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What Will I Do? Toward an Existential Ethics for First Person Action Research Practice

David Coghlan

How first person practice engages with the process of valuing has not received much attention in action research. This article takes the question, 'what will I do?' as the foundation for first person ethical inquiry. It explores the process of how we are able to experience, to understand and to make value judgements about what is 'worthwhile' or 'truly good', and so to make choices and to take action. The article marks a move away from a focus on ethics as a set of coherent concepts and definitions, to a focus on interiority where ethics are considered in terms of appropriating the activities of valuing, a move from a system based on logic to a system grounded in method, from ethics imposed from outside to personal authenticity

Key words: action research ethics, first person practice, authenticity, Bernard Lonergan

Within the general discussion of ethics in action research theory and practice, exploring how first person practice engages with the process of valuing leading to decision and action has not received much attention. In taking the question, 'what will I do?' as the foundation for first person inquiry/practice, this article explores how action researchers may engage with the process of making value judgements as to what is worthwhile that lead to action. While asking questions is natural and spontaneous, it is a conscious activity that is not given much focus. The usual focus for attention is the question we are asking rather than the process of questioning. What is involved in questioning

value? Underpinning this first person approach is that all articulated values are located within a tradition, and that inquiring into and engaging in appropriating our own process of valuing enable both rich personal understanding and fruitful dialogue with others, and collaborative action.

As human beings we cannot avoid taking action. At its core, the story of ethical action is simply the story of activities of how we decide what is worthwhile and act congruently. Action research is about choices, decisions and action (Reason, 2006). Accordingly, this exploration of how we may engage in making choices and decisions and taking action offers the action research community a fruitful reflection in order to enhance our theory and practice. This article seeks to ground a method for an existential first person ethics. It is in two main sections. The first section describes the process of first person practice, and the first person operation of valuing. This is a description of the process of human knowing that is invariant and verifiable in experience. The second part stands back from that account and reflects on the context of some contemporary approaches to ethics, and introduces the notion of interiority, leading to a formulation of a method of first person existential ethics grounded in authenticity.

First person practice

At its core, first person practice means that our own beliefs, values, assumptions, ways of thinking and behaving are afforded explicit attention as we experience ourselves in inquiry and in action, what Lonergan (1992) refers to as 'self-appropriation', Marshall (1999) as 'living life as inquiry' and Reason and Torbert (2001) as 'upstream' and 'downstream' inquiry. As action researchers when we engage in collaborative inquiry in the pursuit of co-generated knowledge we may attend to what goes on in our own minds and feelings, what Lonergan (1992) refers to as 'data of consciousness', Marshall (1999) as 'inner arcs of attention', or Torbert and Associates (2004) as attention to 'action logics' through which we uncover and learn about our own 'theories-in-use' (Argyris & Schon, 1974) and tacit 'epistemology-in-action' (Schon, 1983). Here we are noticing how we think, how we process data, come to understanding, form judgements, make decisions and take action.

Such noticing is challenging and often difficult to do, as we have limited horizons and may be closed to such self-attention. The intended fruit of such inner attention is that we may come to recognise our feelings, our unacknowledged biases and our strengths, for example, how we are learning to work with contextual sensitivity and the elements of power in participation (Marshall, 2011). This is what Varela and Shear (1999) refer to as the science of consciousness. The grounding of this article in first person process that attends to both inner and outer arcs or data of sense and data of consciousness establishes the possibility of critical subjectivity whereby what we experience, understand, judge and value may be subject to critical questioning. It is in these terms that I explore a first person method of existential ethics.

Dworkin (2011), in his dense and exciting first person exploration of value, presents the case that the one big thing in life is value. Value constitutes what truth is, what life means, what morality requires and what justice demands. He explores how value proposes a way to live, based on two foundational principles: self respect and authenticity. It is in this spirit that this paper explores, in a first person process, how we may come to value. What happens when we assert something to be ‘good’ and ‘worthwhile’ and when we ask ‘what will I do about it?’

