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Improving the value of the national curriculum through ethics and the religious

Scott Webster

Abstract
ETHICS AND RELIGION are currently being considered for inclusion into Australia's national curriculum. This paper argues that such a consideration ought to be founded upon an education for democracy, where students are encouraged to become critical inquirers. It is also contended here that an engagement with ethics and the religious has a lot of potential for enhancing the educative value of our national curriculum because currently ACARA lacks any aspirational purposes for education and is merely focused upon the technical concerns regarding teaching and learning. To make this case three points shall be addressed: to enhance the humanity of the curriculum through ethics; to provide a basis as to why we ought to be ethical; and to enable the lives of students to become more meaningful. The position adopted here, which draws largely upon Dewey, is significant to the current deliberations because rather than ethical behaviour and religion being emphasised as per ACARA’s literature, this paper offers a more educationally valuable way of understanding ourselves as being ethical and ‘religious’ in the sense of engaging with the ultimate existential concerns, meanings and purposes for life.

Introduction
While schooling in Australia is largely founded upon the principles of ‘free, compulsory and secular education’ for all, as emergent with the colonial acts of parliament in the 1870s (Cranston et al., 2010), we understand that to be secular does not mean to be devoid of any engagement with the religious. However it is the details regarding what sort of engagement with religion—and with ethics—which is contentious as evidenced in much of the recent media in Australia. On the 16th of November 2011, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) hosted a round table discussion to address specifically the possibility of including ethics and religion into the national curriculum with the aim of producing and circulating a discussion paper for the early part of 2012. Currently religion does not appear anywhere in the curriculum and ethics is listed as one of the graduate attributes but is reduced to being described as ‘ethical behaviour’ [my emphasis]. It is argued here
that the inclusion of a rigorous understanding of the ethical and the religious has the potential to offer significantly greater educative value to the national curriculum. To support this claim I shall address three points of how the ethical and religious dimension might contribute to the curriculum. These points are: enhancing the humanity of the curriculum through the ethical; providing a basis as to why we ought to be ethical; and thirdly enabling the lives of students to become more personally meaningful. I shall be drawing mainly upon the works of John Dewey.

While Dewey (1903, p. 215; 1922, p. 201) was a signatory of the Humanist Manifesto, he also claimed that religion is precious and that “the moral and the religious" is “the most fundamental of all educational questions”. This supports the view that a secular approach to education—while not being bound to any particular religion—nevertheless ought to engage with the religious. As a philosopher and educator who promoted a scientific approach to school experiences, Dewey was concerned about any uncritical adoption and continuation of authoritative religions which do not display democratic characteristics such as intellectual freedom. However he was not opposed to studying and being religious in a democracy and so we have much to learn from his insightful works concerning the nature of democracy, education, ethics and the religious in relation to our own national curriculum in Australia.

The context: Educating for democracy in Australia

It is important to clarify the context in which our school system operates—which is to educate primarily for democracy in Australia rather than contribute to the knowledge economy. The national curriculum is founded upon the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, which states in its preamble that “As a nation Australia values the central role of education in building a democratic, equitable and just society” (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), 2008, p. 4). While an analysis of this document might uncover some inconsistencies regarding priorities, we can nevertheless appreciate that a main priority of the curriculum is to contribute towards an education for democracy. This focus on an education for democracy through democratic learning experiences, via the curriculum, is significant because what we are not considering is an education for or about religion. This is in contrast to Baroness Blatch in England who stated that religious education ought to be about religion (Tillson, 2011, p. 676). Ethics and religious education cannot just consist of delivering information about ethics and religion because encounters with such information are not necessarily educative. Therefore our approach must be an education for democracy through ethics and religion. This is the context being argued for in this paper, that all deliberation regarding the potential for ethics and religion in the national curriculum must be based upon.

Dewey (1916, p. 105) identified that in a democracy there must be “provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms”. So we see that in a democracy there is an obligation on individuals to give an account as to how their actions enable, and do not restrict, the equal participation and opportunities of other community members. In his book Democracy and Education, Dewey argued that:

A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicative experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity.

