

## Ethical relativism and moral pluralism in education

*Relativismo ético e pluralismo moral em educação*

*Relativismo ético y pluralismo moral en la educación*

Agostinho Morosini<sup>I</sup>

Maria Judith Sucupira da Costa Lins<sup>II</sup>

### ABSTRACT


In education, it is indispensable that action be guided by principles and values that give support to ethical life in society. This article analyzes the problem of ethical relativism and moral pluralism with its possible consequences in the educational context. The text is situated in the philosophy of education scope with the theme being ethics and presents, as a premise, the overcoming of ethical relativism through education. The ontological value is proposed as being of fundamental importance. The hermeneutic interpretation methodology is used. It was concluded that ethical relativism and moral pluralism are ideologies with the potential to degrade educational processes in relation to ethical and moral values. In addition to the role of the family, education, if based on fundamental values, is precisely an adequate space for the person to become an ethical subject.


**Keywords:** Education. Ethical Relativism. Moral Pluralism. Values.

### RESUMO

Em educação, é imprescindível que a atuação seja pautada por princípios e valores que dão sustentação à vida ética em sociedade. Esta pesquisa analisa o problema do relativismo ético e o pluralismo moral, com suas possíveis consequências no contexto da educação. O texto está situado no âmbito da filosofia da educação com o tema ética e apresenta, como premissa, a superação do relativismo ético por meio da educação. Propõe-se o valor ontológico como importância fundamental. A metodologia utilizada é a interpretação hermenêutica. Concluiu-se que o relativismo ético e o pluralismo moral são ideologias que representam grave risco aos processos educativos em relação aos valores éticos e morais. Somando-se ao papel da família, é precisamente a educação, baseada nos valores fundamentais, um espaço adequado para que a pessoa se torne um sujeito ético.

**Palavras-chave:** Educação. Relativismo Ético. Pluralismo Moral. Valores.

<sup>I</sup>Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil. Email: [ag2morosini@gmail.com](mailto:ag2morosini@gmail.com)  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3691-1263>

<sup>II</sup>Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil. Email: [mariasucupiralins@gmail.com](mailto:mariasucupiralins@gmail.com)  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5404-6061>

## RESUMEN

En Educación, es imprescindible que la actuación sea guiada por principios y valores que se apoyen la vida ética en sociedad. Este artículo analiza el problema del Relativismo Ético y el Pluralismo Moral con sus posibles consecuencias en el contexto de la Educación. El texto se sitúa en el ámbito de la Filosofía de la Educación con el tema Ética y presenta, como premisa, la superación del Relativismo Ético a través de la Educación. Propone el valor ontológico como fundamental. Se utiliza la metodología de interpretación hermenéutica. En conclusión, el Relativismo Ético y el Pluralismo Moral son ideologías con potencial de degradación de los procesos educativos con relación a los valores éticos y morales. Con la familia, es precisamente la Educación, basada en valores fundamentales, un espacio adecuado para que la persona se convierta en un sujeto ético.

**Palabras clave:** Educación. Relativismo Ético. Pluralismo Moral. Valores.

## INTRODUCTION

This is a study in the field of philosophy of education within the theme of ethics. The presupposition is that it is possible to overcome ethical relativism in education. Ethical and moral values persevere and are essential for the stability of human behavior in social life. According to Sucupira Lins (1999a, p. 100), “values are concrete manifestations of fundamental principles considered to be relevant to the life of the individual and the social community”. Values are understood to be a set of principles and conduct that a subject must follow to live in their environment and that require a reciprocal attitude of respect and responsibility between individuals. The aim of this text is to analyze ethical relativism and moral pluralism with their consequences for education, to discuss and show the limitations of these lines of thought. Of course, the intention is not to conduct an exhaustive overview of the subject, as there is a need for further study and expansion in the field. The aim is not to formulate a new theory related to this topic, but rather to propose pluralism in the sense presented by Ricoeur (1968), Maritain (1984; 2018), Lalande (1993) and, as seen throughout this text.

It is essential that the actions of all those involved in the educational sphere are guided by principles and values that underpin ethical life in society. Authors such as C. S. Lewis (2017), Giussani (2019), and Borges (2020) note that both traditional values and the relevance of ethics are under attack and are questioned even in school education contexts. According to Borges (2020, p. 95), “it is common to observe educational models based on absolute values, and when these enter into crisis, it is common to adopt positions that, in a way, resort to the idea of moral education based on a relativistic conception of values”. This situation generates conflicts and distortions of reality, insofar as it does not point to a solution to problems, but only relativizes fundamental values.

