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## **Towards a Poetics of Childhood Ethics in Abbas Kiarostami's Cinema**

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### **Abstract**

Abbas Kiarostami set out his cinematic experience with works *for* children and *about* them. Despite the significant place this early phase of his oeuvre possesses in Iranian cinema, little has been done to analyze the ethical relations in these works. The major claim of this research project is that there are two major ethical conditions at the heart of the poetics of ethics in Kiarostami's films about children. In these films, children are either engaged in an act of care in order to fulfill their responsibility toward the other, or attempt to go beyond this "responsibility" by resisting and refusing the codes and laws of the "other" in order to reach a sense of individuality or singularity towards freedom. Both these seemingly opposed acts have a relation with what Emmanuel Levinas calls "the encounter with alterity". This article will first attempt to offer a modern definition of ethics and will then investigate the claim that Kiarostami's cinema did not aim to suggest definite and absolute ethical statements but engaged the audience in the ethical questions it proposed. In other words, the article unfolds how the paradigms of this modern ethics is represented in the filmmaker's works, and subsequently illustrates children's role in relation to adults, families, and the educational system, and finally claims that children, encountered by the suppressive and indifferent world of grown-ups, keep finding a way to evade this dominant discourse – a way that may lead to victory or defeat.

**Keywords:** Abbas Kiarostami, Ethics, Care, Responsibility to the Other, Refusal and Resistance, Childhood Studies, Film Studies

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### Introduction

Abbas Kiarostami's cinematic oeuvre has been the subject of many different studies and analyses. His Koker Trilogy - *Where Is the Friend's Home?* (1987), *And Life Goes On* (1992), and *Through the Olive Trees* (1994) - depict human beings' never-ending faith in the sacredness of life despite all sufferings. In the middle of this project, Kiarostami started to make another series of films, starting with *Close-Up* (1990), *Taste of Cherry* (1997), and *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999) which dealt with more philosophical notions of reality vs appearance, fiction vs non-fiction and life vs death. Kiarostami continued his artistic projects in the form of various genres in the twenty-first century until his sudden and shocking death in 2016.

Among his profound artistic works, Kiarostami's early films made at the "Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults" aptly focused on the world of children in line with the Institute's targets and objectives of establishing a system for nurturing children and educating them. *Two Solutions for One Problem* (1975), *Colors* (1976), *Toothache* (1980), and *Orderly or Disorderly* (1981) are among the films made at this early phase. However, one could notice that from the very early works, Kiarostami was not going to make simple didactic films for mere educational purposes. From his first film, *The Bread and Alley* (1970), through his later works such as *Breaktime* (1972), *The Experience* (1973), *The Traveler* (1974), *A Wedding Suit* (1976), *First Case, Second Case* (1979), *The Chorus* (1982), *First Graders* (1984), *Where Is the Friend's Home?* (1987), and *Homework* (1989), Kiarostami started to develop a form of aesthetics in which children's psychological and physical world is depicted with subtle sensibility. Children in these films are confronted with the unsympathetic world of adults, to say the least, and are faced with ethical choices they need to make in order to sustain the childhood that is being taken away from them by adults. Although Kiarostami's child characters are constantly exploited by their parents, the educational system, their employers and the society in general, they continuously attempt to find a way to liberate themselves from oppression.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the possibility of finding an ethical configuration in Abbas Kiarostami's films for children. In other words, it attempts to map out a "poetics" of the nature of these relations according to modern ethics. In his seminal and significant work, *Poetics*, Aristotle aspires to disclose a structure and a system for tragedy. Accordingly, what *Poetics* in general does is to designate representational systems in art, follow their transformational evolution, and investigate how to categorize them. The present article turns to such an understanding of the term "poetics" to detect the grammar and structure of the ethics of childhood in Kiarostami's cinema. One could identify two major ethical choices made by Kiarostami's child characters: an ethics of care and responsibility to the other or an ethics of resistance and refusal in order to sustain a responsibility to oneself.