(Dewey, 1916, p. 93)

Here we see the moral dimension of democracy. It is important to recognise that democracy is as much a moral concept as it is a political one (Kelly, 2009). Its significance for the educative development of students, in an ontological sense (sometimes recognised as ‘character’), is readily recognised. Democracy is ‘an ideal for the good life’ to which all individuals can aspire. As Fairfield (2008, p. 114) contends, “democracy is this ethos itself: a way of life, an animating spirit, also a plea, or aspiration, a bit of moral-political eros”. Being democratic requires individuals to be responsible to the global community and this involves being able to give an account for their purposes and consequences of activities to the public (Taylor, 1991). Drawing upon Dewey, Garrison (2010) reminds us that an education for democracy is an education of eros—so that our way-of-being, our desires actively seek the good for the community.
— not just ourselves in a personal, private sense as if the activities of our own lives have no bearing or impact upon others.

The notion of ‘good’ in our democratic society is not related to the so-called ‘platonic forms’, where there is an attempt to apply a universal notion of an absolute good to every concrete situation. This however, can be a characteristic of some approaches to ethics and religion which tend to be authoritarian. The notion of ‘the good’ as employed here, drawing upon Dewey, is necessarily inclusive of both the common good and the good of the individual (Dewey, 1922, pp. 146–153; 1932; Gadamer, 1986, pp. 142–148). It is therefore context specific, where each individual must be able to personally participate to make a judgement in the relations she finds herself caring for as to what she thinks will be the most valuable outcomes of her actions. Such a notion of the moral good is not something which pertains to principles such as ‘don’t steal’ or ‘don’t lie’ which must simply be ‘applied’. This would indicate that ‘oughts’ are in tension with individual ‘wants’ and so these ‘oughts’ are imposed from external authoritative sources upon persons (Gadamer, 1999). Such an authoritative imposition of ethics relies upon individuals conforming to rules and regulations and is reflective of what Bauman (1989) describes as the ‘ethics of obedience’. Such an authoritative approach to morality does not align with democratic freedom or with education, because it does not encourage individuals to inquire. Inquiry involves being able to freely question, think, challenge, debate and take a responsible stance regarding the possible outcomes of activities and their fitness or ‘goodness’ for the global community.

A curriculum of inquiry is more easily encouraged in contexts where physical materials are being examined and tested such as in science, where participants are encouraged to explore the various properties of particular elements. Novel ways of investigating are often approved. However, ethics, religion, art and values are often considered to be a different and separate ‘realm’ to material subjects like Maths, Science, English and History with their assumed verifiable and ‘objective facts’. Attempts at inquiry into this ‘other realm’ of values, art, ethics and religion is often met with disapproval and even restraint, where what is understood by the majority to be right/beautiful/moral/good is defended patriotically rather than intelligently. Encouragement for students to freely inquire into values and especially into religion might be considered as subversive or an assault upon conservative society—and Australia is very conservative—so we need to give serious consideration into what might be best for our democracy rather than the simple and uncritical preservation of our traditions.

In order for this to be achieved we must have a clear understanding of education—which is not synonymous with schooling nor with all types of teaching, learning and curricula. Dewey (1916, pp. 101, 103) argued that before one can formulate an understanding of education one must first be clear as to what sort of society one is working towards. In Dewey’s view, society ought to be democratic in nature. Democracy is also a major aspiration for Australia today and so, it is fitting that we draw upon some of the insights that Dewey offers in this regard, especially to evaluate the potential that ethics and the religious may have for our curriculum. Therefore his works will provide a major contribution along with other scholars to explore the three points listed in the introduction to this paper beginning with enhancing the humanity of the curriculum through the ethical.

1. Enhancing the humanity of the curriculum through the ethical

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the current discussions regarding the potential of ethics and religion for the national curriculum by drawing particular attention to education which clearly includes a vision of what sorts of persons students are to become (Bloom, 1987, p. 26). For Dewey (1916, pp. 77, 82) “all education forms character, mental and moral” and Noddings (2002, p. 129) asserts that “the kind of people we are turning out is far more important than national supremacy in mathematics and science”. From the Melbourne Declaration we can read some of the characteristics of persons which are being promoted in our schools. According to the Melbourne Declaration these characteristics include:

- act with moral and ethical integrity;
- committed to national values of democracy, equity and justice, and participate in Australia’s civic life;
- able to relate to and communicate across cultures, especially the cultures and countries of Asia;
- work for the common good, in particular sustaining and improving natural and social environments;
- responsible global and local citizens.

