognitive theories of emotion' (in which the cognitive is also meant to embrace 'hot' sentiments), but rather 'cognitive' as narrowly understood to denote 'cold' mental processes that exclude the affective.

Prior to further elaboration, two caveats must be entered. The first and more obvious is that my discussion will necessarily touch upon an accumulation of things, not all of which can be done full justice in a short essay. I refuse, however, to let those limitations soften the challenging stance that I wish to take. The second caveat is that my aim is not to offer a full-blown Aristotelian alternative to the constructivist-cognitive paradigm. I have a more modest aim: to pave the way for such an alternative and offer some suggestions as to its outcome by

exposing the weaknesses of the dominant paradigm. In any event, I hope that my exploration reveals how the problematic of both issues – the professional identities of teachers and the emotionality of teaching – changes as we examine them through an Aristotelian lens.

Professional identities and selfhood

'Professionalism' has been a buzzword in educational discourse since the mid 1980s. With the idea of teachers' professionalism came the notion that it was tied to certain operationalisable standard-based skills or competences (see e.g. Burke's volume, 1989), and that those skills would have to find their way – through systematic teacher education or through the consciousness-raising of practicing teachers – into the professional identities of teachers. Truly expert teaching was suddenly all about identity development and dedication to continuing self-improvement.

Although the emphasis on standards and measurable outcomes tended to include suggestions about the adoption of ethical codes of practice, by which practitioners were formally instructed, among other things, to allow the interests of their 'clients' (read: students) come before those of their colleagues, many theorists complained that the so-called professional reforms had reformed much of the moral life out of teaching. Some critics suggested that the language of professional competences was not really applicable to the moral dimension of the teaching practice (Hansen, 2001); others argued that if competence-talk were to be made applicable to the whole of that practice, it had better incorporate moral concerns (Fenstermacher, 1990). Yet others ventured to claim that the notion of the professional teacher should equated with that of the moral teacher (Sockett, 1993; cf. Carr, 2000; Campbell, 2003). Following those wake-up calls, it seems to have become more widely accepted of late that excluding the moral dimension from teacher professionalism is unadvisedly restrictive, and that professional identities cannot be understood in isolation from

moral identities. In general, the professionalism literature regarding teachers and other professionals is becoming more ethically sensitive and even virtue-oriented (see e.g. Maxwell's 2008 book on compassionate empathy as a professional ideal).

Even if this literature has gradually been relieved of its 'moral problem', a deeper conceptual problem remains. In their extensive meta-analysis of studies between 1988 and 2000, Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop (2004) found the very concept of professional identity to be enveloped in a fog of confusion. Either it was not defined at all or merely given an un-argued-for stipulative definition. No clear or shared sense of a teacher's professional identity emerged. In the research they reviewed, it tended to be assumed that teacher education would have to begin by exploring the 'teaching self'; but whether or not that 'self' was the same as 'identity' remained an enigma. The studies that offered any characterisation of the core concept seemed to rely on an anti-realist notion of a socially constructed self. Within that self – or rather that constructed identity – we are told, lurked many sub-identities, among which was that elusive professional identity as one voice in a multiple identity chorus.

How is this sub-identity constructed, then? 'Through narration', was the typical answer found in this meta-analysis: by living out and telling stories about oneself as a teacher (see e.g. Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). No particular epistemological reasons for this answer appear to have been forthcoming. One can guess from subsequent sources, however, what they would probably be: Narratives are the only means of understanding teachers' identities because there is no objective truth 'out there' (or, for that matter, 'in here') for us to comprehend. Truth is, in any case, 'a floating value, akin to a swirl'; but in making subjective sense of the chaos of experience, teachers, among others, contrive coherent-like stories about themselves which, in turn, produce their identities (Day & Leitch, 2001). Postmodernists such as Zembylas have a field day with such creation stories: The idea of a singular, stable and permanent selfhood is an Enlightenment myth. People partake in various power-structured

language games, however, in which they create their own locally articulated, locally recognised fleeting, fractured, contextual and multiple identities – or such identities are created for them (Zembylas, 2003a). Ironically, Zembylas thinks that identity formation can and should have a moral goal: resistance – the struggle to free oneself from subjection. But given the Foucauldian assumption, with which Zembylas whole-heartedly agrees (2003b), that all aspects of a people's lives are subjected to disciplinary formation and that no 'true self' exists underneath all the masks and facades, the clarion call for 'freedom from subjection' does little more than remind us of the postmodernists' penchant for shooting themselves in the foot.