### **Modern Ethics**

Ethics, in general, could be defined as either classic or modern. According to the classic theory, ethics is a value-oriented, rule-governed, absolutist, essentialist, universal, and internal system defining good and evil, right and wrong, and prescribing moral manners. Emanuel Kant is considered as the major proponent of this universalist morality. Modern ethics, on the other hand, is a departure from "moral statement" and movement towards "ethical question."

Thus, one could identify a distinction between "morality" and "ethics":

Morality as we know it is 'herd' morality, suitable enough for the timorous, spiritually mediocre masses but fatally stymying for [the] noble, exceptional souls ... Morality is a conspiracy against life on the part of those who are fearful of joy, risk, cheerfulness, hardness, solitude, suffering and self-overcoming. It is as chimerical as alchemy. This whole decaying apparatus must now collapse, given that its metaphysical buttresses have been increasingly weakened. (Eagleton 170)

This newer perspective of ethics reconsiders the presuppositions suggested by the older one and situates them in its relationist and self-assessing evaluation system. Modern ethics, therefore, is not universal and does not mean to offer an arrangement of moral principles, but a contextual and dialogical system in permanent endeavor to redefine itself. Emanuel Levinas, the twentieth century philosopher of ethics, believes that the concept of ethics only makes sense when it is consistently viewed in its relation to the other. As he maintains, ignoring the overwhelming presence of the other will undermine what ethics is supposed to mean and question the validity of our ethical conclusions. Consequently, the ethical responsibility, as Emanuel Levinas observes, is not understandable without accepting “the other”.

Although Levinas deals with a vast range of philosophical and non-philosophical matters and is influenced by several sources, his work is “dominated by one big idea” (Bernasconi and Critchley 6), the movement of which is compared by Derrida with the crashing of a wave on a beach, always the same wave returning and repeating its movement with deeper insistence (Derrida 312). Levinas’s recurring thesis is that ethics is “first philosophy” and should be understood as a relation of infinite responsibility to the other person. Such an ethics does not count on erecting an objective and universal moral monument on rational foundations and does not function through some already-written and prescribed codes that we could *know* prior to the immediate encounter with the other. Ethical thinking is thinking “otherwise than being.” It does not expect to comprehend the other in terms of passive and constant identities, and rejoices immediate and singular relations which prioritizes “signification” over “significance,” “Saying” over “Said”.

### **Children in Kiarostami’s Films**

Childhood is not a unified, biological, and natural concept, but a construction made up of discursive and narrative signs construed and defined through implicative relations. As Jack Zipes observes, children and childhood are social constructions who are formed by social and economic

conditions and signify differently in different cultures (Zipes 39). Accordingly, a series of varying and contradictory implications of the term "childhood" can be found in words and expressions such as wild, natural, innocent, sublime, insightful, wicked, guilty, lacked, righteous, responsible, sexless, sexualized, little adult, the object under investigation (the miniature man), the protected/supported creature, and abandoned. Each of these implications, in relation to the dominant discourse of a historical period, could define the term "childhood".

In Kiarostami's films, children are depicted with great diversity, and their dissimilarities are depicted in schoolyards, classrooms, and other social occasions and situations. In these situations, the child is a solitary figure left on his/her own, is dominated by the adult, has traumatic experiences, and speaks in a self-contradicting discourse. In *First Graders*, this inconsistent situation of the child is wonderfully depicted through the humorous language of the film in which the child blends the childish content of his sentence with the formal features of the adult's language: "This gentleman kicked me." This single instance sums up the way children in Kiarostami's movies are lost and confused in the oppressing world of adults.