(MCEETYA, 2008, p. 9)
Most of these characteristics listed are associated with the actual discourse of education itself, which promotes notions of living good and meaningful lives in cooperation with others. However, this has been marginalised in recent times by another discourse which is more technical in nature and which more narrowly addresses only teaching and learning—especially their effectiveness and efficiency in relation to measurable deliverables and outcomes (Biesta, 2006; 2010; Blake et al., 2000; Pring, 2004). The impact of the domination of this other discourse of effective teaching and learning, which is also described by Giroux (2012) as corporate pedagogy, does not allow for discussions about what is valuable in terms of education such as how we ought to live and what sorts of persons we and our students should become. The absence of this discussion is apparent in the national curriculum where there is little in its rationale which provides a clearly articulated vision for the sorts of persons that our students ought to become. However, this may possibly be addressed by seriously engaging with ethics and the religious in order to involve the discourse of education more meaningfully rather than give dominance only to the discourse of corporate pedagogy.

The teaching methods and curricula typical of corporate pedagogy (Giroux, 2012) focus particularly on effective learning and effective teaching and do not educate but instead promote the collection and delivery of structured content and behaviours which can be easily prescribed, measured and reported. Such a process, no matter how efficient and effective, can only train, condition, miseducate or even indoctrinate; but all of these are in contrast to education. To illustrate the difference between these two discourses—of education to bring about a better and more moral sort of person and the effective teaching and learning of corporate pedagogy (which focuses on the efficient transferring of technical knowledge, skills and socially approved behaviours)—Pring (2004, p. 24) shares the following letter from a school principal to her staff:

Dear Teacher,

I am a survivor of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no man should witness: Gas chambers built by learned engineers. Children poisoned by educated physicians. Infants killed by trained nurses. Women and babies shot and burned by high school and college graduates. So, I am suspicious of education.

My request is: help your students become human. Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths, educated Eichmans.

Reading, writing, arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children more human. This letter provides a clear example as to why Dewey placed so much importance for education upon the moral and the religious over and above all the other contenders for a so-called ‘core’ curriculum such as the knowledge disciplines of English, Maths, Science and History. In order to promote a more humane way of life for our students, the national curriculum—if it is to offer educative value—must clearly involve the ethical and the religious, because these directly address the human dimension more ably than any other knowledge domain. Without an engagement with the ethical and religious it is difficult to see how we can avoid educating any more Eichmans. We need to appreciate that ethics and religion in the national curriculum must involve more than just a battery of informative content modules. They must embrace the human aspect of our being rather than only be reified to statements of information to be acquired cognitively.

Inclusion of ethics and religion cannot just involve content information which is to be transferred to students in the hope that they will then somehow demonstrate behaviours which are more ethical and develop intercultural understandings. At the round table discussion in November 2011, ACARA’s definition of curriculum was described as that set “out for what all students are to be taught (content) and what students are typically able to understand and able to do (achievement standards)”. However despite this authorised statement promoting a structuralist view of knowledge, unable to address the concern we have which is not to educate any more Eichmans, we must appreciate that the ‘curriculum’ is always much more than content or subject matter to be transferred through the activities of teaching and learning. Curriculum pertains to all experiences which are provided and because this term ‘curriculum’ is more verbal than noun substantive it primarily addresses the ontology of students—their way-of-being and acting in the world. The focus is what sorts of persons learners are becoming (Pring, 2004).

In contrast to approaches which are idealistic towards the assumed structure of knowledge and its transfer through pedagogy, curriculum designers
need to appreciate that there is a difference between ideas about morality and moral ideas. Only the latter is appropriate for education because it addresses "the very worth of life itself" as Dewey (1903, p. 213) explained. The former ideas about morality consist of information only, organised through a structuralist approach to knowledge, and lend themselves easily to the practices of corporate pedagogy. This practice is problematic for encouraging students to become the sorts of critical and reflective inquirers appropriate for living a democratic way of life.