Action research as practical knowing

Action research is grounded in the realm of practical knowing (Coghlan, 2011). The realm of practical knowing directs us to the concerns of human living, the successful performance of daily tasks, and discovering immediate solutions that work. As Reason and Torbert (2001, p. 6) argue, action research seeks to ‘forge a more direct link between intellectual knowledge and moment-to-moment personal and social action’. One of the particular characteristics of practical knowing is that it varies from place to place and from situation to situation. What works in one setting may not work in another. Accordingly, what we know needs to be differentiated for each specific situation in which we find ourselves. Consequently, action research involves attention to inquiry in the present tense as we engage in cycles of action and reflection (Chandler & Torbert, 2003). Such engagement in the cycles of

action and reflection performs both a practical and philosophical function in its attentiveness and reflexivity as to what is going on at any given moment, and how that attentiveness yields understanding and leads to purposeful action. As practical knowing is about taking action and change in people's lives, action research is fundamentally ethical, as we attend to what is going on, both in ourselves and in the situation in which we find ourselves, understand what these inner and outer events might mean, form a judgement about that understanding, and make choices about what we may say or do. Deliberating on what to say or to do follows from an act of valuing, in that we select, from alternatives, an action we judge to be 'good' or 'better' than possible alternatives. As Fitterer (2008) comments, without the value-laded questions from such deliberation, practical knowing is simply shrewdness.

Reason (2006) argues that action research is characteristically full of choices. As action research is conducted in the present tense, attentiveness to these choices and their consequences, and being transparent about them are significant for considering the quality of action research. Reason proposes that action researchers need to be aware of the choices they face, and to make them clear and transparent to themselves, to those with whom they are engaging in inquiry, and to those to whom they present their research in writing or presentations. Explicating and confronting such choices, and being able to discuss them, require us to have a clear understanding of how we make choices, and so I move now to exploring the first person process of knowing and valuing.

The first person process of knowing and valuing

Before discussing how we explore the notion of value and how we come to value, we need to have a firm grasp on how we know. If we examine activities like when we have been successful in solving a practical problem like fixing a leak or solving a crossword or Sudoku puzzle, we get insights into how we know. The process begins when we question an experience. The question initiates a process of inquiry, and sets a direction that focuses on finding an answer and that rejects inadequate/irrelevant solutions that may emerge. An answer provides understanding in the form of an insight. But any

particular insight is provisional as it may be incorrect, flawed or not fit the evidence. Hence it needs to be verified. Does it fit? Yes! No! Maybe! Perhaps I need more evidence or to check, to make sure in order to reach some closure.

Knowing is not any one of these activities alone. It is not seeing as the empiricists would have it. Nor is it understanding as Descartes would have it. Nor is it judgement only. We can be confident about our knowing, because we can verify our knowing by checking it against our own experience, our understanding and our judging.

Paralleling our knowing of an object is our self-awareness. When we are satisfied that we have an answer to a question, we can be simultaneously be aware of ourselves being satisfied or of still having a niggling doubt. I can be reading something and, at the same time, be aware of my impatience that I am not understanding what I am reading. This awareness is part of being awake where we can experience ourselves both engaging in thinking, feeling and acting as we grapple with questions and feeling frustrated or annoyed at our lack of progress, or satisfied that we have an answer and that we are on the right track or confused. Affirming the operations of knowing and being able to be aware of having insights and making judgements are verifiable in experience, whether or not one does it.

In the realm of practical knowing where we seek to act, we add issues of valuing and choosing to the acts of cognition. We employ the same process of knowing in the invariant, interrelated activities of experience, understanding and judgement. Now we add the activities of choosing, deciding and taking action. We are faced with a concrete problem we seek to answer the question for understanding as to what possible courses of action there might be. At this level we may ask what courses of action are open to us and we may review options, weight choices and decide. We may reflect on the possible value judgements as to what the best option might be, and we may decide to follow through what we judge to be the best value judgement, and so we can take responsibility for consistency between our knowing and our doing. The judgement of value is grounded, therefore, in an evaluation of the reality of the situation, and an intentional response to value and the thrust to act ethically. In action research, focusing on conscious intentionality provides

a rich perspective for exploring how the subjective and the objective are intertwined (Ladkin, 2005).