Roderick McGillis in "Postcolonialism, Originating Difference," argues that,

children are both objects of desire, figures of that which we wish we could be, and objects of transformation into what we think we are. In other words, we both idealise and abject children. We want to be them and we want them to be us. Is this not the colonial state? The colonizer controls and distances the colonised, while at the same time he feels drawn to those he controls. (McGillis 899)

In Kiarostami's cinema, children are constantly assaulted and exploited by the violent cruelty of adults who teach them how to be harsh, revengeful, and business-minded, and expect them to follow their footsteps when they grow up. Accordingly, childhood ethics could be considered as a smaller and more palpable version of the ethics and politics of adulthood. However, Kiarostami's young heroes are, as Elena says, "stubborn and determined"

(Elena 60) and insist on following their childish goals, regardless of the possibility of victory or defeat. Nevertheless, Kiarostami avoids idealizing this childish endeavor and is determined to show how incomplete and small successes are accompanied by failures. Peter Matthews in “A Little Learning”, an essay on *Homework*, believes that the child, in order to survive, has to select between what he/she wants and what is publicly assumed appropriate:

So it appears that a good part of the tuition consists in learning to stifle their natural instincts and master the meek deportment officially demanded of them. These children don't lack all individuality; it only seems so. For a primary socialisation has already taught them that survival depends on gauging the distance between private desire and acceptable public face. (Matthews 31)

Similarly, Kiarostami's narrative reveals how the child could eventually reveal his desires amidst the multitude of social norms imposed by the adults' world – an exposure similar to that of Roland Barthes's *punctum* amidst *stadium* (Barthes 27).

### **Kiarostami's Ethical Method**

Abbas Kiarostami successfully accomplished a narrative structure in order to convey his ethical concerns – an “ethics [that] occurs as the putting into question of the ego, the knowing subject, self-consciousness, or what Levinas, following Plato, calls the Same” (Critchley 4). In Kiarostami's films, the Same is similarly called into question by the other – by that Levinasian “alterity” which cannot be reduced to the Same and evades the mental powers of the knowing subject. Specifying points of alterity, or what Levinas calls “exteriority” that can neither be “comprehended” nor “possessed” by the self, Kiarostami's narrative exercises ethics not through a depiction of moral values but through “an access to exterior being” (*Difficult Freedom* 409).

Kiarostami's cinema can be regarded as the aesthetic representation of the modern self-assessing ethics which turns away from the classic

prescriptive morality. Kiarostami's films make maximum effort to avoid making judgments and suggesting absolute ethical statements, and content themselves with posing ethical questions. The filmmaker explores the possibility of an ethical form of narrative in which performance and selection are not reduced to statement, or, to use Levinas's words, the "Saying" is not contained by the "Said" (*Otherwise than Being* 35). In *Two Solutions for One Problem*, for example, two columns are drawn on a blackboard in which two different groups of ethical actions are written and the child is then invited to make selections him/herself. In *First Case*, *Second Case*, the dropped-out students face a dilemma when they are forced to choose either to stand by their unity and refuse to betray the wrongdoer or to deliver him and return to the class. When politicians, statesmen, and thinkers are interviewed and asked to make the same choice, they translate the ethical dilemma to the political discourse of the early years of 1979 Revolution and regard the duality of unity versus betrayal in the political and biased paradigm of those years.

Accordingly, Alberto Elena believes that Kiarostami's view of ethics resembles that of mathematical theorems: he proposes two different premises and allows the audience to select. Elena maintains that Kiarostami keeps distancing himself from the ethical questions he asks and avoids identifying with each of the ethical choices proposed in the context of the film (Elena 30-31). Doubtlessly, as Bertolt Brecht demonstrates, "identification" spoils ethical questions since it inevitably leads to some sort of sentimental partiality. In *Homework*, a film that consists almost entirely of interviews with some students and two fathers, the filmmaker employs cinematic punctuations to keep showing the camera and the cinematographer to us, lest we situate ourselves in the context of the film, get drowned in the atmosphere of the work, and start identifying with the interviewees. The filmmaker's "ruin" of representation, the way his narration falters, suggests that "its ethical force is intricately linked to what it does not or cannot say; or breaks off from saying" (Gibson 57).