There is good reason to take stock here and pursue a miniature history of ideas. First of all, narrativism about selves is not a single theory. There are at least three distinct versions of it: the hard anti-realist postmodern version that understands 'storied accounts' of identity as feeble and essentially invalid attempts to make sense of truth in 'a swirl'; a soft anti-realist version, according to which storied self-accounts are valid in so far as they satisfy the epistemological conditions of coherence and believability; and a realist version, which claims that narration is the underlying structure of selfhood and that identity stories are valid to the extent that they correspond with this actual structure. Simply positing that teachers' professional identities are narratively constructed, therefore, does not help to solve the underlying conceptual problem of what such identities really are. In order to resolve that dilemma, we must come to grips with the notoriously intractable debate between self-realists and self-anti-realists. For the former (such as Aristotle, 1985), selves actually exist, comprising our deepest traits and commitments. Identities or constructed self-concepts also exist, obviously, but they are either true or false. When they are true (by capturing the self), we possess self-knowledge; when they are false (by missing the self), we are-self-deceived. For self-anti-realists (such as Hume, 1978, Book I; he modifies his position in Book II), no

actual selves exist. What we call ‘selves’ are simply identities or self-concepts: our beliefs about who we are and what we are.

This is not the place even to begin a comprehensive rebuttal of anti-realism. In fact, it must be admitted that Hume marshals some convincing arguments against the notion of substantive realist selfhood – while wanting to preserve the notion of the ‘soft’ realist self of everyday experience. Although there is something to be said for the view that Hume’s scepticism about hard self-realism does not get the better of him, there is nothing, however, to be said for the view that the postmodernists’ Hume-on-steroids version of anti-realism does not get the better of them. Unfortunately, it is the latter that seems to have taken captive the discursive tradition on teachers’ professional identities – when that tradition actually addresses rather than merely shirks the question of what such identities are. But not only does postmodern anti-realism set ordinary experiences of selfhood utterly at nought, it is unable to make any coherent sense of the difference between self-knowledge and self-deception.

What would be the main ingredients in an Aristotelian paradigm of professional identity? The first observation would be that as important as identities or self-concepts are, actual selfhood is more important. To be sure, one’s self-concept does not simply describe and interpret the self without influencing it. Just as noticing a blemish on your face in a photograph may induce you to remove the blemish from your face rather than merely airbrushing it from the photo, so the projection of one’s self-concept may prompt one, consciously or unconsciously, to recast any of one’s core traits or commitments. In that sense, the identity construction of teachers is a worthy object of inquiry. But in the end, what matters is that teachers’ selves are in order – that they have the proper traits and commitments – not merely that they want to have them or assume that they have them. The second ingredient, Aristotle would argue, is that one’s selfhood and emotions are intimately linked; I return to that point in the following section. Third, Aristotle would abide by the ‘one-self-to-a-

customer' rule (Flanagan, 1996). Each person has one self. Truly multiple selves exist only in pathological cases. Some of the core commitments of teachers' selves will concern their profession. We can refer to those as their 'teacher selves', if you like, although it is slightly misleading, and to their beliefs about those commitments as their 'teacher identities'. Moral persons will seek morally grounded consonance among (a) their various commitments, among (b) their various beliefs about those commitments, and between (a) and (b). The tool that we have at our disposal to do just that – and to resolve any remaining dilemmas – is *phronesis*. That is basically what *phronesis* is for. The upshot is that it is futile to study teacher selves or teacher identities in isolation. What matters is how they fit into a person's moral character and resonate with one's overall life plan. The Aristotelian message can be nothing short of proclaiming, then, that the currently dominant epistemological constructivism obscures the goals of identifying and influencing teachers' professional identities and that it does disservice to all those engaged in that endeavour.

