INTRODUCTION

There has probably never been a time when professionals have had to deal with more uncertainty and complexity than at present. A number of significant technological, economic, political, social, cultural and scientific developments have, over the last three decades, combined to produce contemporary ethical issues of unprecedented complexity and scope. Professionals in various fields are now regularly confronted with moral dilemmas that pit personal, societal and professional values against one another. Not surprisingly, it is a situation that often leads to tension, confusion and a general feeling of disorientation. Professionals are hardly ignorant of the fact that their decisions often have profound and far-reaching consequences. In the highly complex and unstable environment within which many function today, it has however become almost impossible to predict with any degree of certainty and exactitude the concrete implications of any particular course of action. No wonder then that so many professionals today feel distinctly rudderless on what is often experienced as a turbulent sea of overwhelming moral chaos.

In some quarters, the perceived need among professionals for a more adequate form of moral guidance has been interpreted as a renewed mandate for the establishment of some form of commonly acceptable moral consensus. Naturally, efforts of this nature are based upon the assumption that common ground can indeed be found among the various stakeholders within a particular field of professional endeavor. The unenviable task of discovering or developing such an enclave of stable moral orientation amidst the complex dynamics of pervasive social fluidity is then routinely, and somewhat expediently, “outsourced” to regulators and legislators. In consequence, professionals all over the world have been bombarded, over the last number of years, with a barrage of new regulations, the implicit or express purpose of which
has been to legally demarcate an area of purported “moral consensus”. In addition, professional schools and colleges are encouraged to familiarize their students with these codes and acts in the course of their training. Guidance on the rights and responsibilities described in professional legislation has also become a crucial area of instruction in continuing education programs for professionals.

Though regulatory efforts of this nature may seem, at first, noble in intent and reasonable in procedures, there is a crucial and fundamental question that needs to be posed in connection with them: Will new regulatory codes based on either universalistic deontological principles, or a utilitarian insistence on enhancing the general balance of pleasures over pains, provide the kind of moral guidance that contemporary professionals are so urgently in need of? Indeed, would it not be reasonable to suggest that the unilateral imposition of an inflexible regulatory regime may have the opposite of its intended effect? May it not prove, in the end, to be morally disempowering rather than empowering for the individual professional as (s)he attempts to come to terms with the often unforeseen contingencies of an acutely dynamic contemporary environment? How will today’s professional develop a sense of moral selfhood in the face of efforts that seem only to relieve her or him of their moral agency by forcing them to cede their responsibility to the members of some or other legislative body?

It might not be an exaggeration to say that what is at stake here, is the very existence of moral education as a viable enterprise. Moral education that subscribes to a generalized moral code and that directs its efforts at obtaining learners’ loyalty to its strictures by introducing them to the demands of principled reasoning, is flawed in its inability to acknowledge that any particular moral agent’s understanding and interpretation of general principles are the result of very specific, value-laden decisions. Moral education programs that seek to induce a sense of moral awareness in learners by instructing them in the construction of a utilitarian cost-benefit analysis, paradoxically run the very real risk of producing individuals who are empowered only in the skillful and shrewd manipulation of “end justifies means” arguments. The unproblematic application of technical procedures of this nature allows the moral agent to sustain an abstract detachment, effectively insulating her/him against a more complex and comprehensive participation in the process of moral decision-making. Can morality, as practiced from day to day by professionals in the execution of their day to day duties really be equated to a condition of detached, abstract rationality? What would a conception of morality
that is prepared to acknowledge the personal investments and messy complexities of everyday life look like? Theorists like Zygmunt Bauman (1993:11) emphasize the aperitic nature of many of the moral dilemmas with which the average moral agent is confronted from day to day. For Bauman, most moral decisions are located in the sustained tension between multiple contradictory and therefore irreconcilable impulses. Under such conditions, it often proves impossible to fuse contradictory compulsions and considerations into a unitary position. The individual moral agent is thus presented with an impasse. It is a situation that is far from unfamiliar in the experience of most professionals. If our ambition is to truly assist today’s professionals in dealing with the many unforeseen moral challenges that they are likely to continue to face in a rapidly transforming and chronically complex world, we would do well if we began by acknowledging the many contradictory moral appeals to which they are routinely subject during the course of their everyday activities. Perhaps the time has come for us to stop pretending that morality can ever be a simple matter of comprehensive legislation. Let us stop deluding ourselves and the future professionals, for whose moral tuition we are made responsible, that morality can be practiced at arms length with the aid of a set of appropriate intellectual tools. I propose instead that we begin preparing professionals for as honest as possible a confrontation with the various contradictory moral undercurrents that are likely to inform their individual professional lives. It seems clear that if we are to begin to address the real moral demands of contemporary professional life, we will have to comprehensively reconsider the way in which we approach moral education. It is to this end that this paper hopes to make a humble contribution.

