Ethics and the Teaching Responsibilities of Faculty
by
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Introduction by
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It is my privilege—bittersweet to be sure—to introduce this lecture to honor the career and retirement of our friend and colleague, David Smith. Along with all of you here, it is difficult for me to imagine IU without him. If ever there was a scholar and a gentleman, a brilliant ambassador of this university, and an all-around wonderful member of the planet, *that* person is David Smith. His contributions to the Department of Religious Studies; the Poynter Center, which he directs; the campus; the Bloomington community; and the profession are vast, and my summary comments tonight will do little justice to the range of his achievements.

Because David is incurably modest, I want to indulge in a little professional flattery, if only because aspects of his career may not be known to all of us. David was trained at Carleton College, Yale Divinity School, and Princeton University before he came to IU to help launch the Religious Studies Department in 1967. He has been in an administrative position in all but a few of his years at IU. He was a key player when the department planned its undergraduate major, its master's degree, and its doctoral program. Four years into his career he was acting chair, and he formally assumed role of chair from 1976 through 1984. He then became director of the Poynter Center for the Study of Ethics and American Institutions, a center whose reach he has extended in countless ways.

Much, though certainly not all, of David's intellectual work has been in religion and bioethics. Indeed, he was in on the ground floor of the modern bioethics movement. Early in his career he received a fellowship at the Kennedy Institute of Bioethics at Georgetown

University, enabling him to develop work at both the theoretical and practical level. Intellectual interests sparked by that fellowship took on new directions after David spent a sabbatical in England, supported in part by a Lilly Open Faculty Fellowship. During that sabbatical, he was introduced to ideas and forms of health care that sustained his work for the next 25 years or so. Indeed, David's story is one of ever-widening circles of conversation and collaboration. While in the UK David worked as a volunteer in a hospice, an experience that complemented his work as a founder of Hospice of Bloomington. His interest in bioethics expanded even further once David assumed the role of co-editor, with Robert Veatch, of the book series in medical ethics at the IU Press, one of the premier series in the field.

In the late 1970s and into the early 1980s, David led two NEH funded summer seminars and a yearlong seminar for faculty from across the country who were interested in studying bioethics. To this day members of those groups rave about how their seminar meetings affected their teaching and writing. In the 1980s David published his most systematic book in biomedical ethics, *Health and Medicine in the Anglican Tradition.* In the 1990s, he convened an interdisciplinary group of faculty from IU, supported by a grant from NIH, that led to the book, *Early Warning: Cases and Ethical Guidance for Presymptomatic Testing in Genetic Disease.*

Ever the humanist with an interdisciplinary bent, David has recently been involved in an effort to widen the circle of conversation partners in bioethics, looking at how sociology and ethnography might enrich research in biomedicine. In the mid-1990s, he led a series of studies that developed and tested normative implications flowing from qualitative empirical studies of professionals and the persons they serve. These studies led to a volume that David edited, *Caring Well: Religion, Narrative, and Health Care Ethics.*

Directing the Poynter Center has enabled David to widen his circle of conversation partners. Poynter's mandate is broader than biomedical ethics, and David soon found himself working to establish a national conversation in ethics, the result of which was the creation of the Association for Practical and Professional Ethics, based here at IU and now including more than 600 members.

In the 1990s, David's intellectual circle expanded even further, and, drawing on his experiences in England, he found himself thinking about the morality of institutional governance and support. One result of that line of inquiry was a grant from the Lilly Endowment to support research for David's book, *Entrusted: The Moral Responsibilities of Trustees.* Another result has been ongoing collaboration with the IU Center on Philanthropy.

David's success in part lies in his ability to work so well with others. If my description of him says anything, it is that he is the model collaborator. He knows how to bring the best out of everyone with whom he works. Many of us know David as someone who's quick with a positive comment, a vote of support and encouragement. Talking to him often makes one feel *great.* But it is important to contextualize that fact, for David's criteria of greatness are not always clear. No profile of him would be complete without mentioning the fact that he roots for the Chicago Cubs. To

this day he is hopeful about them! And so after getting a great boost from David I always leave his office having to remind myself that he is drawn not only to the underdog, but to perennial losers!