Ideas about morality and ethics, usually in the form of societal norms, consist of principles espoused mostly by conservative elements of society but may not be conducive to a democratic way of life. Noddings (2002, pp. 41, 72) warns that such normalised virtues—or in our case possibly inclusive of 'national values'—run the risk of 'othering' people who appear different to ourselves and often "fail to accept dissenting or unusual ideas. They demand conformity and punish dissent" which are not the hallmarks of a democracy. Noddings reports that even the inclusion of critical thinking (as per our national curriculum) does not ensure that moral thinking and actions will develop. Her ethic of care approach clearly involves more than simply ideas about morality and ethics as it includes our emotional and motivational aspects. These latter two aspects must be involved in an ethics education if educative value is to be attained. This will enhance the development of the humanity of the entire curriculum experiences.

Central to Dewey's understanding of educating persons is his concept of 'interest' which has been similarly described in Garrison's (2010, p. xx) notion of eros which he claims is largely founded upon Dewey's "hidden philosophy of love". Similarly to Gadamer, Dewey was opposed to approaching ethics as if it should impose 'oughts' over and above the 'wants' and desires of individuals. He argued that it is an error to assume an opposition between duty and personal interest: an individual self is not mutually exclusive to duties and principles of actions because a self continuously undergoes change and development through 'choice of action' (Dewey, 1916, p. 361).

Dewey's main criterion for educative development was a particular type of growth. He argued that an ethical education of our interests and desires should include an ever expanding capacity to participate in an ever-increasing conception of the common good. Dewey saw this happening through relating more profoundly to the relationships in which we take part. He stated:

The generous self consciously identifies itself with the full range of relationships implied in its activity, instead of drawing a sharp line between itself and considerations which are excluded as alien or indifferent... The wider or larger self which means inclusion instead of denial of relationships is identical with a self which enlarges in order to assume previously unforseen ties. (Dewey, 1916, p. 362)

Just like the existentialist Kierkegaard (1849, p. 43), who described the human person as "a relation which relates to itself"—an idea which is similar to that found with the ancient Greeks—(Gadamer, 1996, p. 149), so too, Dewey (1938) referred to persons as being embedded in an "existential matrix" of relations with our biological and cultural world. These relations are inescapable, so through education these relations can be uncovered, critically examined and related to more meaningfully. During her presentation at ACARA's round table discussion in November 2011, Cathy Byrne reported that the most influential programs involving religious education were the ones which adopted an existential approach. Specifically, existentialism is a practical philosophical approach which provides the means by which life can become more meaningful. It focuses particularly upon why we ought to live a certain way, which is the focus for the next section.

2. Providing a basis as to why we ought to be ethical

According to Carter (1986), 'why be moral?' was the question which haunted the moral educator Lawrence Kohlberg because responses to this question often take us beyond ethics, to seek its foundations and even to venture to the religious to do this. Therefore in this second section, in order to give consideration to the purpose or why of ethics, we need to engage with the religious. This is not a new approach to educating through ethics because Gadamer (1999, pp. 28-30) reminds us that for the Ancient Greeks the emphasis was upon being good rather than simply obtaining knowledge about the virtues. For Ancient Greece, from which we claim many of our cultural origins, "virtue [did] not consist merely in knowledge" but rather on "the way of life" and "moral consciousness" that was required to attain eudaimonia—the good life. This was to be
available for all, as the individual was answerable to the polis—the public—for his conduct. Therefore Gadamer (1999, pp. 32, 39) concludes that “ethics proves to be part of politics” and part of the religious where this latter aspect “is not intended to make a statement about god or the gods, but rather to designate the order of being about which they are inquiring: the whole, the all, being”.