The specific goal of this paper then is to identify and describe the limitations associated with deontology and utilitarianism in moral education and to propose an alternative strategy of moral development and transformation, which is located somewhere between the extremes of radical fragmentation and absolute consensus. I will argue that the adoption of a poststructuralist, yet narrative approach, which steers clear of the particular excesses associated with relativism and absolutism, would allow a form of diverse and complex coherence to emerge and develop, both within and among learners with different moral loyalties and orientations.

The approach of ‘narrative engagement’ that I propose, not only acknowledges the relevance and importance of contextual specifics and differences, but also imparts to learners a strong sense of moral obliga-
tion. It allows learners to develop their own sense of moral identity, and fosters moral imagination, through performative engagement and participation in a process of narrative interpretation.

THE LIMITATIONS OF DEONTOLOGY AND UTILITARIANISM IN MORAL EDUCATION

The employment of both deontology and utilitarianism in moral education rely on a Kohlbergian view of moral development. According to Kohlberg, our moral development progresses in a linear fashion from a pre-conventional phase (in the course of which our morality depends on and is dictated by our fear of punishment), to a conventional phase (which is orientated towards law-abidingness and reciprocity) and finally to its most sophisticated, post-conventional form in principled reasoning. This view of the nature of moral development favors a type of moral education that is directed at training learners in principled reasoning skills and the application of deontological codes.

Carol Gilligan (1982) identified some of the potentially dangerous implications of the type of principled reasoning that Kohlberg articulates in the final phase of his model. Both deontology and utilitarianism rely on a set of insulated principles, which form the basis of the reasoning that it employs in its confrontation with moral dilemmas. Gilligan argues that principled reasoning on this basis can, in some cases, amount to downright cruelty. The faceless, abstract reasonability employed in principled reasoning can in fact render morally responsible agency impossible. Gilligan proposes an alternative approach, which she calls an “ethic of responsibility and care”. It emphasizes the importance of relationships, role responsibilities and caring as contextualized moral responses to the expectations and specific needs of others. Clearly the risks that Gilligan associates with principled reasoning cannot but represent important considerations for moral education.

However, deontology has also been criticized on other grounds. The object of this criticism is well illustrated in the work of one of deontology’s most influential proponents, Immanuel Kant. Kant’s categorical imperative insists that one should refrain from taking consequences into account when making moral determinations. Categorical imperatives are those rational truths that are considered self-evident to the reasonable person. The categorical imperative impresses upon the reasonable person not to allow such variables as may be introduced by a consideration of emotions, relationships and contextual specifics to contaminate the
objectivity of his or her reason. This approach is thus based on a dualist anthropology that separates reasonability from corporality and affectivity. This form of dualism is now rejected in most philosophical traditions. The more holistic perspective that has replaced it, and that is now generally favored, calls into question the very possibility of abstract reasonability. One of the principal objections to the utilization of a deontological strategy in moral education, therefore, is that it relies on the philosophically questionable assumption that learners, as moral agents, can attain and employ a form of abstract reasonability.

Another, related criticism has to do with the privileged status that deontological principles enjoy. They are usually portrayed as self-evident, rational and objective truths. The privileged position that they are thus afforded insulates them against an analysis of the power relations to which they owe their constitution and which they therefore embody. The implicit and even explicit assumption involved here is that deontological truths are to be discovered in the absence of specific, ‘extraneous’ variables. Moral agents are thereby rendered capable of justifying almost any of the negative consequences of their actions. They merely have to be able to demonstrate the consistency of their argumentation, and the commensurability of what they have done or intend to do, with the principles to which they subscribe and that they hold to be true. Furthermore, it becomes impossible to solve disputes between two equally important principles, since there is no specific imperative to sacrifice either on the basis of its potential negative consequences.

Kant assumed that we would all subscribe to the same universal truths if we were to become sufficiently rational, but our historical experience seems to belie this. Instead of deploying a growing consensus, the march of history has contributed to a growing awareness of our individual and collective differences. What’s more, the catastrophic conflicts that marked human efforts to come to terms with these differences in the twentieth century, have sensitized us to the dangerous implications of attempts to universalize truth claims on the basis of their supposed rational objectivity.

Some deontologists have opted for a slightly less radical version of absolutism, called ‘soft universalism’. This basically comes down to finding a minimum, common moral ground and formulating these into minimalist principles that can guide moral decision-making. Many global codes utilize this approach to identify a number of core values, which are then applied universally. What limits the potential of this strategy is the abstract, minimalist nature of the moral guidance that it offers. It cannot
provide meaningful directives in specific circumstances. Values are set out in such abstract terms that people readily pay lip service to it, but never really grasp its relevance or apply it in day-to-day decisions. Another limitation of 'soft universalism' has to do with the fact that people may readily agree on a minimalist principle, such as justice, but may nevertheless differ with regard to what it means to be just in a specific case.