The prominent theorists of relativist argumentation Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (2020) affirm that universal statements about ethics are not possible. A concept of ethical relativism can be found in Lalande (1993, p. 947), who offers two definitions: 1. “A doctrine that recognizes that all knowledge (or all human knowledge) is relative”. This refers to epistemological relativism, which understands that human knowledge is relative and insufficient to know anything true; 2. “Moral Relativism. A doctrine according to which ideas of good and evil vary according to times and societies (without any determined progress in these variations)”. This definition understands that, given the same ethical situation occurring in different times and cultural

spaces, one person can choose one response, while another can choose a totally different or even opposite response, depending on each subject's point of view. Based on these elucidations, ethical relativism is understood as a line of thinking that considers moral values to have neither universal nor absolute validity; values diversify under dynamic historical, political or cultural circumstances within societies.

To better understand this issue, Maritain (1972) affirms that relativism originated in the thought of sociologist Augusto Conte (1798–1857). Maritain (1972, p. 316) cites Conte to contest him, “but in [the affirmation] *everything is relative, that is the only absolute principle*, there is much more than a simple verbal paradox. For if everything is relative, it is strictly true that there cannot be *any* absolute principle” (emphasis added). The author observes that the relative has been placed on a level with the absolute. The concept of relativity in the sense of a *single absolute principle*, as Maritain (1972) highlights, clashes with the fundamental values of ethical life and opens the way to ideological distortions. This can happen with freedom, for example: by thinking that *everything is relative*, people believe they can “freely” do whatever they want without adhering to ethical criteria.

Von Hildebrand (2020) identifies ethical relativism as a subdivision of *general relativism*:

The first type of ethical relativism is no more than a subdivision of general relativism or skepticism. As soon as someone denies that we are able to have any objectively valid knowledge, as soon as he argues that there exists no objective truth, he necessarily also denies the existence of any objective value. (Von Hildebrand, 2020, p. 110)

It is understandable that this relativist principle denies the existence of objective values. Yet ethical relativism is contradictory in that it is a line of thinking or a doctrine that does not present true formulations. It is not supported by its own conjectures. The philosopher Von Hildebrand (2020, p. 111) notes the existence of a *general relativism* when he adds that “the unconscious motive for general relativism is often the desire to do away with an absolute ethical norm”. For this author, it is a resistance against the objectivity of truth, a revolt, above all, against values.

Another line of thought that is currently much debated is pluralism. Pluralism is defined by Lalande (1993, p. 817) as the “doctrine according to which the beings that make up the world are multiple, individual, independent, and should not be considered as simple modes or phenomena of a single and absolute reality”. This concept involves a specific sense of pluralism, in line with Maritain's thinking (1984; 2018), as a multiplicity of beings. Individually is different from individualism, as it indicates the unique nature of each specimen of a species. The interest here is not to analyze the doctrine of these authors specifically, but to clarify the meaning of the word pluralism due to its polysemic characteristic.

Difficulties arise when relating pluralism to morals and ethics. At this point it is important to clarify the meaning of morals and ethics. According to the philosopher Sucupira Lins (1999a, p. 100), “it is known that Ethics derives from the term *Ethos*, which initially referred to customs, in a strong connection with politics as well, and was then used to designate character, thus also marking the individual as a person”. Morals refers to a set of behaviors within a culture with its customs and practices referring to the common good. The author adds that “Morality can be broadly understood as the practical experience derived from an ethics” (Sucupira Lins, 1999a, p. 100). In this sense, it is important to consider that the practical experience of these cultural traits directly linked to the common good, over time, promotes the tradition of a people, a community or an institution.

In the argument about pluralism, concerning ethics and morals, it is possible that a pluralist morality defends the coexistence of conflicting opinions towards which there should be tolerance. However, this would be the same as proposing to a disloyal, dishonest and deceitful person that they seek truth, and they reply, from a position of a pluralist morality: "Truth is plural, everyone has their own. Keep your truth and I'll keep mine". Moral pluralism, from this perspective, consists of recognizing many justifiable systems of contradictory and conflicting values, according to Kekes (1993; 2010), within a culture's moral aspects and opinions. This would be the same as blindly believing everything that is said without confronting the arguments with reality itself. MacIntyre (2021) warns about the importance of the incontestable fact, that is, against ideological attempts to relativize and disguise a fact. The author highlights the objectivity of a fact, the reality against which there are no plausible arguments and the indispensable conformity with reality. These themes are discussed, especially in relation to the distinction between pluralism and plurality.

The methodology used in the research that gave rise to this article is hermeneutic interpretation, elaborated by Ricoeur (2013, p. 23), and defined as "the theory of operations of understanding in relation to the interpretation of texts". It allows extracting fundamental information from documents, leading the researcher to possible approximations and conclusions. In this approach, it is essential to pay attention to the meaning of the concepts expressed in the discourses and actions that are presented.