As explained in the previous section, an engagement with ethics in an educative manner is able to enhance the humanity of curricular experiences and the sorts of persons that students become. While ethics specifically addresses how we ought to live, the religious dimension, being inclusive of political ideals, is able to provide more of the context as to why we ought to live a certain way. The religious, which at first glance might appear to have much in common with ethics, nevertheless offers a distinctively different dimension to experiences and to knowledge (Caputo, 1993; 2007; Frank, 2000; Hirst, 1974; Kierkegaard, 1993). This was also understood by Dewey who was clear as to how intimately involved ethics and the religious are to each other, and yet like William James he also understood that “the religious dimension of experience involves more than morality” (Rockerfeller, 1991, p. 469) because, as with the Ancient Greeks, it specifically addresses all of our purposes. This is why Dewey regarded the religious dimension of our existence to be the most fundamental for education because it engages with, and hopefully improves, the purposes we have for the lives we live in the society we find ourselves.

A difference between ‘religion’ and the ‘religious’ needs to be explained as this has a major bearing upon our understanding of a democratic approach to education. The term ‘religion’ does not have a simple singular meaning (Hick, 1983, p. 2). The philosopher A.J. Ayer (1950, p. 218) identified that religion offers “an explanation of the world’s existence... an assurance that life is worth living; and an answer to the question of how one ought to live”. Similarly Cox (1966, p. 24) states “Religion is fundamentally a man’s [sic] attempt to explain to himself the meaning and purpose of his own existence.” Often ‘religion’ is understood to refer to the sacred, the holy and the ultimate concern, and usually includes references to a belief in, or worship of God or gods. However, from its etymological origins derived from ‘to bind’, religion is not so much ‘personal’ but is seen to refer to the systematising of belief and worship and also the binding of the individual to something through reverence and devotion. This latter aspect allows for a wider application of the term to incorporate such things as even football being a religion.

As a formal body of doctrine, the beliefs of religions lend themselves to be delivered to a captive student audience as per corporate pedagogy—which may appear to some curriculum designers to be a short-cut method to promote the graduate attribute of intercultural understanding. However religious doctrine has more to do with metaphysics than epistemology, so according to Dewey (1915) it is not appropriate for education. This is not because it is ‘bad’ but because from an educative concern it deals basically with stories about ultimate origins which can neither be proved nor falsified and so they must be accepted (or not) simply on the basis of authoritative tradition. Such an approach in the curriculum would not promote democracy as a way-of-being, because critical and free intellectual inquiry would not be possible to test such doctrinal beliefs.

Due to Dewey’s interest in promoting the good of society and the good of the individual through education for democracy, he strategically promoted what he referred to as the ‘religious’ rather than ‘religion’, so it is helpful at this point to consider the difference Dewey made between these two terms. The first chapter of his book Common Faith (1934, p. 9) is titled ‘Religion versus the Religious’ in which he explained that “a religion...always signifies a special body of beliefs and practices having some kind of institutional organization, loose or tight”. He then went on to offer a contrast between this and the ‘religious’ for which he claimed,

| the adjective ‘religious’...does not denote anything to which one can specifically point as one can point to this and that historic religion or existing church...It denotes attitudes that may be taken towards every object and every proposed end or ideal...But ‘religious’ as a quality of experience signifies something that may belong to all these experiences [i.e. aesthetic, scientific, moral, political and companionship]. It is the polar opposite of some type of experience that can exist by itself. (Dewey, 1934, pp. 9–10)

Here we begin to appreciate the importance that this religious dimension has over ‘religion’ per se because it is able to bring about a sense of unity to all the meanings of one’s experiences and indeed for one’s entire existence and character. In extolling strength of character, Dewey (1934, p. 19) argued for an
existential understanding of the religious such that "[a]ny activity pursued in behalf of an ideal end against obstacles and in spite of threats of personal loss because of conviction of its general enduring value is religious in quality". In our contemporary world it is commonly understood that those who are religious are those who have bound themselves to a religion, such as for example nuns, monks and priests. However for Dewey all persons in a secular society can engage with the religious because for him this refers to our way-of-being, the way we give sense and meaning to our lives as a whole. I am arguing therefore that it is the ‘religious’ which has value for secular education in Australia rather than religion.