Of course this is not all that simple. We know that there are such things as stupidity, obtuseness, confusion, divergent views, bias, lack of attention and a general lack of intelligence. We may not bother to ask questions about our experience. An understanding may not come quickly enough, and we may be impatient and not question further. Many insights may be wrong. Interpretations of data may be superficial, inaccurate, biased. Judgements may be flawed. We may have unconscious fears which censor, block or divert questioning. We can be egotistical where we use our intelligence to figure out how to exploit people. We can be blind to the limitations of our culture, race, gender and of the groups with which we identify. Accordingly, we need to gain insight into these negative manifestations of knowing by the same three-fold process of knowing. Hence, the importance of self-knowledge, and of having self-development and training in first person practice and critical thinking in the formation of action researchers.

Valuing

Valuing is a spontaneous process in which we engage very early in life, long before we can talk about it. While not yet able to understand value, infants and children express clear preferences for what they like or want to happen. We learn the use of 'should' and 'ought' very easily. We are always valuing. We use words like 'good' and 'bad' about a wide range of issues. We like this; we don't like that. We choose one item over another. We choose to take this action rather than an alternative. As children we receive values from others: parents and teachers, and we choose our own values later as adults. As well as being spontaneous and beginning in infancy, valuing exists in every culture and all through history. It is unavoidable. As Lonergan (1972, p. 18) puts it

Spontaneously we move from judgements of fact or possibility to judgements of value and to the deliberateness of decision and commitment; and that spontaneity is not unconscious or blind; it constitutes us as conscientious, as responsible persons, and in its absence would leave us as psychopaths.

Not all judgements of value lead to a sense of responsibility or of obligation to act. I may affirm that an object is good without needing to do anything. However, besides thinking about reality, we often want to change it. We may experience a situation and judge it to be unjust, and so we may decide not to leave it at that but to say or do something. We have the ability to ask what we might do before deciding what we will do. We ask questions, like ‘will I?’ Is it better or worse? Is it worth my while? These questions are clearly normative, and capture the most fundamental and moral drive to live in a responsible way. The normative drive for responsibility is different from the drive of reason. As Dunne (2010) points out, when we are being reasonable we focus on knowing the truth, and we try to keep a cool head and leave our feelings aside. But when we are responsible we focus on action, and we may be flooded with feelings and driven to act.

The question: “what will I do now?” implies an intended yet unspecified goal to a specified good and a decision to try to realise it. There is rarely a single possibility, so the question of deciding between possibilities occurs, but only those possibilities which occur to us. We are constantly engaging in specifying the good and realising it. Will I respond to this e mail now or later? Will I accept the invitation to contribute a paper? Will I vote for candidate A or candidate B in the election? Will I have a cup of tea or coffee? Sometimes these are easy to answer; sometimes they are not. Choosing coffee over tea may be less difficult than choosing to accept an invitation or not, as accepting to write a paper may mean the relegation of other work to a less important status, and so implying a ranking of values and priorities in terms of time and energy.

The ‘good’

When we use the term ‘good’, we ask what do we mean by ‘good’? Why is something good? What is good about it? Can we use a term like ‘truly’ good? A simple answer is that the good is what is intended by the judgement of value which extends beyond the merely satisfying. It may be useful to think of the good as a process with three expressions.

- The *particular or material good* is the good that has value for us. It satisfies practical needs and desires and comprises the good of, for example, having food, shelter, friends, a job and so on. It operates on the level of experience as we cooperate with others in the pursuit of fulfilling these needs and desires.
- The *good of order* is the systemic value that underpins structures as a process of events whereby meeting the needs of a particular good is institutionalized by people collaborating out of their judgement of value, for example, the operations of a business or a service. The good of order operates at the level of understanding and is grounded in collaboration.
- *Cultural value* is where we choose and enact what we judge to be of value for human beings and the world and how to keep the good of order operating. We adopt a critical attitude to how a particular good, and the good of order, may be chosen and implemented. So critical reflection may form the basis for seeking to reform of how the good of order is structured in the name of cultural value.

Action research recognises and engages in the pursuit of all three forms of the good. Community action to provide shelter for homeless people may be focused on a particular good for marginalised members of that community. Parallel to meeting that particular need there may be projects to address employment or housing policies that inhibit people from having accommodation. Underpinning these activities may be a critique of how the economy and society are structured, and how power determines who is housed or not.