## THE QUESTION OF VALUES IN THE FACE OF ETHICAL RELATIVISM AND MORAL PLURALISM

To obtain greater conceptual clarity, considering the semantics of words, it is essential to delve deeper into the definitions of the central terms used. It seems essential to highlight the conceptual difference between the natural relativity of things and ethical relativism; plurality and moral pluralism. This clarifies the role of values to be applied in the field of education.

There is a natural relativity between human beings. There are discrepancies that are easily seen by simply observing reality. There will always be some difference between people, whether in height, hair color or other physical, intellectual and emotional characteristics. These differences increase considerably when it comes to the cognitive and psychological dimension, thus showing that no human person is the same as another in their psychophysical and spiritual constitutions. Sucupira Lins (2018a; 2022b) describes the unique, unrepeatable characteristic of human dignity, which has absolute value, and is present in the plurality of human beings, in each one of them. Although there is an equality of human dignity among people, because they all belong to humanity, people differ in their attributes, in their singular identity and individuality.

The term spiritual is not used above in a religious sense, but in a philosophical sense, as seen in Scheler (2003, p. 37), when he says that "the 'bearer' of spirit is that being whose dealings with external reality as well as with himself have been inverted in a sense dynamically opposite to that of an animal, with the inclusion of his intelligence". Note the connection between intellect and spirit. This allows understanding the approximation of the concepts of spirit and reason. Sucupira Lins (1999b) analyzes this conceptual relationship and shows that Max Scheler relates two distinct aspects of these terms: 1. awareness of the world and of oneself; 2. the objectification of one's own psychophysical nature. The first points to a spiritual capacity for movement from the inside out, towards the world and its own existence. The second refers to a capacity for self-awareness, which is to look at one's inner life. The purpose here is not to deeply examine this topic, but only to specify the reference to the spiritual dimension, to the inner life of the human person.

Pluralism follows a similar conceptual dynamic as relativism. It could be said that the current use of the term *pluralism* is somewhat distorted by certain lines of thought and ideologies, as Von Hildebrand (2021) explains when identifying contemporary philosophical problems. However, pluralism, in the correct sense of the word, refers to the very reality of the diversity of people in the world, circumscribed in time and space. This is also how Maritain (1984, p. 148) explains it: “individuality, or more precisely, individuation, is what makes one thing of the same nature as another differ from that other within the same species and the same genus”. This is pluralism that does not confuse the meaning of values, universal virtues or humanity as a whole, and still preserves the singularity and individuality of each person. Along these lines of argument, Ricoeur emphasizes:

If I say “history” in the singular, history is also the history of men in the plural, that is, not only of individuals, but of communities and civilizations. A certain pluralism is therefore also inscribed in the preconception of historical drama and historical work. (Ricoeur, 1968, p. 77)

The author refers to the historicity of man and his action in the world within a plurality of situations in human becoming and in the making and realization of history. This is the undeniable plural reality. From this perspective, values are diverse due to their plurality, but not in a relativistic sense.

On the other hand, moral pluralism, which is ideological in nature, consists of recognizing many justifiable value systems, which are contradictory and conflicting on the level of morals or opinions. Although authors such as Kekes (1993) and Oliveira (1998) defend the thesis of a model of pluralism as a solution to the degradation caused by relativism, their proposals also have limitations and difficulties in sustaining themselves. It is not possible to conduct an in-depth analysis of the theses defended in these works in the space of this article, but the arguments that follow indicate that the pluralism proposed does not satisfactorily elucidate the problem.

When analyzing ethical relativism and moral pluralism, it can be seen that the arguments put forward in these lines of thought are mostly related to ontological, ethical and moral values. The notion of value is questioned by these two lines. The thesis that it is impossible to affirm the existence of universal or absolute values is a misconception that must be analyzed in an attempt to find solutions. Universal and absolute values are understood in the way that Sucupira Lins (2018b, s.p.) explains by showing that “there are, in reality, virtues that are universal, such as honesty, friendship, justice, reverence, generosity, humility, and that appear in each culture, at certain times, with approaches that do not shake the internal structure of virtue”. From the author’s observations, it is clear that there are universal values and virtues, which are those that manifest themselves in different cultures and at different times, but which are relevant to all of humanity and act as anchors for ethical life.