Importantly this religious aspect includes the purposes and aspirations that we have for our own lives. Dewey (1934, p. 19) explained that “the whole self is an ideal, an imaginative projection. Hence the idea of a thoroughgoing and deep-seated harmonizing of the self with the Universe...”. Without this religious dimension, experiences, facts, emotions, motivations and objects all hang separately and the individual struggles to give sense and coherence to all of these separate elements. Even personal narratives are not enough as they tend to be too subjective and don’t actively engage with the lives of others and the rest of the physical environment. This problematic state was a concern for Dewey (1934, p. 25) and he called it an “unreligious attitude” which he described as “that which attributes human achievement and purpose to man in isolation from the world of physical nature and his fellows”, i.e. a denial of our ‘existential matrix’. This is unrealistic as the life of each individual is inextricably involved with the lives of others and with the rest of the physical environment.

As with Bonhoeffer’s “religionless Christianity”, Rockefeller (1991, pp. 469–472) concludes that this was also Dewey’s approach for including “the possibility of religionless religious experience”. For Dewey (1930, p. 268) reality—existence—is one. Consequently, like Nietzsche, he was critical of religions and philosophies which sought to ‘spiritualise’ away material existence as if it were somehow base or sinful, because “life has been thought to be evil and hopeless” requiring ‘a higher reality’ to give it a meaning from beyond itself. Dewey (1938a, p. 22) claimed that many traditional religions can be characterised as ‘cults’ because each has its own particular collection of formalised symbols, rituals and doctrine, which can become dogma because they are “not based upon critical examination of [their] own underlying principles”. This led him to conclude that Christianity is not technically ‘a religion’ because Jesus had no cult or rite to impose; no specific forms of worship, no specific acts named religion” (Dewey, 1893, p. 4). Therefore, Dewey argued, strictly speaking Christianity ‘is not a religion’. He claimed that as soon as one constructs a realm of religion one immediately co-constructs a realm of the non-religious which is ‘other’ to one’s understanding of the sacred.

Dewey’s main contention against supernatural approaches to ‘religion’ is that they often lead to anti-naturalism and promote moral absolutism with “an undemocratic tendency towards dogmatism, authoritarianism, and fanaticism” which frustrates the spirit of the democratic way of life (Rockefeller, 1991, pp. 378, 444). Dewey’s pragmatism requires world-views, ideals and religious beliefs to demonstrate and justify their value and have these tested in our current existence. According to Rockefeller, 

...religions...cannot escape the challenge of [Dewey’s] democratic humanism, which calls on all peoples to devote themselves to the task of cooperatively building a harmonious world of equal opportunity, freedom, and justice as the supreme moral and spiritual challenge. Democratic humanism critically evaluates a religion in the light of the consequences that follow from its faith and practice in this regard... (Rockefeller, 1991, p. 547)

This overarching commitment to confronting the challenges of modernity through a democratic approach of critical inquiry is profound for understanding Dewey’s pragmatism as a way-of-life rather than just an academically interesting alternative. The lives of students can become more personally meaningful through experiences provided by the curriculum if the religious aspect is made explicit. This would involve the whole personhood of each student becoming involved as reflected in Dewey’s (1933, p. 137) notion of ‘wholeheartedness’ which affects one’s very character because it is the essence of one’s interest and passion for living.

So ‘religion’ can provide a ready-made and institutionalised world-view that offers a message for a better life (usually through some form of salvation) by which individuals may gain meaning and purpose for their lives and how they should live. It is usually considered to be institutional, to refer to something to which devoted members are bound, although it can also include personal devotions. But it is
specifically through engaging with the religious that we can give critically active considerations as to the ultimate ‘whys’—such as why is there something rather than nothing? Why do we exist? And more personally, why does each of us as a unique person even exist? These questions are not only for the vain wanderings of philosophers or religious gurus, but they are real existential concerns for many adults as well as for youths in our schools. This requires students to understand how the religious—or spiritual—is able to contribute to a greater sense of meaning and purpose for their lives today (Webster, 2009). This important dimension of making lives more meaningful is the focus for the final section.