The limitations associated with deontology are soon exposed in an educational setting. One of the main objections to the employment of deontological strategies in moral education is its inability to accommodate and adequately manage differences in a group of diverse learners. Learners often come from different backgrounds and may not reach the same conclusions when seeking a priori principles to guide moral action. Kant's contention that a sufficiently 'rational' agent will be able to identify moral truth statements that pass the test of universalization ignores the possibility that the moral content of certain maxims may be disputed by different individual agents. For example, within any given college classroom, learners may differ with respect to the proper or precise denotation of a word such as “marriage”. In consequence the utility of the word as point of common reference in a priori reasoning may come into dispute. Some students may insist that the proper meaning of the word “marriage” is exhausted in reference to an exclusive relationship between members of the opposite sex. If this interpretation is considered an a priori truth statement, then it allows those who subscribe to it to argue on logical grounds alone, that gay marriage and polygamy are morally unacceptable.

Active facilitation may produce, in some instances, an agreement on certain minimalist values, but disagreements about its application often continue to divide learners. When this is the case, there is no way to determine the most appropriate interpretation of moral principles without referring to contextual specifics and outcomes. But this, of course, undeniably undermines the absolutist and universalistic assumptions on which deontology is based. In addition, it is sometimes noted that, when learners have been taught to accept abstract principles as non-negotiable truths, their critical capacities are often underdeveloped to the extent that they are rendered incapable of offering a meaningful or effective critical assessment of ideologies and contestable social orders. Learners may also experience difficulties in deciding moral issues when the different principles, to which they subscribe, make conflicting demands. Moral dilemmas of this order are what ethics is all about, and one has to be able to equip
learners with the ability to make trade-offs in specific cases without compromising their commitment to a moral optimum. Clearly the deployment of a deontological strategy does not allow the educator sufficient scope in this regard.

Utilitarianism is another way of applying “rational” reasoning to moral decision-making. Instead of looking for universal principles however, it seeks to discover the optimum outcome for all within the limitations of a specific situation. It amounts to a cost benefit analysis by which one seeks to maximize benefits and minimize harm. This approach has gained popularity in many quarters because of its practicality and goal-orientation. The main objection of ethicists to utilitarianism has to do with its quantification and calculation of aspects of human existence that do not readily lend themselves to this type of abstraction. Many ruthless decisions have been made in the name of utility. Cases of this nature serve to demonstrate that ends cannot always morally justify the means by which they are attained. Utilitarian calculations are complicated by the fact that it is often impossible to project the precise cause and effect relationships involved in human endeavor. Life is quite simply unpredictable and our rational calculations don’t always materialize in the way we had anticipated. Another important area of concern with regard to utilitarianism relates to the issue of who is included in its deliberations. More specifically, it is often asked of utilitarians how they can guarantee that the voices of all those who are likely to be affected by their pronouncements, are heard in the course of their deliberations.

In my own experience, the biggest single danger associated with the employment of utilitarian decision-making models in moral education is that it seems to suggest to learners that, as moral agents, they can rationally justify the harmful consequences of their decisions by simply demonstrating how they are outweighed by their benefits. It is far too easy for learners to lose sight of those who will suffer the negative effects of their utilitarian decisions. Learners need, instead, to be able to adequately appreciate the fact that their choices have very real consequences for real people in real situations. If our educational strategies do not foster this type of awareness, learners may be left completely unsensitized to the moral risks involved in situations where victims have absolutely no say in the supposed justification of the harm that is visited upon them. This has the effect of reducing individual human beings, in the eyes of the learner as moral agent, to mere figures in a cold and ruthless rational equation.
This evaluation of deontology and utilitarianism allows one to identify, I believe, at least three of the aspects that an alternative approach to moral education would have to address:

• It must equip learners to grapple with moral dilemmas in specific historical and social contexts.
• It must encourage learners to (re)discover the moral appeal that can only be experienced as a consequence of one’s direct confrontation with real people in real situations (i.e., what Emmanuel Levinas refers to as: ‘the face of the Other’).
• It must allow learners to develop a way of dealing with difference that does not require them to sacrifice their commitment to seeking that which is morally appropriate.

‘NARRATIVE ENGAGEMENT’ AS AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO THE EMPLOYMENT OF DEONTOLOGICAL AND UTILITARIAN STRATEGIES IN MORAL EDUCATION

I would like to propose an alternative approach to moral education that I believe addresses the main limitations and deficiencies of deontology and utilitarianism as I have outlined them above. It is an approach that I will call ‘narrative witnessing’. It utilizes narratives as a means to create a ‘sense’ of what is morally appropriate. Narratives have, of course, been utilized by a number of philosophical traditions, with varying success. Aristotelian virtue ethics represent one of its earliest deployments, while Alasdair MacIntyre’s Communitarian approach is one of its more recent manifestations. However, what differentiates the particular employment of narratives in the approach that I am proposing is the very specific interpretation of language and identity on which it relies and on the basis of which it proceeds. It is to a brief exploration of these aspects that I therefore turn next.