But rather than write David off as a blind optimist, I think it's more accurate to say that he's a person who can spot potential. That is one reason, though not the only one, that he is such a revered teacher. He can identify promise. And I suspect many of us are in this room precisely because he had a discerning eye and encouraging voice.

Most of the collaborations I have mentioned have been local—centered here with students and faculty at IU. That will soon end, at least for awhile. David will spend next year as the visiting professor in the Institution for Social and Policy Studies at Yale University, where, as we say, he'll share the wealth.

On a more personal note, David is known as the Dick Clark of the department—not because he's a great fan of early rock and roll—but because he appears entirely unable to age. He seems forever young! And that, no doubt, is due to his spontaneous wit and sparkling good cheer.

For example, recently at a national ethics conference, some ethicists (including David) were being interviewed by a member of the press who was asking, of all things, "What is it like to be interviewed by the press? What are the challenges of communicating ethical arguments to the media? Has the press's interest in ethics increased, and if so, why?"

One of those interviewed remarked that one problem is that the media often want a moral sound bite— that typically they want ethicists simply to say "yes" or "no" to a complicated moral question. David then interjected: "Sometimes we say maybe!"

Tonight David will speak about "Ethics and the Teaching Responsibilities of Faculty." Knowing that this a topic close to his heart, I'm confident that what he has to say will not be "maybe."

Ethics and the Teaching Responsibilities of Faculty[1]

In this paper I hope to state what I think I have been up to for the past thirty-six years. I want to explain why I think teaching about ethics is important. To do that I will offer a brief history of the teaching of ethics in higher education, then turn to rationale for teaching ethics that I find important. I'll conclude with some reflections on morality and the academic community. The concluding section will have a certain sermonic quality, which I hope you will forgive. It may help to bear in mind a remark a clergy friend once made. "David," he said, "we always preach to ourselves." In these remarks I reveal not what I have done, but what I have aspired to do.

The question I want to address is "Is the teaching of ethics part of the scholar's vocation?" In one of the great essays of the twentieth century, "Science as a Vocation," Max Weber argued that it was not. Students, he said, should not look to faculty for social and political leadership. This assertion has usually been construed to mean that faculty work must be value neutral. Although I agree with Weber on much of his argument, and on some other points as well, I do hope to explain why I take a somewhat different view. There may be good reasons to teach ethics in higher education, and if there are, we should try to do it with intellectual rigor and integrity.

I begin with some remarks about the history of the teaching of ethics in American higher education. Our colleges and universities were founded with a moral purpose; this description certainly characterizes Indiana University. Most of the university's first presidents were Presbyterian ministers; they taught what we would call capstone courses in moral philosophy or theology.

Without meaning to disparage them or what they taught, I have to say that even a glance at their pictures, displayed in various places on campus, makes me nervous. It's hard not to assume a dogmatic approach, and a class that would be entirely inappropriate today.

From the late nineteenth century forward American higher education retreated from this commitment to moral instruction. Our country was becoming more heterogeneous. A kind of pan-Protestant hegemony was crumbling and anyone who wanted to defend the teaching of ethics was immediately confronted with the question "Whose ethics?" The recognition of pluralism was reinforced by an intellectual ideology of positivism: the notion that all value judgments were simply expressions of opinion, like taste in food, strictly matters of personal preference. True knowledge had to be scientifically verifiable. The demographics of pluralism and the ideology of positivism lead to moral relativism or skepticism.

Why teach ethics, and what does that mean?

The study of ethics, however, has experienced resurgence since World War II; for example, the authors of *On Being a Scientist* write that "With few exceptions, scientific research cannot be done without drawing on the work of others or collaborating with others."[2] That means, they say, that preserving a set of core values, including "honesty, skepticism, fairness, collegiality, openness,"[3] is at the heart of what science is about. If teaching about those

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[2] Committee on Science, Engineering, and Public Policy. *On Being a Scientist* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1995), p. 3.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 21.

values isn't teaching ethics, I don't know what is.

In this shift to a self-conscious affirmation of the teaching of ethics, higher education has partly been responding to a widely held perception of cultural decline and immorality in business, medicine, politics, religion, and education. American citizens look to higher education for training of professionals, and they expect that colleges and universities will train persons of probity. This may not be the most sophisticated or intellectually compelling reason for academic attention to ethics, but it is hypocritical to deny its relevance.