One cannot simply deny the existence of values and virtues. Aristotle (Aristóteles, 2011, Livro III, 426a-20) observes that “the first philosophers of nature were mistaken in their opinion that there was neither white nor black beyond sight, as well as that there was no taste beyond the palate”. This statement is supported in part by the fact that if a person has never seen (due to visual impairment), colors do not manifest themselves. Despite a person’s ability to see or not, colors exist. In line with these reflections, Maritain (1972, p. 319) points out that “it is a mark of childishness to think that a truth ceases to be true because the nearsighted see it badly, or the blind do not see it at all”. The same principle can be applied to honesty, friendship, justice, reverence and charity, insofar as they cannot be denied simply because they are abstract, subjective or universal values. Values exist independently of the judgment of those who analyze them. For this reason, we must argue

that whether or not one adheres to them depends on the person's conscience. However, rejection of the value of freedom, for example, is due to a flaw in their upbringing and the formation of their conscience, and not the non-existence of these virtues.

Gonçalves (2014, p. 71) points out the different types of values, explaining that "there is talk of ethical, aesthetic, monetary, economic, legal, historical value, etc. The term 'value' is thus intended to highlight the importance of something to which this importance, esteem, quality is attributed or recognized." It must be said that moral value, on the other hand, has the importance that the object possesses in itself and not an *enhancement*, in the way that the author defends.

From Von Hildebrand's perspective (2020), the kind of relevance that is an objective good for a person necessarily presupposes what is important in itself, value. It means considering that this *important* thing has an absolute primacy in all respects. In reflecting on the nature of love, he emphasizes that love is based on a value that is so intimately united to this individual and unique person, taken as a subject, who presents themselves to me as valuable, precious and lovable. In contrast to ethical relativism, continuing the analysis of the explanation developed by Von Hildebrand (2020, p. 179), we note that this author lists traits of moral values. Given the space limits of this article, it is sufficient to consider just one: "the first preponderant mark of moral values is that they necessarily presuppose a person". This is to say that an impersonal being (a stone, a tree, a piece of paper, a pen) can never be morally good or evil. Only people, in a concrete way, with their human acts, can be morally good or bad. Therefore, moral values refer exclusively to the conduct of human beings. The author points out that there are important values in impersonal things, even if they are not moral, and cites aesthetic values, highlighting, for example, the beauty of a mountain, a flower, a tree, a bird or other animal, differently than values related to a person.

One of the main characteristics of moral values is that they can only be applied to people. The aforementioned philosopher also observes that relativism is unable to resolve this issue because its foundation is tied to differences of opinion, and not to value itself. In many cases, the fact that one tribe, in some historical era, considered something to be morally bad that another tribe considered to be morally good, we can understand that this event is due to a difference of opinion or belief about the nature of a thing, and does not refer to its value. From this perspective, Von Hildebrand (2020, p. 115) makes it clear that "if for one tribe certain animals are considered sacred, as, for example, the Egyptians considered the ox Apis, then killing this animal takes on the character of sacrilege". It is important that, if one is aware of the true nature of this animal, killing it is not sacrilege at all. These forms of diversity do not manifest a contradiction concerning moral values, but only a difference of opinion about the nature of certain objects.

In a recent study, Sucupira Lins and Miranda (2020, p. 145) show that "relativism affirms that there is no absolute truth and that it can be measured according to time and space, however, this statement nullifies itself ". This form of *self-contradictory relativism* pointed out by the authors was also noted by Scriven (2018), in his assertion that there is an incoherence in this relativist current to the point that it is itself self-refuting:

That is, if relativism is true then to say that 'relativism is true' is no more true than 'relativism is false', so relativism cannot be true in the sense that means it is not false, and there is no other sense of 'true' in the language. [...] People often adopt relativism as a result of discovering that scientific theories are sometimes wrong. (Scriven, 2018, p. 445)

The aforementioned authors show that there is an incoherence within relativism. For this reason, we may think that relativist formulations about opinions collapse. It is necessary to recall what was discussed earlier, when we considered that the relative and natural quality of things in



relation to each other does not cancel out their essential value. In other words, even if there are changes in form, the essential, the value itself, does not change.

Education has undergone many changes, especially in terms of its fundamental assumptions, over the centuries, since classical ancient Greece, including today, due to the multiplicity of philosophical thought.

One basic ethical principle that guides education is that of the intrinsic position of the educator, which is expressed in the purpose of providing students, according to Sucupira Lins (2018a), with the conditions to gradually progress in their improvement in all dimensions of their lives.

In this sense, Von Hildebrand and A. Von Hildebrand (2021, p. 30-31) propose that fidelity and truthfulness are also fundamental attitudes for educational action when they affirm that, “without this basic attitude of fidelity, no culture, no progress in knowledge, no community, but above all no moral personality, no moral maturation, is possible”. It is understood that fidelity is a free and meaningful response to the world of truth and values, and to their relevance as a constitutive part of morality. Truthfulness, another virtue highlighted, is respect for the fact. There must be fidelity and truthfulness with regard to the aims of education. In the same work, the author reaffirms this idea by saying that “an education that does not emphasize sincerity and truthfulness condemns itself to failure” (Von Hildebrand and A. Von Hildebrand, 2021, p. 53). We argue that there is truth in education, as we explained when working with the concept of relativism. We recall that Von Hildebrand (2021, p. 64), concerned about the trivialization of the concept of truth, explains that “truth is not a national or cultural or temporal property”, but an adequation to the fact of reality. The absence of these fundamental principles causes a serious degradation in educational performance, at the risk of great losses in the areas of personal development, teaching and learning, and consequently for society as a whole.