At the heart of this paper is the assumption that what is considered ‘good’ is considered by a person. When we hear two people arguing about the ‘objective’ worth of something, we can realise that we cannot talk about the objective worth of things without talking about human persons, their value judgements and the kinds of moral bias that may be distorting those judgements. A judgement is someone’s judgement, but in making a judgement of fact, a person is affirming that this is the case and their intentionality is towards ‘what is’, not merely ‘this is the way they see it’. The focus here is on the good that people choose or reject. Once we have understood what goes

on when we make choices, we can co-operate more intelligently and realistically in the process of doing good in the world.

Feelings play an important role in knowing value. Abstracting from the physiological feelings, such as hunger, thirst, and fatigue and so on, some feelings are pointers to values. What attracts us? So a feeling of anger in a situation may point to an injustice, and so we are attracted to the value of justice through our anger at the act of injustice that we have witnessed. Of course, it is not always that simple, as individual feelings may be repressed or others may dominate to the exclusion of others, as in the case of the egoist for whom everything is weighed in terms of its role for self-aggrandizement. We may borrow feelings, where we pick up the feelings of others and become excited or angry. Rather than being excited or angry about the objects themselves, we can, of course, borrow feelings from ourselves where we resurrect old habitual feelings and so we do not have insight into our own actual feelings in the present moment. Hence, there is the need to appropriate our feelings in the present tense and to be able to attend to and to understand how they guide our attitudes and behaviour (Rogers, 1961).

In summary, in the realm of practical knowing that constitutes action research, first person practice focuses attention on the operations of valuing and decision-making, in addition to the operations of cognition. We add the activities of valuing, choosing, deciding and taking action to experience, understanding and judgement. We may ask what courses of action are open to us, and we may review options, weight choices and decide. We may reflect on the possible value judgements as to what the best option might be, and we decide to follow through and take responsibility for consistency between our knowing and our doing. The judgement of value is grounded, therefore, in a knowledge of reality, intentional response to value, and the thrust to act responsibly. Deciding to act completes the operations of experience, understanding and judgement as knowledge alone does not change the way we live or make us better persons. Taking action does and deciding on an action depends on experience, understanding and judgement to present a sound view of a real situation. If I genuinely ask what will I do, then I must ask in a concrete situation as the good is concrete, and I ask what I will do in the here and now. I ask in the situation as I understand it. I want to act in the world as

I understand it. My simple ethical questions involve me in the effort to understand the situation. That can only happen by paying attention to the data of sense and of consciousness.

Reflection

Having described the process whereby we engage in the process of valuing, I now stand back and reflect on it in terms of two perspectives: the fragmented field of ethics and interiority.

The fragmented field of ethics

The field of moral philosophy and ethics appears to be a fragmented and diffuse field. MacIntyre (1981) refers to it as a situation of grave disorder, as in a battlefield after a savage battle. There are rich traditions of systems for engaging with ethics. The natural law approach typically formulates injunctions: what do to and what not to do. While this approach is effective and practical, particularly in educating children ('Don't tell lies'. 'Share your toys'.), it is not easy to apply as it focuses on behaviour and may miss out on underlying values and intentions. The laws are general but then the application is concrete. (When is it OK to tell a lie?) It is easier to say what not to do than to formulate what to do. The virtue ethics approach focus on the qualities of a good person, and so produces a list of moral virtues: be generous, be just and so on. This approach is effective in appealing to human aspirations and motivations. It provides role models and heroes (for example, in children's stories), though it may be difficult to find the 'good person'. In today's world it may be difficult to define virtues. Are virtues cultural, and therefore, relativist? Developing virtues involves rigorous self-disciplines and restraint. There are other approaches to ethics that are grounded in feelings, such as to maximise pleasure and avoid pain, happiness, and rationality, among other approaches (Chappell, 2009). Each of these approaches emerge from experience, is grounded in an insight that has been verified by judgement in a given community.

The action research community has endeavoured to frame the ethical values, principles and virtues underpinning the theory and practice of action

research (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Eikeland, 2006). Boser (2006) argued that externally developed guidelines around power relations be integrated into the design and implementation of each stage of the action research cycle. Hilsen (2006) pointed to core values such as human interdependency, co-generation of knowledge and fairer power relations as the foundations of action research ethics. As a development of Hilsen's work, Brydon-Miller (2008) argued for a fundamental reconsideration of the basic terms under which research ethics, particularly action research ethics, are understood and evaluated. In this reconsideration she suggests adopting a covenantal ethics approach, based on the values of collaborative relationships and a shared commitment to social justice, which underpin action research.