### **Ethics of Care: Responsibility to the Other**

As said earlier, according to Levinas, ethics is always understandable in relation to “other.” Similarly, Kiarostami’s films, in which adults are pretentious, hypocritical, indifferent, domineering, and ignorant of the child’s world, rely on the relation (and for Levinas, ethics is the occurrence of this relation) between the grown-up and the child as the most significant part of childhood ethics. The adults in these films are unable, or unwilling, to make what Levinas calls “the movement outward” which is “the ethical impulse towards or openness to the other that effects a release from the confines of the self.” In other words, grown-ups in Kiarostami’s films do not respond to “the spontaneous and immediate desire to escape the limits of the self, a desire generated as those limits are experienced in their narrowness, even their sheer absurdity” (Gibson 37).

In response to the lack of care or understanding of grown-ups, children, in an altruistic fashion, attempt to care for one another. *Where is the Friend’s Home?* is perhaps the best example of this “ethics of care”: “In Levinasian terms, we look to theories of justice for insight into how to convey care for the other in our actions, and a good theory will be one that, among other things sharpens our capacity to recognize the other, that sharpens our ability to hear her call” (Shaw 123).

Ahmad is struggling to hand his friend’s notebook back to him in order to stop their teacher punishing his classmate for not writing his homework. On his arduous journey, he is confronted with many obstacles. At the start, Ahmad’s grandfather, sitting at the village square and talking to his friends, tells him to get back home and bring his pack of cigarettes. On his way back home, he encounters a man negotiating a trade with someone. This scene of the film situates Ahmad as a child against the opportunistic, deceptive, pretentious, and indifferent discourse of an adult. The man needs a piece of paper to record some figures for the deal (as a metonymy for the deceptive and business-minded world of adults) and asks Ahmad to remove a sheet from the notebook (as a metonymy for childhood friendship). This is the notebook Ahmad wants to hand to his friend sound and safe! Despite his initial resistance, the notebook is taken away by force and a sheet of it is

literally and symbolically torn. In the same part of the film, grandfather talks about beating children: you may quit giving them their pocket money, but cannot stop beating them! In *Where Is the Friend's Home?* the notebook functions as a plural and fluid sign on which almost all ethical implications of the film are loaded. A notebook which, at the beginning of the film, signifies responsibility for and commitment to the educational principles of the adult world, becomes the notebook for the adult's dealing and trading world, and eventually fades out throughout the narrative into the sign of children's friendship, loyalty and responsibility to each other.

Beside ignorant adults, Kiarostami's films introduce some wise ones. However, these adults do not have an organically appropriate relationship with children and keep preaching and advising them to conform themselves to the customary discipline of the adult world. As an example, the old doormaker in *Where Is the Friend's Home?*, though very kind he is, symbolically fails to "keep pace" with the walking boy. Now the night has fallen and Ahmad is still searching for his friend's house in an alien village. When the old man says that he cannot walk fast when he talks, the boy replies, again symbolically and on behalf of all children of the world, "so, please don't talk." The discrepancy between the walking paces of the child and the old man represents a deep gap between their worlds. Furthermore, this is the wise and kind old man who, lost and drowned in his own past, eventually misleads Ahmad to a wrong house and makes him, after wasting much time, return to his own village empty-handed. Even with these good people, the child cannot experience that "moment of pure touching, pure contact, grasping, squeezing" (Levinas, *Proper Names* 41).

In *The Chorus* (1982), the grandfather's inability to hear, which makes him unable to open the door for his grandchildren, similarly reveals problematic connections between the two worlds. At the end of the film, children, beyond the window on the street, shout together, "grandpa, open the door," and grandfather hears nothing since he has removed his hearing aids. This crucial sequence of the film is an extraordinary representation of how the adult does not hear the child's cry of "invitation" for opening a door

of mutual understanding and friendship. Therefore, even the caring adults are literally and symbolically unable to hear the call towards the other.