## FREEDOM IN EDUCATION IN THE FACE OF RELATIVIST IDEOLOGIES

In the field of ethics, freedom is a preponderant factor in educational activity, but is highly influenced by relativistic ideologies. Sucupira Lins (2009, p. 8) also emphasizes that freedom cannot be understood in the sense of doing what you think or what you want; “this would be the determinism of instinct, pleasure, sensuality and appetites in general. Free will is a characteristic of the human being who can freely decide for the truth”. From this we can understand the value of human freedom, through which man can achieve self-mastery and no longer be a prisoner of his instincts, his spontaneous reactions and the mistaken idea of destiny. It is necessary to consider that the freedom that exists in the child is in a potential state, that is, it will need to be put into action. Sucupira Lins (2018a, p. 82) argues that, “as long as a person is not aware of who they are and their will is not strengthened, it will be difficult for them to put their power of freedom into action”. This is how the essential role of education is understood, so that people understand that they were born free and that they need to learn to be free, in harmony with their will and affectivity.

Von Hildebrand (2020, p. 297) sheds more light on this subject by stating that “a man is responsible only for something that he can freely choose or refuse, something that in one way or another is within the reach of his power”. In a philosophical text, the author uses the word man, in the original *der mensch*, and not *der mann*, in the sense of human being. Human freedom presupposes the person and their moral action for good or ill. Von Hildebrand (2009, p. 95) presents a situation in which action is necessary, so that the person is particularly engaged in a unique way: “I am called, in conscience, to do what is morally good and even more so to omit what is evil and wrong”. It is something that is found in the human capacity, differently from the phenomena found in animals, which act solely through the conditioning of the laws that govern their instincts. Moral freedom, in turn, refers to man’s ability to consciously intervene in the course of events and alter or change

them either positively or negatively. A reflection by Gardner (2012, p. 89-90) illustrates this dynamic of conduct well, in what he calls *role ethics*, referring to the *morality of neighbors*. According to the author, the main characteristic of a true ethical position is responsibility. Whether in professional duties (the role of a teacher, lawyer, doctor, engineer, businessman, among others) or simply as a citizen, a person must ask themselves: “I have rights and duties. Now, what are my responsibilities?”. Exercising freedom necessarily implies recognizing that you are responsible for your own actions.

It is in the combination of reason, will and affectivity that we can think of the possibility for an education that is capable of fostering the proper development of the human person. The purpose of education is, according to Sucupira Lins (2022a), to make man better, through proper training, even if it is aimed at a future that is possible and not simply utopian.

On the other hand, it is not correct to say, as the aforementioned author does, that truth (metaphysics) is now illusory and unsustainable. Even though there is controversy over the definition of truth, it is undeniable that what is false is worthless. Von Hildebrand (2020, p. 113) emphasizes that “the truth of a proposition does not depend on how many people agree with it, but only on whether or not it conforms to reality”. With this statement, one can clearly understand that arguments must be confronted with the facts themselves, with the real state of things.

According to Oliveira (2012, p. 117), “different conceptions can be considered reasonable and therefore examined through argumentative rationality, which is characteristic of a pluralist philosophy”. According to this principle, in the name of a form of tolerance, ideological pluralism tends to accept the existence of false propositions as if they were values. For example, if there are conflicts that can lead to violence between students in a classroom, should they be tolerated because of their differing opinions? Would not active intervention by the educator be better? Von Hildebrand (2007) proposes *active* intervention not as interventionism, but in the sense of leading individuals to overcome conflicts based on respect, transforming the situation into an emotional experience. In this way, tolerance should not be understood as blindly accepting any opinion, but rather as respect for a different position and being respected as well. Respect, in such cases, does not mean blindly accepting any opinion.

We believe that it is through reason that a person has the capacity for analysis, but human beings are not only composed of rationality. According to Von Hildebrand (2007), reason, will and affectivity are three fundamental centers of man’s inner life that must manifest themselves harmoniously. In this sense, an emphasis on the rational to the detriment of the other dimensions leads to errors in arguments and behavior. The author adds that, under these conditions, there is not only a danger of error, but also of intellectual pride and rationalism. It is necessary to avoid rationalist formulations about reality without verifying reality itself. Giussani’s idea (2019, p. 51) that “education has come to be an introduction to reality “ applies here. According to the author, the word reality is to education as the goal is to the path. Of course, it is on the plane of reality, of human action, that things actually happen, and not in the imagination of opinions, superstitions or fiction. This must be the proper meaning of pluralism, reality itself.