The focus on how we make value judgements in order to take action is captured by Aristotle's notion of *phronesis*, which means practical wisdom. For Aristotle, *phronesis* is a virtue and a habit whereby the prudent person not only knows what is right in general, but also knows what is right in a concrete situation. The prudent person knows how to live the good life (Dworkin, 2011). In this way, *phronesis* is at the heart of action research when it is practiced by virtuous action researchers (Eikeland, 2008). It frames the process and fruit of first person practice in practical knowing. As we have understood, practical knowing engages with the concrete, and choices about action flow from the deliberation of what is valuable and the judgement of value that an intended action is good or worthwhile which leads to the question, 'Will I do it?' *Phronesis* thereby describes the good person as one whose life is oriented towards value, and not merely satisfaction, and whose courses of action are genuinely good, because they are oriented towards values and because they recognise what is required to implement them in the concrete situation (Byrne, 1997).

The approach taken in this paper complements these approaches by focusing on the first person dynamic of choosing value: the moral injunctions to live by, the virtues to internalise and so on. How do I move between the values of my tradition and make choices? How do I critique my tradition? I suggest that the notion of interiority provides an answer.

Interiority

Choosing what is good and worthwhile is grounded in meaning. Meaning is not a simple matter, as we may attribute different meaning to events or gestures and several levels of meaning may exist in a given experience. At any one time, we may be concerned with only a single meaning in a situation; other meanings may be ignored or left for later reflection. So we need to be able to identify and differentiate the meaning(s) sought in a particular experience, and on the basis of which we choose how to act. In the context of action research, I explore three realms of meaning that have relevance for our exploration of how we value: theory, practical knowing and interiority (Coghlan, 2010).

Theory provides sets of principles and values and methods of behaving to direct us. Ethics as principles occur in the realm of theory. We can understand concepts such as participation, democracy, justice, equality, rights, responsibility, moral reflection etc. on the level of theory, and it is important to do so.

In the realm of practical knowing, we are confronted with imperative of having to act in a concrete situation. Practical knowing does not formulate values but sees the situation as it relates to us. In the realm of practical knowing we do not want theory on human rights, but we want to know how to act in a specific situation, and what the consequences might be.

Interiority is where we can understand both perspectives, value them and choose between them in a given situation. It is a first person activity involving shifting from *what* we know to *how* we know, a process of intellectual self-awareness. It involves using our knowledge of how the mind works to critique an intellectual search for ethical action in any situation. It enables us to grasp how we choose which value to follow in a given situation, and to critique that choice and how we perform. Interiority is the means by which we become aware, identify and take responsibility for how we understand moral obligations, how we deliberate about value, choose and make decisions about what to do.

Toward a first person method for existential ethics

Dunne (2010, p. 76) defines a value as ‘what the morally self-transcendent person intends when assessing a concrete object of choice’. How then to capture the first person process as a method for developing an existential ethics? To do so, I ground it in the four basic steps of how we come to know and choose (experience, understanding, judgement of value, choice/decision) that we can recognise as a natural, spontaneous and cyclical process. The valuing process is one with which we are intimately familiar, if we examine what we actually do when we make a choice. It is we who experience. It is we who may ask about our experiences and try to understand what is experienced, asking if our understanding is sufficient and judging whether it is or is not. It is we who ask what might be done, who may look at possible courses of action and ask if they are worthwhile, better or more important than alternatives and decide to implement one of them. It is we who may examine our proposed action in the light of our own solution, measure it against other suggestions and maybe allow time for further questions or advantages and disadvantages to surface. In the end it is we who are convinced or tentative, even though we may be explicitly following rules or guidelines. The evidence has to be sufficient for us. We ourselves are the first principle of ethical action.

Table 1: Structure of Knowing and Valuing

Operations	Authenticity	Questions
Valuing	Be responsible	Is it good? Is it worthwhile? Is it right?
Judgement	Be reasonable	Does it make sense? Does it fit the evidence? Is it true/correct?
Understanding	Be intelligent	Why? When?
Experience	Be attentive	What is happening – in the situation, in me?