3. Enabling the lives of students to become more personally meaningful

Through the preceding two sections I have explored, through a Deweyan perspective, important aspects for addressing the ethical and religious in a curriculum which is educative. Firstly if educational value is going to be realised, ethics cannot simply be provided through a behaviouristic approach as described in ACARA’s list of graduate attributes. Curricular experiences which reduce ethics to information and outcomes to be acquired about ethics are not the way to animate students to be ethical. Ethical learning in an educative sense involves students developing clear and significant responses to the ultimate ‘why?’ questions of their lives—hence the religious dimension, as defined by Dewey, is inextricably involved. This has been clearly identified and articulated by Nel Noddings who argues that,

As human beings, we care what happens to us. We wonder whether there is life after death, whether there is a deity who cares about us, whether we are loved by those we love, whether we belong anywhere; we wonder what we will become, who we are, how much control we have over our own fate. For adolescents these are among the most pressing questions: Who am I? What kind of person will I be? Who will love me? How do others see me? Yet schools spend more time on the quadratic formula than on any of these existential questions. (Noddings, 1992, p. 20)

Engaging with these existential questions is intrinsic to the philosophy subjects found in many of the curricula in Europe, but the possibility of including philosophy in Australia’s national curriculum appears even more remote than religion. Victor Frankl (2000, pp. 86–87) has argued that this existential concern for the meaning and purpose of life can be regarded as so important for young people that it requires a total reversal of the assumed order of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Rather than ‘self-actualisation’ as a psychological construct to be aimed for, Frank argues we ought instead to give attention to our ‘unconscious religiousness’ which he explains as our intention (either conscious or not) towards our relations which may be transcendent in character. He argues that this latent aspect of our lives is partly recognised through the highest goal reported by some students which is to develop “a meaningful philosophy of life” (Frankl, 2000, p. 86). This quest for a meaningful life has been more recently termed ‘spirituality’. England for example has included the spiritual dimension as distinctively different to the moral dimension in its Education Reform Act 1988. Since then the National Curriculum Council and the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) have clearly stipulated the role that existential concerns should have for making the lives of students more meaningful. Specifically, in its report Transforming Religious Education, Ofsted argues that the core purposes of religious education ought to be:

- to develop pupil’s skills in investigating and evaluating the world of religion and belief;
- to help pupils develop positive values, attitudes and dispositions;
- to enable pupils to develop their own spirituality and reflect on deeper aspects of their own human experience;
- to foster respect for diversity of religion and belief.

(Ofsted, 2010, p. 42)

The Ofsted report (2010, p. 16) states that religious education is at its best when pupils have “opportunities to explore and reflect on the meaning and purpose of their lives and on the more intangible aspects of their experiences”. In the United States, Noddings (2002, pp. 33, 124) reports that “religious and existential questions are rarely discussed” and claims that “real education cannot neglect the questions, Where do I stand in the world? What has my life amounted to? What might I become?... What is the meaning of life? Is there a God?” We in Australia—like curriculum designers in the United States—may have something of value to learn from England and quite possibly ought to give serious consideration to this dimension of existential
spirituality which Dewey described as ‘the religious’ in order to differentiate it from ‘religion’ which he understood as having less value for education.

We must be careful regarding the experiences which are to be offered in Australian schooling. Our national curriculum cannot simply involve the transfer of adult knowledge to the impressionable minds of young learners. In order for our young people to become educated they must be able to give their own sense and meanings to their religious dimension of life—hence the need for an existential approach. This is made apparent by Dewey (1903, p. 211) when specifically addressing religious education, claiming that “In a word, it is a question of bringing the child to appreciate the truly religious aspects of his own growing life, not one of inoculating him externally with beliefs and emotions which adults happen to have found serviceable to themselves.” This view is consistent with his whole approach to democracy which requires all members to be active inquirers rather than passive consumers of information (in the guise of knowledge). This is especially important for young learners if they are to develop a democratic-way-of-being.