The emotional practice of teaching

Even for advocates of the claim that the professional teacher must be a moral teacher, the role of emotions in the moral life has not always taken hold. In her otherwise excellent account of the moral dimension of teaching, for instance, Campbell harps on the idea that teachers' moral knowledge is demonstrated through their *actions* and classroom *behaviour*, and that such knowledge is 'necessarily action-oriented' (2003, p. 139). In the detailed subject index of her book, there are no entries for 'emotion', 'feeling' or 'affect'. It is no wonder, perhaps, that emotions were virtually absent from the mainstream educational literature before the 1980s, as they were from the mainstream moral philosophy literature. The Aristotle-inspired revival of emotions in recent mainstream moral philosophy, however, has taken some time to find its way into educational discourse. Maybe the tenacity of Kohlberg's Kantian formalism, which

influenced whole generations of teacher educators, is to blame. In any case, one is more likely now than before to come across handbooks for teachers making bold claims like: 'People often talk as though emotions should be banned from the teaching relationship. Impossible. Emotions are at the heart of [it]' (Wilson, 2004, p. 30). Notably, this quotation is taken from a book on 'the emotional business of teaching and learning' (2004, p. 1).

Zembylas (2003b) writes about three 'waves' in the introduction of emotions into educational discourse. The first wave was that of the teacher burnout literature of the 1980s. Theorists suddenly became alert to the fact that teaching, as well as many other 'people professions', involved hard emotional labour, the burden of which constituted the typical reason given for early exits from these professions. It is not as if this realisation came as a bolt from the blue; but after the invocation of scientific measurements of experienced burnout (see especially Maslach & Jackson, 1981), folk wisdom about the effects of long-term emotional stress was finally incorporated into a theoretical framework. Among the key indicators of burnout in human service institutions, including schools, turned out to be 'emotional exhaustion' (frustration, stress and fatigue) and its resulting 'depersonalisation' (evidenced as self-dehumanising cynicism and callousness). Every teacher has a story to tell: the hurt produced by spending hours preparing stimulating materials, only to have them sabotaged by a handful of disrupters (Wilson, 2004, p. 31); the feelings generated by an expectation that the distinction between personal emotions and public image in the classroom must be erased (see various examples in Nias, 1989); the price of maintaining the appearances of a cheerful and enthusiastic professional while worrying about a critically ill mother (Day & Leatch, 2001, p. 411). Such examples can of course be multiplied many times over.

The burnout literature focused on personal emotional strain and the adverse effects of emotional labour. The second wave of research on teacher emotion widened the perspective to include the sociological aspects of emotion. I am referring here to the literature sparked by

Hargreaves's seminal article on the 'emotional practice of teaching' (1998). We must not overemphasise personal factors (private origin, individual responsibility) when gauging teachers' emotions, Hargreaves argued, for such an approach aggravates guilt and increases burnout. Rather we should understand emotion as an institutional factor: part of the structure of the job. The sources of teachers' specific emotional vulnerabilities are not to be sought inside their heads, but in the policy measures and complex professional relationships that create an impact on their work (cf. Kelchtermans, 2005). Think here of all the strict curricular requirements that must be met and the fearful 'school inspections'; the policy makers' constant demands for change; the steady increase in administrative responsibilities and paperwork; the constant lack of time, certainty and emotional space (cf. Wilson, 2004, pp. 30–33). But we should also remember that emotional labour can be 'pleasurable and rewarding – when people are able to pursue their own purposes through it' (Hargreaves, 2000, p. 814).