In Kiarostami's films, the family is a "being that is attached to its own being" (Bernasconi and Wood 172). The family, this being concerned only with its own being, constantly imposes its value systems upon children and assigns disproportionately large tasks and duties to them without noticing their responsibility to their children. In *Where Is the Friend's Home?*, in a sequence in the class, we see a boy spending most of his time not *at* his desk but *under* it. Later in the film, through Ahmad's odyssey, when we see the boy again in the village carrying two large milk containers, and realize that this is what he does every day, it turns out that he suffers from a chronic backache. In the same film, Ahmad – the protagonist of the story – has difficulty communicating with his own mother and, after a fruitless conversation in a sequence of the film, the two are drawn into a quarrel. John Wall in *Ethics in Light of Childhood*, argues for a "generative" view of family:

To call families 'generative,' therefore, is to say that the fundamental ethical purpose of family life is to create shared worlds with others. Being human involves not just living alongside others but also making new narratives with them and responding singularly to them. Family generativity arises out of a variety of biological, psychological, social, cultural, traditional, historical, and spiritual constructions. It does not spring from nothing. But its underlying ethical purpose is neither to impose nor to overcome such conditions, but rather to reconstruct them in new ways responsive to each new person. Such is the generativity of love. It is neither self-centered nor self-sacrificial but self-decentering. (Wall 148)

To put it simply, this "generative family" is simply lacking in Kiarostami's films. Kiarostami employs a bitter and dark humour to depict the complications of the relationship between families and children. In *Homework*, for example, Kiarostami asks the child, "who checks your homework at home?" Surprisingly, the child replies that it is *him* who

checks his mother's homework. In *The Traveler*, Ghasem's mother takes him to school and asks the principal to beat him in front of her for stealing a few coins. In *Homework*, in spite of the fact that the filmmaker does not intrude the privacy of houses, the audience gets to know about the hidden horrors of the families' worlds through the students' replies to the interviewers' questions. These interviews reveal to us some bitter facts about the families in which these children are being raised – ignorant, illiterate, jobless, violent, and polygamous families where children are constantly beaten and tormented. One could claim that *Homework* represents the utmost instance of children's vulnerability:

What childhood suggests, in part, is not only that humanity contains vulnerability at its core, but also that whatever vulnerability it contains is not simply opposed to the freedom of self-empowering agency. When agency and vulnerability are dichotomized - as for example in the remarkably adult-centered rational individualism of much of modernity - vulnerability devolves into the mere absence of a human ideal: absence of self-control, of reason, of freedom, or of power. (Wall 39)

Kiarostami calls his "memories of school" as "still traumatic" (quoted in Elena 63). In his films, the educational system is characterized by constant "othering" of children, and subjecting them to normalizing and discriminative discourse, the immediate effect of which is to demolish child's creativity through surveillance and vigilance. Cathy Caruth defines "trauma" in such terms: "In its general definition, trauma is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena" (Caruth 91).

In *First Graders*, the school principal, despite the wise, fair, and responsible impression he gives, is the epitome of power, the reflection of which can be seen in the frightened and traumatized eyes of children whom he encounters. He summons them one after another and after a trial-like procedure of inspection and interrogation, gives his final "wise" verdict:

[T]he interrogations in the headmaster's office form the backbone of the film and impose a single meaning on the various events filmed by the director: this first contact with school is also the first contact with a world made up of rules, which must necessarily be learned and obeyed as quickly as possible. (Elena 61)

Gender and the formation of sexuality in children are the subjects of some of Kiarostami's works including *The Experience* and *A Wedding Suit*. In these works, puberty is represented as the bitter experience of the child's entrance into an alien and strange world of adulthood. In these films, boys' efforts to connect with the other – here, the opposite sex - are doomed to failure, since they do not belong to the social class of girls and are constantly humiliated by the social upper class.

### **Ethics of Refusal and Resistance: Moving towards Freedom**

It is in this dire condition of “child exploitation” (Saeed-Vafa and Rosenbaum 73) that Kiarostami's child characters choose to *resist* against these domineering sources of power and *refuse* the moral standards of the family and society in the hope of a higher form of ethics, i.e. freedom. Therefore, the theme of refusal in Kiarostami's films – most particularly revealed in *Where Is the Friend's Home?* and *The Traveler* – is fundamentally related to his ethical concerns.