One of Dewey’s main concerns with a ‘miseducative’ approach to religious education is that “To attempt to force prematurely upon the child either the mature ideas or the spiritual emotions of the adult is to run the risk of a fundamental danger, that of forestalling future deeper experiences which might otherwise in their season become personal realities to him” (1903, p. 212). He continued with his warning that,

the premature acquaintance with matters which are not really understood or vitally experienced is not without effect in promoting scepticism and crises of frightful doubt. It is a serious moment when an earnest soul wakes up to the fact that it has been passively accepting and reproducing ideas and feelings which it now recognises are not a vital part of its own being.

...This person is plunged into doubt and bitterness regarding the reality of all things which lie beyond his senses, or regarding the very worth of life itself. (Dewey, 1903, p. 213)

Here we see Dewey concerned about the welfare of individuals such that they be spared from such an existential crisis which brings the meanings and purposes of their lives into serious doubt. Dewey was also concerned that the potential value of religious dimension might be closed off to young learners who are exposed to it before they are properly ready for giving their lives more sense and meaning through it. Thus Dewey wanted the religious dimension to remain open as a possibility for learners and not be cut-off from them through ‘forcing’ them to ‘learn’ it before they can properly engage with the significance that the religious aspect might hold for them. This warning from Dewey is critically important for designers of our national curriculum if experiences in ethics and religion are to be educative. Dewey (1903, pp. 213–214) clearly understood that the stage of youth is distinctively different from childhood and offers a “critical time in spiritual experience” which if mishandled may result in youths resorting to living by “distracting circumstances” and “superficial interests and excitements” where the potential spiritual “richness is missed” due to failing to “grasp its deeper significance”.

Dewey was very clear that religions do not and should not be considered “to possess a monopoly of ideals” which give sense and purpose to life because the religious dimension is clearly inherent in all pursuits of truth and understanding and so it is also important for secular education. Dewey was familiar with Nietzsche’s writings and his conception of the religious attitude appears to respond to the dangers of nihilism about which Nietzsche wrote. Nietzsche (1967, p. 9) has famously described nihilism to occur when an “aim is lacking” and when the question “why?” finds no answer”. If something lacks a why, a purpose, it can be considered to be nihilistic. It is interesting to consider that if our national curriculum does not promote this aspect of a religious attitude or of spirituality as per England’s national curriculum, might a sense of nihilism be inadvertently promoted in our schools? Indeed currently our national curriculum does lack a why regarding Australian values, ethical behaviour and for life itself. This lack of a rationale has been one of the major criticisms made against the national curriculum by Alan Reid (2009).

However, promoting the ‘religious’ as ‘existentially spiritual’ over ‘religion’ is not to say that we should just allow our students to be ignorant regarding the ‘big picture’ metaphysical views which form the foundations of many world religions and ethnic folk lore regarding why certain people live the way they do. Therefore curriculum designers must remain cognisant that in order for engagements with ethics and religion to be educative, much more than a superficial familiarisation with the content of
religious stories, doctrines and beliefs is required. Students must be encouraged to actually inquire in a critical and personally meaningful way into the religious (Webster, 2010) which is even recognised by the Ofsted report (2010, p. 8) which argues that religious education should promote the spiritual development of pupils "by allowing for more genuine investigation into, and reflection on, the implications of religion and belief for their personal lives".

**Conclusion**

It has been argued in this paper that it is possible to enhance the educative value of our national curriculum through including ethics and the religious. To achieve this we need to focus upon an education for democracy. This involves students actively inquiring into the ethical and the religious. Therefore the curriculum ought to focus upon the way-of-being of students, that is, their character and what they desire and are passionate about, and how they give meaning and purpose to their lives. This offers a significant enhancement to the potential educative value of the national curriculum as it now stands—which is devoid of any purposes pertaining to a meaningful life. This inclusion of the ethical and religious (or spiritual) will ensure that the curriculum is valuable in terms of education for democracy, which has been argued here to be the major criterion for evaluating contributions to the debate regarding the potential inclusion of ethics and the religious into the curriculum. If the attributes of an education through ethics and the religious as described here are not taken up in our national curriculum then we may well continue to have an under-theorised approach to schooling which will provide a disservice to the youth of this nation in terms of preparing them to participate in a democratic, humane, meaningful and purposeful life.

**References**