On the subject of moral pluralism, MacIntyre (2021), a contemporary Scottish philosopher who is attentive to the concrete issues of philosophical and political reality, observes that:

The superficial rhetoric of our culture can speak satisfactorily of moral pluralism, but the notion of pluralism is too imprecise because it can very well apply to both an orderly dialog of opinions that intersect, and to a disharmonious amalgam of incompatible fragments. (MacIntyre, 2021, p. 37)

There is a recurring problem here, which is that the issue remains in the realm of opinion. It is clearly understood that moral pluralism, in the form in which it is presented today as superficial



rhetoric, occurs among ideologies and with the use of disguises and dissimulations. A hermeneutic and phenomenological analysis is needed to escape fallacious lucubrations that may carry destructive intent against ethical life. In the field of education, Brazil's National Curriculum Parameters (PCN) (Brasil, 1997), which are current guidelines for the entire country, warn of the seriousness of the situation:

Without a moral option, a democratic society, pluralistic by definition, is totally impossible to build, and the concept of citizenship loses its meaning. It is therefore imperative that the school contributes so that the dignity of the human being is a value known and recognized by its students. (Brasil, 1997, p. 69)

The above text indicates that it is essential to teach ethics and morals at school. They have been inappropriately equated as synonyms in some contexts, especially by Brazilian legislation, as noted by Rezende (2017) and Borges (2020). Despite this misconception, virtues and, therefore, moral values cannot be ignored. Borges (2020, p. 103) considers that the PCNs, especially those concerning transversal subjects, deal with the topic of ethics, with the correct and pertinent question: "How to act towards others?". According to the author, reflection on various human behaviors should be part of the greater objectives of schools committed to training children for citizenship and moral development. The absence of ethics teaching in education can result in disastrous consequences, both for citizenship and for the dignity of the human being. Sucupira Lins (2009, p. 6), who is interested in research on this issue, makes the following observation: "what we need to emphasize is the importance of the school in the educational process, which includes the education of values and the formation of an ethical subject". The school context is understood to have a special role in the education of values that guide the subject's life from an ethical perspective. However, for this to happen, the commitment of educators and educational institutions is fundamental. Aristotle (Aristóteles, 2014) points to the need to learn virtue through education:

Indeed, moral virtue is about pleasure and pain. In fact, it is because of pleasure that we perform vile actions and because of pain that we fail to perform noble ones. Hence the importance, according to Plato, of being specially educated from childhood to like and dislike things: this is what correct education really consists of. (Aristóteles, 2014, Livro II, 1104 b1-10)

This passage indicates that since ancient times there has been a concern to provide a correct education. Sucupira Lins (2022a) observes that "Relativism may seem like freedom because everyone thinks one way, but then coexistence is impossible. Relativism brings the loss of human paradigms, causing the absence of references to attitudes" (Sucupira Lins, 2022a, s.p.). Based on these observations, it can be seen that, more than ever before, the current situation demands attention and dedication from all those working in the educational field to guarantee teaching and learning based on freedom, responsibility and values that guide society and, therefore, cannot be relativized.

Pertinent questions can be raised considering that many people receive a school education but, for various reasons, do not develop the correct understanding or awareness of the ethical presuppositions needed for harmonious social life. There are also those who, having received an education considered to be *excellent*, have used or are using their intelligence not for the common good, but for disvalues, such as the manufacture of ever more lethal weapons of destruction and, as a result, suffering and death for humans. This reality can be considered to stem from ethical relativism or from ideologies associated to certain educational processes and ways of thinking, affecting current generations. For C. S. Lewis (2017, p. 46), the hypothesis that all values will be

rejected by the “rebellion of new ideologies”, if realized, would result in the destruction of humanity. The author makes an analogy to emphasize that the *rebellion of new ideologies* against fundamental values can be seen as a revolt of branches against their own tree. In this sense, according to the author, values are destroyed to the extent that freedom, justice, honesty, reverence and truthfulness are considered irrelevant or merely relative.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The analysis of ethical relativism and moral pluralism in the educational context must be deepened. In these final considerations, we conclude that ethical relativism and moral pluralism can be classified as ideologies with the potential to degrade educational processes related to values.