Being attentive to experience, intelligent in understanding, reasonable in judging and responsible in taking action are four ‘imperatives’, as Coghlan

(2008) describes them, that constitute first person authenticity (Table 1). They form a general empirical method, the foundations of which are the recognisable activities of human knowing, as I have explored in this article. Dunne (2010) describes them as pulls. In Dunne's view these pulls are normative:

- normativity of experience where I am pulled to pay attention to experience
- normativity of understanding where I am pulled to understand. What? How? Why? What for?
- normativity of reason where I am pulled to sift reality from illusion, truth from falsehood, sound from unsound explanations
- normativity of responsibility where I am pulled to know what is better and to do it.

Of course, as described earlier, we also know that we often fail in our efforts to be to be authentic. While we ask ourselves what we are to do and want to make it intelligible and reasonable, we may be selective in our attentiveness. We may avoid difficult evidence and limit our questioning. We may fail to be responsible. As Argyris (2004) points out, we may be highly skilled in how we flee from authenticity. Authenticity is not a static position. As Lonergan (1972, p. 252) points out

Human authenticity is not some pure quality, some serene freedom from all oversights, all misunderstandings, all mistakes, all sins. Rather it consists in a withdrawal from inauthenticity, and the withdrawal is never a permanent achievement. It is ever precarious, ever to be achieved afresh, ever in great part a matter of uncovering still more oversights, acknowledging still further failures to understand, correcting still more mistakes, repenting more and more deeply hidden sins (1972, p. 252).

The key to method is the relationship between questioning and answering; it is a framework for collaborative creativity that deals with different kinds of questions, each with its own focus. So questions for understanding specific data (What is happening here?) have a different focus from questions for reflection (Does this fit? Is it good? Is it worthwhile?), or from questions of responsibility (What will I do?). The general empirical method of being

attentive, intelligent, reasonable and responsible is a normative heuristic pattern of related and recurrent operations that yield ongoing and cumulative results. It envisages all data, both of sense and of consciousness. It does not treat objects without taking into consideration the human subject's operations of experience, understanding and judgement.

What is the link between personal authenticity and the tradition in which we have been raised? As Dunne (2010) explores, it is useful to think of the tradition as being a top-down, descending process where values are handed down to us in a living community whose insights and judgements of value have been formed over generations. Authenticity, in contrast, is something of a bottom-up, ascending process where gradually we grow to learn our own processes of being attentive, intelligent, reasonable and responsible. As noted above, this is a life-long process and no one does it perfectly. We make mistakes, sometimes wilfully and other times out of unresolved feelings and unquestioned assumptions, contingent on a truly mindful first person inquiry.

No tradition is simply good or bad. Collective insight may be flawed. We are born into a tradition, and gradually we learn to listen to the inner voice of our own authenticity and we may come to insight about the merits and problems of our tradition. How it is that we have come to a new value judgement about the ecology of our planet, and have begun to act in what we consider to be a more responsible way in how we use natural resources, and so confront directly the value judgements of previous generations, is an example of how a tradition may be questioned and then changed.

Barden (1991) notes that the fashionable position is that there is either one best tradition, or that all traditions are equally good. This latter position, he says, excludes the possibility of ethical development. If one tradition is better than another then there needs to be some criterion to judge so, which in the tradition of western ethics theory has been thought to be a principle or a set of principles. Following Barden, this article is exploring the argument that the grounding principle or criterion is not a proposition, but a questioning ethical subject who asks what might be done now.

Earlier, the first person approach in this article was linked to the notion of *phronesis*. As authenticity and *phronesis* are equivalent terms (Braman, 2008; Fitterer, 2008; Dworkin, 2011), we might consider how there are three di-

mensions to how we work authentically and develop the skill of *phronesis* (Dunne, 2010). There is an intellectual dimension to how we make value judgements. We need to realise how we know in several modes, and how interiority enables us to hold them together, and to move from one to another as appropriate. We need to realise the intelligible relations between the value judgements that we make and the values that they affirm, and we need to have settled the meaning of ‘objectivity’ in our value judgements. The starting point of our ethics is not a set of rules or conceptualised standards, but the intelligent, reasonable, and responsible selves that we try to become. Secondly, there is a moral dimension which we need to learn to make explicit. How do we choose the worthwhile over the merely satisfying and be able to talk about that? Thirdly, there is an affective dimension where what and how we love is explicit. Ideally the affective dimension makes the moral dimension concretely possible, i.e. what we love and care about directs our behaviour. Being authentic involves all three dimensions: being able to talk about what and why, being able to pursue the good and caring about what we judge to be valuable, and what we pursue.