Language

Language is of crucial importance to moral education. Values and principles are conceived, articulated and disseminated in and as language. However, language represents an area of considerable contention in both the analytic and continental philosophical traditions. The work of Ludwig Wittgenstein continues to influence language debates in both these philosophical traditions. Wittgenstein’s ideas about language developed over a number of years. It is his later work that is of special interest within the
context of the present discussion. According to McDonald (2002:18), Wittgenstein’s later work should be understood in terms of its opposition to the Fregean conception of language. This is the interpretation of language which sees it as something that is governed by discernable rules. Wittgenstein not only rejects this aspect of the Fregean view, but at the same time manages to avoid the abstract character of Derrida’s interpretation of language. Derrida stresses the boundlessness of language’s context and the endless deferral of meaning, which is thought to be its undeniable implication. In contrast, Wittgenstein’s notion of “language games” suggests that language should be seen as a “spatial and temporal phenomenon”, a “form of action” that is embedded in forms of life. By creating an awareness of the specific contextual practices in which language is embedded, Wittgenstein’s thought establishes some limits to what could be considered meaningful statements in a specific context. In this way, he provides a way out of the impasse of Derrida’s endless deferral of meaning, which becomes particularly important when one seeks to make meaningful statements about right and wrong. Wittgenstein’s notion of language games therefore succeeds in establishing a balance between complete relativity and foundationalist certainty. It resists the endless flux of meaning that would undermine moral agency, yet it also avoids the pretence that moral statements represent a set of foundational truths, thereby resisting the modernist fixation of meaning.

This conception of language is of particular interest within the context of moral education. Without the insight that language is not a picture-depiction of reality, both learners and educators/facilitators tend to assume that values or principles represent an unambiguous common “content”. As such they fail to recognize that the content of these values or principles are determined by a moral agent’s involvement in specific forms of life. This failure represents one of the most important deficiencies of moral education strategies that promote deontological and utilitarian reasoning. It leaves moral agents unaware of the hidden power relations that values or principles embody and perpetuate. When moral agents are left unable or unwilling to critically evaluate the values or principles that function to organize, facilitate and regulate the social relations within their specific context, these supposed common denominators can begin to function in a totalizing way. Totalizing knowledge structures establish truth by means of the hegemonic suppression of moral imagination and the elimination of dissent. It allows the social interests of certain members of society to be perpetuated and advanced at the expense of others by insulating the values and principles, which secure their privi-
leged position and status, against criticism. To uncritically assume an unambiguous, common ‘content’ in the moral language of values or principles is to leave it open to the danger of abuse.

Many poststructuralist as well as analytical philosophers now favor a conception which sees language as action. Wittgenstein explains the rationale of this position: “There are …things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest” (Wittgenstein in Grayling 1988:47). The ‘things’, that Wittgenstein refers to, do not possess an independent meaning. They only become meaningful when they manifest themselves within a particular political, economic, social, cultural, scientific and temporal context. It is impossible to conceive of these things in terms of what they ‘are’; instead, we need to think of them in terms of what they are ‘becoming’. The ethical is one of these. According to Wittgenstein, language cannot represent the ethical. The ethical shows itself in language. From this perspective the ethical becomes apparent in the social and cultural construction of language acts. According to McDonald (2001:24), Wittgenstein’s late work succeeds in fostering an ethical view of language as action. The way in which people continually speak or write about their interests as well as their relationships to and with one another facilitates the articulation and ceaseless transformation of the moral language, in terms of which the ethical dispensation within their particular context is enacted.

The idea of language as action has found resonance in many disciplines. In the field of Psychology, some social constructionists use it in their approach to narrative therapy. This type of narrative therapy rejects the idea that it should direct its efforts at uncovering some form of pre-existing, dormant knowledge, or ‘true/authentic’ self. Instead it explores the relationship between power and knowledge. In so doing, it admits the re-introduction, and subsequent consideration of, what Foucault refers to as ‘subjugated knowledge’. Subjugated knowledge functions as part of discursive practices that “speak” the subject as much as the subject itself is actively speaking. It includes knowledge components that are the result of certain hidden power-relationships that the subject is not aware of, but that continues to influence the subject’s identity and actions. The functioning of subjugated knowledge therefore succeeds in suspending the subject’s engagement in the construction of meaning somewhere between active and passive states of being. Reintroducing subjugated knowledge allows contemporary phenomena to be interpreted by tracing and describing its historical manifestations, transformations and constitution (Besley 2002:135).
A narrative approach that subscribes to the idea of language as action allows language to be seen as iterative, i.e., it is at the same time repetitive and singular. Although it allows for the interpretation and articulation of specific events, it creates certain parameters within which we can revisit and experience these events. It resists the fixation of such interpretations, and rejects them as “picture-depictions” of reality. Whereas Derrida sets the repetitiveness and singularity of language in opposition to one another, Wittgenstein sees the relation between the two as a modulated and differential one. Derrida acknowledges that for a thing to be what it is, it must be able to be repeated. Yet, he emphasizes that every repetition produces differences. Repetition is therefore never pure. In fact, it always leads to alteration. Wittgenstein argues that a language game as a form of life constitutes a practice that involves agreement about rules for the use of words. The rules of a language game cannot be completely overthrown by a single iteration, and therefore it secures a much stronger sense of repetitiveness and stability. Wittgenstein's position is able to accommodate a certain degree of ambiguity, yet allows hermeneutical choices to be made within a specific framework. Wittgenstein's account of the dynamics of language avoids the complete loss of any sense of historical or social identity, and the relativism to which it gives rise, by allowing meaning to emerge in the dynamics of narrative interpretation.