Disobedience may be a common theme in many cinematic works, but what makes Kiarostami's work particularly remarkable is the different approach he takes from the mainstream Iranian cinema. While disobedience is commonly represented as a hero/heroine's breaking through the obstacles with bravery, intelligence and adherence to moral principles, Kiarostami's characters do not shy away from doing the morally “wrong” thing – from telling lies, for example – to protect themselves against domestic violence and restriction, and the resulted confrontation becomes an important cause of tension in the filmmaker's story lines. This kind of “relative ethics” does not distinguish “the moral” and “the immoral” in absolute terms. In *The Traveler*, Ghasem has to cheat and lie to make his dream of watching a live

soccer match come true – a dream that is not celebrated and supported but constantly suppressed and humiliated. In the breathtaking sequence of his mother reporting his theft to his headmaster, home and school join together in punishing him instead of trying to understand him. Living in a poor urban setting, Ghasem is the prototype of the millions of children all over the world who see their love of sports as the main source of self-actualization and identity. The bleak portrayal of Ghasem's condition at home and at school and the dark ending of the movie in which the exhausted Ghasem falls asleep and misses the game, reveals that Kiarostami is not very optimistic about the outcome of the child's efforts.

Similarly, in *Where Is the Friend's Home?*, Ahmad has to lie to his mother, takes significantly risky trips to an unknown environment, and finally forges his friend's homework to save him from punishment. While his socioeconomic condition seems better than Ghasem's, and his family does not appear particularly poor, the prospect of communication, understanding and support is equally dismal. The rural setting of the film, which could have raised the possibility of perhaps closer relationships and better understanding of one another, does not, in fact, make Ahmad's condition more promising than Ghasem's in that poor urban background. Ahmad is as lonely and unsupported as Ghasem is. The problem of misunderstanding, ignoring others' needs, and use of violence to face disobedience is widespread regardless of social classes and geographical positions. School is again not better than home in helping children achieve their goals. Although the ending of the story appears upbeat, Kiarostami surprises us with Ahmad's self-sacrifice that is not directed toward the cause (human failure to understand others) but towards the effect (uncompleted homework). This outcome is obviously an exception rather than a norm. From this perspective, Kiarostami appears as pessimistic as thirteen years before, when he made *The Traveler*. However, both these film reflect a quest for "individuality" or "singularity" by means of refusal and resistance: "Ethics manifests itself as a vital conflict most easily grasped as occurring between the principle of interest and the principle whereby one becomes a subject" (Gibson 148).

Out of lack of trust, children in Kiarostami's cinema build up a subculture far from the reach of adults, in which they resort to telling lies as a "self-defence mechanism" (Elena 64) against aggression and violence. Kiarostami's children are talented, inquisitive, daring, and sharp (but not innocent and otherworldly), and intend to subvert the rules with which the adults' worlds are governed. In *Breaktime* – a short film – a student is called to account and then punished for playing balls. Through a superimposition of a medium shot of a broken window on the scene of the punishment of the boy, the filmmaker creates an effective image to reveal the depth of the child's agony. After being beaten by the principal, the boy leaves the school while holding a ball in one hand and a notebook in the other through the rest of the film. This representation forms a dichotomy between the duty imposed by the world of grown-ups on the one hand, and the freedom and play of the world of children on the other, what Terry Eagleton calls, "the deathly cat-and-mouse game between law and desire" (Eagleton 143). At the end of this short film, the boy, entangled in this dichotomy, walks in the opposite direction of grown-ups' cars, and disappears over the horizon, waving for the indifferent cars which pass by and throw dust into the air. The ending of this short film could signify one of the most controversial aspects of ethics and that is "ethics of freedom". For J. M. Coetzee, "freedom [is] irresponsibility, or better, ... responsibility toward something that has not yet emerged, that lies somewhere at the end of the road" (Coetzee 246).