The most notable contribution of the sociological approach was probably its helpful conceptualisation of the emotional landscape. Concepts help to structure thought; and in Hargreaves there is no shortage of new frameworks of thinking. Apart from the notions of (a) 'emotional practice' and (b) 'emotional labour', which he fleshes out in some detail, there is also the notion of (c) 'emotional geographies of schooling' (referring to the specific 'spatial and experiential patterns of closeness and/or distance in human interactions' within schools; Hargreaves, 2000, p. 815) and that of (d) unique 'emotional understanding'. One of the defining features of Hargreaves' sociological approach emerges in explaining (d). Emotional understanding differs from cognitive understanding, because emotions are essentially non-cognitive (Hargreaves, 1998, p. 840; 2000, p. 815). Cognitive reflection can help us to guide and moderate emotion (2000, p. 812) – control it, if you like – but emotions constitute affects, not beliefs or judgements. When we are captured by strong emotions, it is the emotional mind

that swamps the rational mind (Day & Leitch, 2001, p. 406). Schools should, as much as possible, be structured in such a way that this does not happen.

Non-cognitivism is common in psychological natural-kind approaches to emotion. So is the notion that emotions can be divided according to their 'valence' into positive (read: pleasant) and negative (read: painful). When we feel bad, we are in the grip of negative emotions – and the good life is life with as few of these emotions as possible. It is not clear if Hargreaves accepts this characterisation, but in subsequent works influenced by the sociological approach, it is rife: 'If teachers cannot feel good about themselves in the classroom', Wilson remarks, 'there is little chance of them being able to cause pupils to feel good about themselves.' Moreover, 'negative emotions may have a malign effect on teacher–pupil relationships' (2004, p. 31). Changing the emotional structure of the school is tantamount to diffusing the channels of potentially negative emotions (2004, p. 151).

Zembylas (2003b) writes about the postmodern movement as the third wave in research on teacher emotion, and is a vocal representative of that movement. He faults the burnout literature for its myopic personal perspective and the sociological literature for reifying existing school structures and taking them for granted, while overlooking the causes of emotion in reigning political ideologies and oppressive power relations. He does not even hesitate to state that previous approaches have done 'little to improve our knowledge about teacher emotion' (2003b, p. 121). What, then, is the postmodern approach to emotion? Zembylas unpacks it into four assumptions (2003a, p. 110): First, emotions are not private, universal or passive experiences ('the Aristotelian view'), but rather public, local and active discursive practices. Second, power relations are inherent in 'emotion talk' and shape the expression of emotion. Third, by using emotions, one can create sites of social and political resistance. Fourth, emotions are embodied (corporeal and performative). According to this view, teachers' emotions 'are not internal states, but […] are about social life' (Zembylas,

2004, p. 187) – more specifically, about social life inside the school as it plays out power structures inherent in society. Emotions may either help or hinder teachers in constructing strategies of resistance and self-formation; the postmodern route would be to try to overcome the hindrances.

Now, what would Aristotle say about those three approaches? I am not sure he would have much to say about the first approach – which is essentially descriptive rather than normative – except to acquiesce to its insights: To be sure, emotional labour can be difficult, and teaching is rarely easy. As to the sociological approach, Aristotle would condemn the restrictive cognitivism underlying the dualism of cognition (or reason) and emotion: of head and heart. The fact that an issue is emotionally loaded, stemming from the 'heart', does not mean that it disrupts the governance of the 'head'; rather emotions can be properly thoughtful, just as thoughts can be properly felt. Hargreaves relegates emotions to the status of such mere feelings as toothaches or palate pleasures. Aristotle does not deny that emotions incorporate painful and/or pleasant affects, but he notes that they also incorporate cognitions – beliefs or judgements – and rather than different 'feels' setting them apart, they are set apart by different cognitive consorts. A teacher does not become angry with students without warning, but only because she believes that they have done something inappropriate. Even more unsettling for Aristotle would be the idea that a teacher's emotional repertoire should be developed so as to maximise pleasant emotions and minimise painful ones. Surely some of our most valuable and morally worthy emotions are painful (compassion with those in need, for instance) and some of our most despicable ones are pleasant (*Schadenfreude*, for example).

I gather that Aristotle would be baffled by the postmodern approach, as expounded by Zembylas (2003a). In any case, it hardly requires an Aristotle to notice that Zembylas's four 'assumptions' about emotions are a collection of misconceptions and platitudes.