MacDonald's (2001:36) distinction between “story” and “narrative discourse” is helpful in elucidating the nature of the meaning that develops in the course of the process of narrative interpretation. Whereas a “story” relies on a causally connected and rule-governed “plot” and a certain repetitiveness, “narrative discourse” is performative and highlights the potentially singular features of narratives associated with the construction of a plot. In this interpretation then, narratives that utilize a Wittgensteinian notion of language as action always allow for a certain open-endedness in the way that the plot is developed.

The idea of “open-ended”, transformative plotting is also evident in Ricoeur's concept of ‘mimesis’. Mimesis is related to the concept, ‘mythos’. Mythos is described by Kearney (2002:12) as the “transformative plotting of scattered events into a new paradigm.” These concepts are used in reference to what Ricoeur describes as the “synthesis of the heterogeneous”. It involves our participation in a process, which allows us to see the world otherwise. Within the context of this process, Postmodernism's insistence on the complete discontinuity with or loss of a sense of historical reality is avoided. At the same time however, it steers clear of what
Kearney (2002:46) describes as “a digging up of hidden facts”. It is not the quest for a unified truth. Instead it involves an interweaving of past events with present readings. As such it may be interpreted as a process, which mediates between the extremes of immediacy and remoteness.

Ricoeur’s (1984:55) mimetic process can be described in terms of three important features. The first feature of mimesis has to do with the fact that it involves a conceptual framework. Emploiment is always grounded in a pre-understanding of the world, its meaningful structures, its symbolic resources and its temporal action. The second feature relates to what is involved in representation. Representations are developed within the context of a practical field in which a number of symbolic resources such as signs, rules and norms already exist. Narration therefore does not start from nothing, and is not merely relative to the teller of the story. The third feature involves a recognition of the temporal structures that call for narration. Time is integral to action, and all action is therefore potentially implicated in a narrative structure. The representation of action cannot but reflect this temporal orientation.

The idea of a mimetic process of narrative discourse or plotting based on the Wittgensteinian notion of language as action, is of great consequence to moral education. In practical terms, the utilization of this kind of narrative strategy in moral education would involve the active participation of learners in a process of open-ended and yet meaningful narrative interpretation. Learners would be confronted with and be expected to engage with narratives that they may at the same time experience as familiar and challenging. Its human and temporal aspects would allow learners access to the narrative and thus facilitate their participation in its interpretation, but it would also be open or ambiguous enough to invite and encourage them to see the world in alternative ways. The Wittgensteinian interpretation of language, on which this narrative strategy is based, allows us to recognize the moral language of values or principles as historical and social constructions that embody certain power relationships. Learners may experience moments of recognition and identification as they participate in the process of narrative interpretation but their active engagement with one another and with the text could discourage an uncritical acceptance of the moral content of the narration and its identification with dogmatic truth. Teachers become facilitators in this strategy. They create an opportunity for and extend an invitation to learners to participate in a “moral language game”. In this ‘game’, moral truths emerge as part of the unfolding historical and social reality in
which players cannot but participate. In this way, narratives facilitate and encourage context-sensitive moral choices.

Identity

Identity is central to the notion of morality. What constitutes identity and to what extent a moral agent's choices and behavior can be understood in terms of it are questions with far reaching implications for issues such as free will and accountability. This being the case, identity has to play a major role in our consideration of moral education.

In the wake of the tragic and cataclysmic historical events of the twentieth century, many philosophers lost confidence in the notion of an autonomous agent, or the so-called transcendental subject. The idea of a fixed, essentialist self began to give way to the notion of a more distributed self that is continually positioned and repositioned in endlessly shifting discursive practices (Francis 1999). This notion of identity however, is sometimes criticized for the lack of coherence, constancy and integrity that it seems to imply. Ricoeur (1992:116) however maintains that it is possible to retain a sense of identity and self-constancy (which he relates to the word ‘ipse’) without subscribing to what he considers a modernist notion of sameness (which he denotes with the term ‘idem’). The distinction between ‘ipse’ and ‘idem’ is crucial for developing a notion of self that allows for ethical responsibility and accountability without transgressing into the territory of the transcendental subject. As we shall see, Ricoeur utilizes the narrative as a means of mediating between that which is dynamic and that which remains constant in the moral agent’s sense of self.