In 2010, Abbas Kiarostami made a short film entitled, *No*, in the form of an interview with a little girl with beautiful hair who loves acting in movies. The interviewer (Kiarostami) agrees to give her the main role as long as she fulfils one task. The single condition is that in the course of the plot, the girl's hair should be cut off. Quite surprisingly, the girl refuses to do so and decides not to act in the movie. In other words, she decides to maintain and cherish her own individuality and singularity: "Freedom would not lie in our essence but in our historically contingent singularity" (Rajchman, *Truth and Error* 109).

While Kiarostami tells the story and leaves judgment to us, there are signs to believe he is not a completely impartial bystander. His child characters, in order to achieve a higher ethical goal (freedom), have to break the society's traditional codes of conduct (respecting parents/elders) and presumably standard and accepted moral rules (honesty). Kiarostami's child heroes, entrapped in an unjust mesh of social relationships, have to make difficult ethical choices that could not be supported in ideal circumstances. They implement this refusal at times by lying, stealing, deceiving, taking unreasonable risks and ignoring the adults' norms. Interestingly, this refusal and disobedience is non-confrontational and peaceful. They ignore the rules rather than confront them.

### **Conclusion**

Human beings usually explain their own mistakes and failures by way of circumstances they have been in, but attribute others' mistakes and failures to their character. This is considered as one of the well-described biases of human cognitive system called "fundamental attribution error". Kiarostami masterly sets the plot in a way that we start to break away from this prejudice and see the supposedly immoral behavior in its socioeconomic context. We begin to ask why Ghasem has to cheat on his classmates to watch a soccer game, why he is unable to talk to his mother and more importantly, why his mother is unable to listen to him. We may even ask ourselves why we often prematurely judge others by their presumed characters rather than their true circumstances. We become curious to know how the whole story would have ended if Ahmad was accompanied and supported by his parents. What the society considers normal could be more fluid than we think. Kiarostami takes the focus of our cognitive lens from the child's behavior into the context in which this behavior happens. He redirects our ethical enquiry and helps us to see the text in the context.

Therefore, Kiarostami becomes the modern day gadfly and his cinema reminds us of the conversation Socrates had with Euthydemus. Socrates asks Euthydemus whether being deceitful is counted as being immoral. The answer is positive. He then asks whether stealing a knife from a friend who

is suicidal could be considered immoral. Euthydemus is not sure how to respond. Socrates seems to be saying that being deceitful is not immoral in all situations. Similarly, in Kiarostami's films, this refusal by itself supports and promotes a much more valuable human quality which is freedom and happiness. We love Kiarostami's characters not because they achieve much but because they either risk their lives in order to care for each other or break "stereotypes and expectations" (Saeed-Vafa and Rosenbaum 74) in order to be free. This appears to be a more relative approach to ethics in contrast with the universalist view of moral values.

At the ending scenes of *Homework*, we see one school boy who is so tormented by suppressions and wrong expectations of the adult world that he cannot tolerate school without the all-time presence of his classmate. In other words, he needs to have his classmate by his side at all times. When Kiarostami asks him to recount a poem he knows by heart, he recites a poem by Ali Mousavi Garmaroudi which is included in primary school textbooks. The recitation of the poem acts as the ending credit to *Homework* and turns out to be a "verbal irony" of what the filmmaker reveals about the world of the children. This ending not only effectively betrays the hypocrisy in teaching children a poem that is deeply inconsistent with the life they experience at home and school, but it also conveys the heart-felt yearnings of every single child in the world:

O' God of beautiful stars,  
O' God of colorful world,  
Who brought Venus,  
And the moon and the sun,  
Mountains, hills and seas,  
These beautiful fruitful trees,  
Butterfly's pretty wings,  
And nests for the birds,  
And Joy and game and strength,  
And eyes for us to see,  
And rain and snow, heat and cold.  
O' God! You brought all these,

You granted what I wished,  
Fill our hearts with happiness and joy.

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