The possibility to create new values, such as those arising from technological advances, does not necessarily imply abandoning traditional values. Fundamental values, be they virtues or aspects that value human life, life itself, health, and freedom in its proper sense, are important in themselves and prevail even under relativistic questioning. Because anywhere in the world, regardless of culture, a conscious subject must act ethically.

In continuity with the role of the family, it is precisely education in the modality that takes place systematically at school, based on fundamental values, that is configured as the appropriate space for people to become ethical subjects. The current situation demands attention and dedication from all those working in the educational field to guarantee teaching and learning based on freedom, ethical responsibility and values that guide society and, therefore, that cannot be relativized.

With regard to pluralism, if the claim is for recognition of a plural reality, Maritain's (1984; 2018) indications regarding reality should be recognized. From this perspective, pluralism is reality itself. That is, reality is made up of a universality-diversity, with the understanding that each person is one, unrepeatable. Simultaneously, reality is the condition of diversity of human beings around the planet. Respect is therefore proposed, as opposed to the tolerance derived from moral pluralism. With regard to acting ethically in the educational context, we again point to the need for actions based on freedom with responsibility.

In concluding our argument, within the limits of this article, in response to the objective proposed for the research presented here, we understand that ethical relativism and moral pluralism represent a serious risk to education.

In conclusion, we believe that it is education, thought of as an introduction to reality and as a formative process, that can promote the construction of the fundamental values necessary for human life, both those that are related to personal issues and those related to citizenship. Even if they are questioned by certain lines of thought and ideologies, our argument has highlighted that the virtues denominated as justice, freedom, fidelity, truthfulness, reverence and responsibility do not lose their value.

## REFERENCES

- ARISTÓTELES. **Da Alma** [*De Anima*]. Tradução: Edson Bini. 4. ed. São Paulo: Edipro, 2011.
- ARISTÓTELES. **Ética a Nicômaco**. Tradução: Edson Bini. 4. ed. São Paulo: Edipro, 2014.
- BORGES, Graziela Diniz. **Valores morais na escola: para colher é preciso semear e cultivar**. Marília: Oficina Universitária. São Paulo: Editora Cultura Acadêmica, 2020.
- BRASIL. **Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais**. Brasília: Ministério da Educação, 1997. Available at: <http://portal.mec.gov.br/seb/arquivos/pdf/livro082.pdf>. Access on: Nov. 18, 2022.

- GARDNER, Howard. **O verdadeiro, o belo e o bom redefinidos: novas diretrizes para a educação no século XXI**. Tradução: Nivaldo Montiguelli Jr. Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 2012.
- GIUSSANI, Luigi. **Educar é um risco**. Tradução: Neófita Oliveira e Franceco Tremolada. 2. ed. São Paulo: Companhia Ilimitada, 2019.
- GONÇALVES, Duarte. Teoria do valor: Bases para um Método. **Trans/Form/Ação**, Marília, v. 37, n. 1, p. 71-104, jan.-abr., 2014. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0101-31732014000100005>
- KEKES, John. **The morality of pluralism**. Chichester, West Sussex: Princeton University Press, 1993.
- KEKES, John. **The human condition**. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- LALANDE, André. **Vocabulário técnico e crítico da filosofia**. Tradução: Fátima Sá Correia. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 1993.
- LEWIS, Clive Staples. **A abolição do homem**. Tradução: Gabriele Greggersen. Rio de Janeiro: Tomas Nelson Brasil, 2017.
- MACINTYRE, Alasdair. **Depois da virtude: um estudo em teoria moral**. Tradução: Pedro Arruda e Pablo Costa. Campinas: Vide Editorial, 2021.
- MARITAIN, Jacques. **A filosofia moral**. Tradução: Alceu Amoroso Lima. 2. ed. Rio de Janeiro: Agir, 1972.
- MARITAIN, Jacques. **Para una filosofía de la persona humana**. Traducción: Abelardo González, Rodolfo Martínez Espinosa, Rafael Pividal (h) y Antonio Vallejo. Buenos Aires: Club de Lectores, 1984.
- MARITAIN, Jacques. **Humanismo integral**. Tradução: Margarida Hulshof. Cultor de Livros. São Paulo: Nacional, 2018.
- OLIVEIRA, Renato José de. **Utopia e razão: pensando a formação ético-política do homem contemporâneo**. Rio de Janeiro: EdUERJ, 1998.
- OLIVEIRA, Renato José de. Contribuições da racionalidade argumentativa para a abordagem da ética na escola. **Revista Educação e Pesquisa**, v. 38, n. 1, p. 115 -130, 2012. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S1517-97022011005000005>
- PERELMAN, Chaïm; OLBRECHTS-TYTECA, Lucie. **Tratado da argumentação: a nova retórica**. Tradução: Maria Ermantina de Almeida Prado Galvão. 3. ed. 4. reimpr. São Paulo: Editora MMF, 2020.
- REZENDE, Monique Maiques de Souza Alves. **Ética na Educação: análise das Diretrizes Nacionais para a Educação Básica em Direitos Humanos**. 2017. 118 f. Dissertation (Master's Degree in Education) – Faculdade de Educação. Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, 2017.
- RICOEUR, Paul. **História e verdade**. Tradução: F. A. Ribeiro. Rio de Janeiro: Companhia Editora Forense, 1968.
- RICOEUR, Paul. **Hermenêutica e ideologias**. 3. ed. Tradução: Milton Japiassu. Petrópolis: Vozes, 2013.
- SCRIVEN, Michael. **Avaliação: um guia de conceitos**. Tradução: Marília Sette Câmara. Rio de Janeiro; São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 2018.
- SUCUPIRA LINS, Maria Judith da Costa. Educação moral na encruzilhada. **Revista da FAAEBA – Educação e Contemporaneidade**, p. 97-112, ano 8, n. 12, 1999a. ISSN: 0104-7043