Ricoeur (1992:121) describes character in terms of a “…set of lasting dispositions by which a person is recognized”. Character constitutes for Ricoeur what he refers to as “the limit point where the problematic of ipse becomes indiscernable from that of idem, and where one is inclined not to distinguish them from one another.” Ricoeur proposes, in this regard, that we consider the temporal dimension of the ‘lasting dispositions’ that he identifies with character. In doing so, we “set character back upon the path of the narrativization of personal identity”. In other words, a moral agent’s identity (i.e., the moral agent understood as a character in a narrative) remains constant, though not necessarily consistent through the passage of time (as represented in the unfolding of the narrative plot). The dynamic, which constitutes character as a recognizable identity throughout all its different temporal manifestations is comparable to that of a tradition, which is perpetuated through continuous re-
interpretation. If an individual’s moral disposition is related to his or her sense of personal identity, it follows that integrity can only manifest itself in the historical act of making decisions. Integrity, in this conception, is identified not only with the constancy of an individual’s personal moral commitments, but also with his or her constant re-interpretation of those commitments in different temporal contexts. The moral agent’s integrity is not something that can be identified by pointing it out. It is a history that is continually being narrated as it unfolds.

The advantages of employing an alternative narrative strategy in moral education thus come into focus. Such a narrative approach would be based on an alternative model of self-identity. The narrative, as employed in this strategy, mediates between what Kearney (2001:152) calls “the ipse of process and promise” and “the fixed idem-self”. Our ability to participate in narratives renders us capable of ethically responsible actions. We experience ourselves as at once subject to narratives while also being its subjects. Our interpretative participation in the plotting of our individual and collective moral histories cultivates our narrative imagination and constantly allows us new perspectives as we consider the world around us. Ricoeur understands the capacity for narrative imagination as one which allows a dialectic of ‘care and carefreeness’ and of ‘ownership and dispossession’ to come into play.

Narrative imagination involves our participation in the interpretative plotting of our experience. As such, experience plays a central role in our narrative representations and interpretations of ourselves and our world. Johnson (1993:161) describes, in this regard, the notion of an ‘experientialist self’ which has come to replace the ‘objectivist self’ of modernity, i.e., that individual metaphysical entity which was thought to have been constituted in an essentially rational nature. In contrast to modernism’s metaphysical claims, the experientialist perspective is one which regards the individual as a self-in-progress. In this interpretation human beings exist as complex, self-transforming biological organisms. They transform themselves and are transformed in the course of their interaction with the physical, interpersonal, and cultural environments in which they participate. It would be wrong then to replace the transcendental rationality of the modern subject with a kind of ‘transcendental’ narrative imagination. Experience and imagination are inseparable in the process of narrative interpretation through which we are constantly redefining ourselves and our world. In fact, it would probably be more accurate to speak of a kind of ‘experiential imagination’ in this regard.
The interpretation of identity, on which the use of an alternative narrative approach depends, has significant implications for the process of character development in moral education. One important implication is that it no longer allows us to use what Kearney (2002) calls ‘essential identities’ as a point of reference. National or religious identities would serve as examples of ‘essential identities’, as Kearney conceives of it. Moral education strategies that take essential identities as their point of departure usually direct their efforts at inscribing individual moral agents within the strictures of a static consensus. Kearney suggests an alternative conception of collective identities. He proposes that we think of collective identities as ‘imagined communities’. National, cultural, or religious identities, in this interpretation, are something which is contingent and relational in nature. They are produced in the interaction between different histories and stories. Kearney (2002:97), for instance, offers a very convincing account of how British, Irish and American national identities had developed in the course of their respective histories of dialectical opposition to ‘Others’. This puts the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ logic that so often lies at the root of conflict into a new perspective. The challenge for moral education is to encourage and assist learners to engage in a process of active reinterpretation with respect to the imagined communities with which they identify themselves. In this way learners, as moral agents, will no longer merely ‘belong’ to a collective identity, but will become active participants in it. By constantly re-telling the stories of their imagined communities in a different way, they re-invent and thereby rejuvenate it. This in its turn guarantees its continuation as a point of reference in moral deliberation, by ensuring its continued relevance.