A more interesting intellectual reason for us to take up the teaching of ethics is recognition that moral relativism or skepticism – as opposed to pluralism – is wrong. The fact is that one can give better or worse reasons for moral judgments; some choices and forms of character are better than others. The stakes in making this point are high, particularly for those without power, for without such credible moral judgments, might makes right. (I'm reminded of the professor of ethics who said to his class at the beginning of the semester, "Any one of you who is a relativist at the end of this semester will fail." It was ingenious, for a consistent relativist could scarcely protest the blatant injustice of his policy.)

I don't mean to try to make the case here for an ethic that is rational right down to the bottom. At the end of the day it may be that ethics has to start from somewhere – with some basic presuppositions. But it now seems almost indisputable that ethics has a significant cognitive component, that argument in ethics is as logically possible as argument in any other form

of human endeavor, and that the phrase "ethical reasoning" is not an oxymoron. Assessing the moral valence of the holocaust, or racial discrimination, is not simply a matter of taste. The fact that there are lots of hard cases does not prove that we know nothing about morality.

Beyond these arguments I have found two factors important and they are certainly important to the rest of this talk.[4] The first concerns what I will call the inevitability of teaching ethics: Education alters the way people understand the world, shapes character and therefore has an imprint on the self; the alternative is ineffective education. It is impossible really to educate and to leave character unaffected.

Although I had come to this conclusion some time before, the full character- shaping power of higher education became clear to me in 1995. During that year I spent a good part of three months working in a couple of laboratories. It was a wonderful experience. I cross-bred fruit flies, attended lab meetings, streaked plates, and went to departmental seminars. The relevant point, however, is that it became clear to me how much the culture of the lab, unit or department shapes the way graduate students or post docs look at the world, their expectations and aspirations, and their sense of what their relations with other members of the lab or unit or department should be. A working scientific group is an intense learning environment.

When we really teach, we affect character, because character is related to the way one knows the world. A

paranoid person thinks the world is a certain kind of place and behaves accordingly. So do we all. To some degree becoming a serious student means becoming a different kind of person. Therefore, responsibility for the training of students carries moral responsibilities for shaping character. When I teach about the historical and critical reading of the Bible, or the myths it contains, or difficulties presented for theism by the problem of evil, I am – if I am any good – affecting the way my students see the world.

The second reason that ethics teaching is more complicated than purely cognitive education is that character and recognition of obligations are closely related to membership in communities. Academic community with all its warts, limits and general weirdness is, at the end of the day, a kind of community – as is quickly perceived by nonacademics who encounter it for the first time. Scholarship is a collective enterprise in the sense that it may best be characterized as a complex conversation going in many directions. Scientists must depend on the work of other scientists, as must cultural critics, theologians, mathematicians and members of a law faculty. Classrooms also are communities of conversation. They require intellectual leadership from faculty; they are not democracies. But they require cultivation of the virtues of respect and patience, courage and candor. The form of the faculty member's presence in the classroom and the model of the life of intellect and community is a very powerful moral force.

So, I claim, faculty must teach ethics because they can't avoid it, because the public rightly expects it, and

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[4] I should say in this connection that I am not speaking for the Department of Religious Studies or even the Poynter Center.

because the continuation of a vital academic community requires it. I have suggested that teaching ethics should attempt two things:

The first is developing cognitive skills, e.g. recognition of something as a controverted moral issue and development of facility in reasoning about such issues. This amounts to moral discernment and moral logic. The second is shaping or forming character in certain ways. There are, I suggest, some moral virtues of the educated person. The activity of the university requires the development of a morality that includes honesty, candor, justice, even love or compassion within the community. The university cannot survive without those virtues, and it is a community at home with many different cultures.

Response to objections

Important objections to what I have said come quickly to mind. Our ability to change character is limited; character is formed very early in childhood. Any attempt to change behavior is not only futile but presumptuous. I have two responses to this position:

First, on the futility point, character does change in the course of a lifetime. It may not change for everyone, but for some persons it does. The psychologist Eric Fromm argued half a century ago that it is important to distinguish *character* or the values one holds, from *temperament*, understood to be the way in which one expresses those values. We are, Fromm thought, fated with our temperament, but character growth is possible,[5] and it is, as any religious tradition, or Alcoholics

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[5] Eric Fromm. *Man for Himself: An Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Publications, Inc, 1967).