SUCUPIRA LINS, Maria Judith da Costa. Introdução aos conceitos de Espírito e Razão em Max Scheler. **Revista Univille**, v. 3, n. 2, p. 92-99, 1999b.

SUCUPIRA LINS, Maria Judith da Costa. Ética e educação escolar. In: OLIVEIRA, R. J.; SUCUPIRA LINS, Maria Judith da Costa. *Ética e Educação – uma abordagem atual*. Curitiba: Ed. CRV, 2009. p. 115-126.

SUCUPIRA LINS, Maria Judith da Costa. A Filosofia da Educação a partir do pensamento de Von Hildebrand. In: SUCUPIRA LINS, Maria Judith da Costa; MIRANDA, Bruna Rodrigues Cardoso (orgs.). **Filosofia da pessoa e educação Dietrich Von Hildebrand**. Curitiba: CRV, 2018a. p. 73-85.

SUCUPIRA LINS, Maria Judith da Costa. **Valores universais e valores culturais**. Rio de Janeiro: Canal Sucupira Lins, 2018b. 1 vídeo (5min 22s). Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FNlr-ebiR4w>. Access on: June 29, 2022.

SUCUPIRA LINS, Maria Judith da Costa; MIRANDA, Bruna Rodrigues Cardoso. Ética e liberdade: lidando com os conflitos existentes no ambiente escolar. **Revista do NUFEN: Phenomenology and Interdisciplinarity**, v. 12, n. 1, p. 143-157, jan.-abr. 2020. <https://doi.org/10.26823/RevistadoNUFEN.vol12>

SUCUPIRA LINS, Maria Judith da Costa. **Ética e Relativismo**. Rio de Janeiro: Canal Sucupira Lins, 2022a. 1 vídeo (5min 39s). Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xfoC9bz1alw>. Access on: Aug. 30, 2022.

SUCUPIRA LINS, Maria Judith da Costa. **Relatório final do pós-doc. sobre a Filosofia da Educação segundo Josef Seifert**. Inédito, 2022b.

SCHELER, Max. **A posição do homem no cosmos**. Tradução: Marco Antônio Casanova. Rio de Janeiro: Forense Universitária, 2003.

VON HILDEBRAND, Dietrich. **The heart: an analysis of human and divine affectivity**. South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 2007.

VON HILDEBRAND, Dietrich. **The Nature of Love**. South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 2009.

VON HILDEBRAND, Dietrich. **Ethics**. Steubenville: Hildebrand Press, 2020.

VON HILDEBRAND, Dietrich. **The dethronement of truth**. Steubenville: Hildebrand Press, 2021.

VON HILDEBRAND, Dietrich; Von HILDEBRAND, Alice. **A arte de viver**. Tradução: Artur Padovan, Henrique Elfes. São Paulo: Quadrante, 2021.

**How to cite this article:** MOROSINI, Agostinho; LINS, Maria Judith Sucupira da Costa. Ethical relativism and moral pluralism in education. **Revista Brasileira de Educação**, v. 30, e300023, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S1413-24782025300024>

**Conflicts of interest:** The authors declare they don't have any commercial or associative interest that represents conflict of interests in relation to the manuscript.

**Funding:** The study didn't receive funding.

**Authors' contribution:** Writing – first writing, Writing – reviewing & editing, Methodology: Morosini, A.; Lins, M.J.S.C.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

AGOSTINHO MOROSINI holds a master's degree in Education from the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ).

MARIA JUDITH SUCUPIRA DA COSTA LINS holds a PhD in Education from the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ). She is a full professor at the Faculty of Education of the same institution.

Received on February 22, 2023

Revised on July 21, 2023

Approved on February 29, 2024