When collective and individual identities are allowed to develop in a process of narrative interpretation, the narrative acts as a mediating medium between description and prescription. Although it requires interpretation, the narrative resists final closure by remaining open-ended. In their interpretive engagement with the narrative, learners begin to see their lives as something which is inextricably intertwined with the lives of others. This facilitates their resistance to the notion of final closure in the process of moral deliberation. It is an attitude that follows the realization that we are all caught up and entangled in histories that make it impossible to ever speak the final word. But to acknowledge this is not to exclude the possibility of some sense of narrative unity in life. On the contrary, it is precisely our interpretative participation in this complex web of relations that allow us to develop a sense of selfhood.
Ricoeur’s use of mimesis supposes an intersection of the text and reader. A narrative only comes into being when it is read or heard and reinterpreted by the reader. Internalized narratives (what Ricoeur calls ‘narrative voices’) provide us with a sense of identity that constitutes us and is constantly reinterpreted within the contexts of culture. Identity is continually being developed in both an individual and collective sense, depending on the scope of the ‘who’ question that is posed to and by the narratives that constitute it. Although individual and collective identities are inextricably intertwined, the individual is never fully absorbed by collective narratives. An alternative, narrative approach to moral education opposes the essentialism that the comprehensive identification of the individual with a collective interpretation of the self implies.

Rorty’s interpretation of moral agency concurs with this perspective on the relationship between individual and collective identities. Morality, for Rorty, is not “a voice from the divine part of ourselves”. Instead, our sense of morality is something which is constituted in the course of our involvement, as members, in a community of speakers of a common language. As moral agents then, we are not required to identify and conform to a set of essentialist moral imperatives as dictated by communal consensus. What we should be directing our efforts at instead is developing habits that enable us to cope with the world and one another. (Hood 1998:186). Morality cannot be an armchair exercise of applying abstract principles to theoretical problems. Rorty therefore rejects universalism as an approach to morality, in favor of a moral practice which is located in a process of narrative interpretation. His rejection of essentialism is at the same time an embracement of pluralism and an acknowledgement of the historical particularity of the real world (McGuinness 1997:30).

THE UTILIZATION OF NARRATIVES IN AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO MORAL DEVELOPMENT AND TRANSFORMATION

The poststructuralist understanding of narratives as a process of interpretative engagement suggests at least three areas of transformation in the way we approach moral education. It requires, in the first place, that we revisit our understanding of moral terminology. It also asks us to consider afresh the envisaged outcome of our pedagogical interventions. Lastly, it seems to demand of us a more creative engagement with those who entrust themselves to our moral tutorage.
Terminology

Moral education curricula usually commence with the exposition of a number of basic definitions. Learners are taught, for instance, to differentiate between concepts such as ethics and morality, ethical approaches like deontology and utilitarianism, followed by a discussion of a number of general moral principles such as truth and justice. These conceptual clarifications are, of course, not devoid of merit. However, a poststructuralist, narrative approach to moral education requires a contextualization of concepts. Learners need to develop an awareness of the historical, social and cultural manifestations of concepts in different contexts. What’s more, they need to be encouraged to discover its relevance in the world as they experience it from day to day. This process of contextualized and personalized interpretation is facilitated by the use of narratives. Learners develop an understanding of moral concepts through their participation in the narrative process. Definitions, in this pedagogical strategy, emerge in the course of learners’ engagement in a process of narrative interpretation instead of being provided beforehand. In fact, it could be argued that to provide learners with a list of definitions at the onset of a course could severely limit their ability to actively engage with and interpret the basic tenets of morality as it applies to and manifests itself in their respective personal and social realities. A narrative approach, such as is envisaged here, obviously deviates considerably from traditional approaches to moral education in the way in which it develops and transforms learners’ understanding of moral concepts. From a poststructuralist perspective however, it represents the most promising strategy for conveying to learners an understanding of the socially and historically constructed nature of moral language as well as the role of power relationships in the interpretation of its content.

More specifically, the approach here advocated involves learners’ participation in a narrative, by means of imaginative listening, reading, or role-playing. The idea is that learners should develop, in the course of their engagement with the narrative, a sense of what is at stake for its characters. The conflicting interests of these characters could be explored by asking learners to assume the position of a specific character and to argue his or her case. Moral principles are then developed as contextual responses to the various moral dilemmas that confront the characters. Learners would be invited and encouraged to propose and evaluate different interpretations of particular moral principles, such as justice, in terms of its relevance and imagined implications for the various characters in the specific situations set out in the narrative plot.
Outcomes

The goal of this form of moral education obviously has nothing to do with acquiring learners’ acquiescence with a set of preformulated metaphysical truths. It attempts instead to promote in learners an attitude that allows and facilitates their interaction with that which is and with those who are different from what they know and how they are, in the course of moral deliberation. It is this type of interaction that will reveal to them what Levinas calls, ‘the face of the Other’. It is due to the openness of the moral agent to the appeal of the face of the Other that he or she is able to formulate contextually appropriate responses to specific moral dilemmas. Abel (1993:23), a commentator on Ricoeur, noted that to expect of Ricoeur to declare his values, is to miss the whole point of his approach. In his work, Ricoeur remains elusive with regard to his own moral commitments and invites the interlocutor instead to accompany him on an explorative journey without a defined duration or destination. Ultimately, it is his steadfast commitment to and participation in this journey that reveals itself as the particular ethical quality of Ricoeur’s enterprise. His interpretative advance is none other than an exercise in responsibility. As such, Ricoeur’s conception of ethics is methodological in nature. The poststructuralist narrative approach to moral education advocated here also differentiates itself in its commitment to a journey, rather than a defined destination.