Anonymous group, or the military will attest. People do change their minds about things; although limited, moral education is not entirely futile. As we grow older, for example, we develop new vices – avarice replaces lust (or so it is rumored). We don't make over the entire character; I freely concede that there are many other, usually more powerful, influences. But sometimes the effect is great, and always what we do has an impact that is relevant on the margin. Conceding that radical changes in viewpoint are not the rule, minor changes and new patterns of reasoning can certainly be learned. It's not unrealistic to hope for some changes and even on the most pessimistic estimates, small changes will make a big difference. The trick is moral education that triggers self-reflection.

On the presumptuousness point, I completely agree with the critics. Seeing ourselves as playing the role of moral educator in other people's lives can be disconcerting. What business do we have telling anyone the kind of person they should be? The task greatly exceeds our power and prerogative. Our lives would be easier if mind and character were completely separable. But the fact is that when we fiddle with student minds, we risk affecting – or should I say hope to affect – them as persons. In my day-in and day-out teaching I am grateful that our ability to change character is limited, but that is not the same thing as having *no* responsibility. It is our business to insist on a set of characteristics or excellencies that membership in our kind of community requires. We are healthily uncomfortable about this exercise, but I think it is important to be intentional about it.

Thus my argument is simple. We are members of a distinctive kind of

community – an academic community. Faculty leaders of that community are called "professors," suggesting they have something to profess. Our subject matters are at the core of who we are, and studying them includes commitments to values, and some of those values are definitely moral values. Thus, although the label may make us uncomfortable, we are – individually and collectively – in the ethics-teaching business. We can stand for and exemplify both a set of values essential to our common work and others that are more idiosyncratic. In the remainder of my talk I want briefly to identify three dimensions of our life in which thoughtfulness about ethics is essential.

Students and teaching

When I started 36 years ago (as some readers may remember), I weighed at least 25 pounds less and had no gray hair. I was physically indistinguishable from the students, and they terrified me. Not only were they often bigger and stronger than I, they seemed remarkably sure of themselves, and they asked all kinds of reasonable questions that I could not answer. I grasped their otherness, and I was resolved to domesticate it. Thus began a mind set that lasted for some time. I would control the material, I would control the class, and – albeit in a benevolent way – I would control THEM. To be sure I got some signals about the problems with this mind set early on. In my third year (That was 1970 when students did these things more than they do now) one student came to my office hours and began a three hour session – the general topic of which was my limits as a teacher, scholar and indeed as a human being – with the question "Do you have any idea how intimidating you can be?"

Intimidating! The stupid nit, didn't he know I was scared to death? I give myself a couple of points, however, for remembering what he said.

It is possible to overreact to criticism and to adopt a style in which all authority and control, or at least too much, is surrendered. As I just said, the lecture hall or seminar room is not a democracy, but in his own way this student was getting at something that I fully grasped only as my own grown children's education progressed. I certainly wanted them in orderly classrooms in which information was learned and conceptual accuracy and clarity, not to mention intellectual integrity, reigned. But I also realized they were more than students, that they sometimes chose their courses in the most irrational ways, and that they were hungry for intellectual food presented in an attractive and palatable way. There is a built-in and healthy elitist drive in faculty work. We can't help responding to – even loving – student energy, initiative and ability. But students are vulnerable, and we have extraordinary power to affect their lives, most frequently and unsensationally by presenting subject matters in ways that no vital young person will find interesting. I concluded that before I make judgments like "she's only a mediocre student" I had better know a bit more about her than I usually do.

I am eager not to be misunderstood. I hold to the view that the subject matter is the appropriate middle term between faculty and students, and that we should not try to be therapists or pals. Mutual dedication to a subject was what Aristotle regarded as the highest form of friendship. It may lead to nonacademic forms of assistance and help, but part of my teaching

responsibility is to kindle love of the subject so that this rare kind of friendship becomes possible. That said, we must remember the power imbalance and mutual vulnerability of the teacher-pupil relationship.