From first to second and third person practice

In the context of this paper, I am alluding to second person practices as engaging with others on ethical action. As Barden (1991) argues it is more fruitful to engage with others on what is common, i.e. our own operations of knowing and doing, than to debate about answers. Debates about positions and answers, of themselves, are likely to be incomplete and fractious. Co-inquiry into what we have experienced, into how we have understood our experience, and into how we have made value judgements provide a fruitful second person extension of the first person focus of this article (Coghlan, 2009). It provides a foundation for engaging in covenantal ethics which, as Brydon-Miller (2008) describes it, is a commitment to act for the good of others, and which requires deep commitment to working together to address issues of importance. Articulating how we come to value and to identify the good, how we have weighed options in making concrete choices, and how we decided what action to take performs a valuable third person contribution to

the field of action research. The articulation of these operations facilitates the transparency that Reason (2006) discusses, and in these terms contributes to the quality of action research.

Conclusions

This article counters the notion that objective value must be somehow a concept that is 'out there'. Such a notion is based on the mistaken assumption that knowing is a taking a look at something that is 'out there'. By understanding what we do when we say that option A is better than option B, we may realise that all things valuable are valued through responsible consciousness, and that true values are learned by people being responsible. So affirming something as truly valuable is the fruit of authenticity and integrates the intellectual, moral and affective dimensions. The philosophy of action research as the social science of practical knowing provides a formulation that enables us to understand and explore how the subjective and the objective may be held within the general empirical method (Coghlan, 2011).

Moral knowledge, as Melchin (1998) expresses it, is not a quality, but rather a direction, a dynamism that propels movement from a current situation, through intentions and social structures, to actions directed towards goals and actual consequences. As action research operates in the realm of practical knowing and engages us in being attentive, intelligent, reasonable and responsible in the present tense (Coghlan, 2008), evaluating how we judge an action to be worthwhile or good is at the heart of the choices and quality decisions we make as we engage in our action research work (Reason, 2006).

To date the first person practice of engaging with the process of valuing has not received much attention within the general discussion of ethics in action research theory and practice. In taking the question, 'what will I do?' as the foundation for first person inquiry, I have sought to explore how action researchers may engage with values that are presented by their tradition, and describe the first person approach to valuing that grounds a method for an existential ethics, and that may also be the basis for second person dialogue with others. Underpinning this approach is the experience that we can question our tradition by inquiring into, and engaging in dialogue about, our own

process of valuing, so as to enable both rich personal understanding and fruitful dialogue. Exploring a first person approach to valuing expands the discussion on ethics in action research and seeks to make up for what Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, and Eikeland (2006) describe as a 'dearth' in the literature. It also offers a challenge to how action researchers might be trained and formed to be responsibly conscious in the development of first person skills.

In this article I have sought to explore a move away from a focus on ethics as a set of coherent concepts and definitions, to a focus on interiority where ethics are considered in terms of appropriating the activities of valuing, a move from a system based on logic to a system grounded in method, from ethics learned from outside to personal authenticity and *phronesis*. This is to establish the recognisable operations of knowing as a base, rather than abstract principles and to ground the question of what will I do in people as they are and what they intend: experiencing, questioning, weighing options, struggling to do what they think is right, and making what they judge to be the best choice.

In the fluid uncertainty that accompanies experiencing, understanding, judging, deliberating, choosing and taking action in our complex world, all we can do is our best. I have framed first person practice in terms of the four imperatives or pulls: be attentive, be intelligent, be reasonable, and be responsible. This article is an invitation for readers to engage in their own first person inquiry to verify for themselves how, while we engage in action research and attempt to make our choices transparent, we are working from the realm of interiority whereby we are able to experience, understand and judge how we make value judgements, and thereby understand how our subjectivity works, and how value may be judged to be 'worthwhile' or our action to be 'truly good'. This is our own story. What underpins this exploration is the phrase from Barden (1991, p. 111). 'The discovery of the good is our autobiography'.

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