In his book, “Against ethics”, Caputo (1993) echoes this rejection of metaphysical principalism and encourages the reader instead to engage in the ‘messiness’ of the ethical encounter. Ethical encounters become messy when differences are acknowledged. This often excludes the possibility of a ‘neat’ solution, which in its turn has a retarding effect on the resolve of those involved. Caputo reminds us, however, that encounters of this nature allow the contextual experience and the authenticity of being human to remain intact.

Creative opportunities for interaction

Our contemporary, technology driven world is marked by the instant availability of an excess of all sorts of information. However, all this information remains largely meaningless to learners without the benefit of meaningful interpersonal interaction. The sharing of personal narratives among peers is an intimate way for learners to exchange ideas, reframe perspectives and challenge ideologies. In the poststructuralist narrative approach to moral education, learners are therefore encouraged to describe the moral dilemmas that they have been or are currently con-
fronted with and to relate the stories of those whom they consider moral heroes. Because we often learn more from our failures and mistakes than we do from our successes, it is likewise important that learners witness the detrimental consequences of their mistakes. Both the narratives that learners tell with pride and those they tell with shame are of value in moral education.

The learner as narrator needs an audience. In the poststructuralist narrative approach to moral education it is as important for a learner to listen to the narratives of others as it is to tell his or her own. However, in the information age it is very easy for people’s stories to disappear amidst the noise associated with popular culture or to be rendered invisible by the gravitational appeal of dazzling multimedia spectacles. In lieu of this, some educators consider it prudent to avoid the communication mediums with which these phenomena are predominantly associated. The suggestion is that telecommunication, the press and the internet are unsuitable as vehicles for interaction on moral issues, and that they should therefore never be allowed to become a substitute for face-to-face communication.

Face-to-face communication has the ability, of course, to create immediacy, urgency and cooperation. However, a strong case can also be made, in this regard, for electronic communication media. In a recent article, Marina Umaschi Bers (2003) describes how she uses on-line narrative tools to foster awareness, among learners, of the relation between identity and values. She calls her on-line tools “kaleidostories”. It allows children from different backgrounds to create complex on-line representations of themselves by choosing a variety of role models and telling their stories. Kearney (2002:11) concurs with this more optimistic evaluation of the potential of electronic communication media for narrative engagement. He points out that: “far from eradicating narrative, new technologies of virtualized and digitized imagining may actually open up novel ways of storytelling inconceivable in our former cultures”. It is up to the facilitators of moral education courses, then, to creatively explore the new avenues that recent technological advances offer for developing and transforming the moral sensibilities of learners through their interaction with one another in a process of narrative interpretation. Not to do so would be to miss valuable and exciting new opportunities for moral education.
CONCLUSION

The appeals of traditional deontological and utilitarian approaches to a set of general or common principles or values may be interpreted as an attempt to make moral decision-making simpler, more predictable and therefore more manageable. Unfortunately, contemporary professional life is fraught with contingencies so unforeseen and complexities so impenetrable that they make such ambitions appear distinctly unrealistic. Having become disillusioned with the pretences of deontological and utilitarian ethics, poststructuralist thinkers have developed an interpretation of language and identity which has given rise to a new understanding of and approach to morality. It is this interpretation which forms the basis of the alternative, narrative approach to moral development and transformation that has been proposed in this paper. It is an approach that avoids meaningless appeals to decontextualized, abstract values and principles. Instead, it allows individual and collective differences to inform and transform the dialogue through which learners develop and transform their moral orientation in the world.

Moral education, in this conception, is directed less at the establishment of harmony and more towards the fostering of an open and respectful attitude among learners with different moral orientations. It becomes then, less about dictating and more about facilitating, and less about conformation than about consideration. It is about giving learners the opportunity to rediscover themselves, one another and their world in the sharing of real stories about real people in real situations. When this happens, moral education becomes moral development and moral transformation.

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NOTES

1 The example of Ford’s utilitarian reasoning on how to deal with the Pinto dilemma is a case in point here.

2 There is a subtle difference between MacIntyre’s notion of “narrative unity of life” and Ricoeur’s use of narrative as method. MacIntyre’s notion aims towards moral contents that are determined teleologically within certain com-
munities, or practices, whereas Ricoeur’s emphasis on temporality emphasizes a certain open-endedness that is part of language as action.

BIBLIOGRAPHY