First, emotions *are* private 'internal states', in the sense that they are psychological processes that happen to individuals. By rejecting this fact and claiming instead that emotions are 'about social life', Zembylas is confusing the location of the emotion with its intentionality ('aboutness'). True, when a teacher feels angry with her students, the anger is *about* the students, but the emotion is still inside her. Moreover, one needs do no more than pick up an ancient tragedy or a novel written in another country to realise that emotions such as anger, jealousy or pride are universal rather than local. And the view that emotions happen to passive sufferers – which Zembylas ascribes to Aristotle and rejects – was not Aristotle's view at all. Admittedly, if a teacher has allowed an emotional disposition of excessive anger to grow within her, she may not be able to control bouts of episodic anger. But Aristotle had a proactive view on the cultivation of emotional dispositions: In the end it is within the power and the responsibility of each individual to develop the proper dispositions of that kind. Second, Zembylas's point that power relations shape 'emotion talk' is true, given a typically bloated postmodern conception of power according to which any attempt at control of, or influence on, another person constitutes an exercise of power. But its truth then also becomes trivial. The angry teacher may succumb to the power of disruptive students and try to control them with angry shouting. But has anyone ever denied the claim that all occurrences of emotions are reactions to some outside influence, and are themselves attempts to influence some states of affairs? Zembylas's third assumption is also platitudinous. To be sure, one can create sites of social and political resistance by using emotions; Aristotle's main discussion of emotions was even set within his treatment of political rhetoric. Against whom, then, is this assumption supposed to be directed? The behaviourism inherent in Zembylas's fourth assumption is strangely old-fashioned. It is true that the body is normally used to express emotions. However, well-known experiments with subjects completely paralysed by curare have shown that these subjects can experience intense emotions. More mundanely, every

teacher has surely had the experience of being angry in class but succeeding in hiding their emotional state from students. Why can anger not be non-performative, then?

Just as in the previous section on teacher identity, I do not work out here an alternative Aristotelian paradigm of teacher emotion. Suffice to say that Aristotle's focus is on emotions as enduring states of character. As such, emotions constitute virtues or vices that comprise one's selfhood. An emotional virtue is not policed by reason but infused with reason. And when emotional virtues conflict, the moral agent relies on *phronesis* to adjudicate the conflict (see Kristjánsson, 2007, Ch. 2). Applying those general insights to teachers' emotions in particular obviously requires more work than I can undertake in this paper. In any case, it should already be patently clear to readers why Aristotelians will reject approaches to teacher emotion that consider emotions essentially as non-cognitive thrusts – or worse still, as localised social capital exchanged by anguishing postmodern bodies.

Concluding remarks

To see anything like an Aristotelian approach required for understanding teachers' professional identities and teachers' emotions, one must, of course, have become dissatisfied with other, current, approaches. I hope to have given readers reason to be dissatisfied with some such approaches.

I return, finally, to the story of Runner Fan. A *constructivist* analysis of his reaction would focus on the putative conflict between his professional and professional identities – with both being seen as 'voices' in a chorus of multiple constructed identities. A narrowly construed *cognitive* approach would see him as having become overpowered by the emotion of fear as a non-cognitive thrust. A *postmodern* approach would consider him to be an unfortunate actor in ubiquitous power relationships.

In contrast, an Aristotelian analysis of the story would focus on the teacher's self rather than his identity (let alone identities) – and on possible emotional dissonances within that single self. It would look for the beliefs and judgements underlying Fan's fear and his lack of emotion with regard to his students. It would subject these emotions to moral scrutiny with the aid of *phronesis* – notably not *phronesis* as mere intuitive artistry but as an intellectual virtue guided by general moral truths as well as situation-specific observations (Kristjánsson, 2007, Ch. 11; cf. Carr 2000, p. 167). Aristotelians would seek congruence between professional and practical values, and not hesitate to pass judgement on the moral rightness or wrongness of emotional reactions. Rather than understanding teaching as a unique practice with its own independent set of norms and rules, Aristotelians would generally be ready to concur with Campbell's view (2003, p. 12) – provocative as it may seem in our fractured times – that professional morality is nothing but the extension of everyday morality into the nuances of professional practice.

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