Parenthetically, it's right and proper in this connection to note that students have some power over us. While they seldom throw manure on us, as they occasionally did in thirteenth century Paris, they can be good at the verbal equivalent. Much creativity is shown in course evaluations. I was struck with some student evaluations that once were published in *The Herald Times*. One student commented about a course, "I laughed, I cried, I kissed $150 goodbye" – of which the only surprise is the low dollar cost of the course. Another wrote "If I had only 10 minutes to live, I would like them to be in this class, for then they would seem like forever." My own personal favorite, fortunately unpublished, was from a student who wrote on our suitably bureaucratic form: "I didn't like the course; I didn't like the books, and I DON'T LIKE YOU." I suppose you could say that I had more than a strictly intellectual effect on that student.

I can capture what I want to say about the morality of our relations with students in one word: listening. The trouble with listening, of course, is that it takes time, but I'm afraid that I have reached a stage in life where I find it easier to announce truth as I see it than to listen to my students – or colleagues. But memory isn't so faded as to make it impossible for me to remember how hard it is to learn from someone who doesn't hear what you have to say. Listening – hard – is the first step in good teaching, or good friendship.

Collegiality

This is, perhaps, a natural place to turn to my next major point, my relations with my colleagues. I believe that I have had as fine a set of colleagues, in Religious Studies, the Poynter Center, and across the university, as anyone could hope to have. Those professional friendships are the stuff of my life, but I worry. We are people who are verbally skilled and collectively we know a lot about many different things. But those very facts can make development of lively community difficult. We are trained to attack and critique, and some of the best of us are not backward about using those skills. We tend to think of intellectual argument as war, rather than as inquiry, and we stake out positions and identify subject matters that trump everything else.

Underneath I increasingly sense the isolation and loneliness of faculty life. Some religious traditions suggest that the self is not finally alone, that it is possible for us to open our eyes and realize in Tillich's words "you are accepted." But even if someone is lucky enough to live aware of a relationship to Another, moments – perhaps a lifetime – of incomprehension, doubt and isolation seem to be inevitable.

And it is lonely in more than one way. We have an enormous and most unattractive tendency to self-pity. It's true we are unappreciated in many quarters, but it is also true that academics remain part of a fortunate group within society. Our role reminds me of Robert Dole's evaluation of the vice presidency – a position for which he was once a candidate: "Not a bad job. It's indoor work without much heavy lifting." When I think of the working life my father led as a salesman in Chicago, or the lives of many others less

fortunate, I am reminded how pervasive academic self-deception can be.

Roughly speaking, my idea about how to respond to the situation of alienation, loneliness and self-absorption in the academy is that we should get together and help each other out. It's possible on the basis of honesty. In fact too many of the communities we know have another basis. We cluster – as administrators, physicists, historians or faculty in religious studies. We form what Robert Bellah et al. call "life-style enclaves," in which the only thing that holds us together is frightened agreement on what kinds of life-style or intellectual work we reject: those of our parents, or the uneducated, or the elite, or capitalists or the middle class or of some intellectual school.

The first step out of this predicament is to substitute honest inquiry for parochialism. It calls for courage, for inquiry after new and strange truth is risky. Truth is, and always will be, a jealous god, a god whose worship has broken persons for as long as we know. A commitment to make oneself vulnerable by becoming a disciple in search of truth is a commitment to an unusually risky kind of discipleship with many inglorious martyrs. But if we are unwilling to make the commitment, we should get out of college or university life.

Parenthetically again, I think it fair to say that honesty is not always strictly observed in the academic world. Robert Thornton, a professor at Lehigh, has worked up an ingenious solution for the problem of writing letters of recommendation about persons whose qualifications are dubious. He has compiled a Lexicon of Inconspicuously Ambiguous Recommendations (LIAR). Here are some examples: If the

candidate is lazy: "You will be very fortunate to get this person to work for you." If the person is inept: "I most enthusiastically recommend this candidate with no qualifications whatsoever."

I have tried to be amusing, but we are all familiar with other examples of dishonesty that are not funny – when colleges advertise courses that are unavailable because faculty convenience is trump, or when sexual harassment is not reported on grounds of "collegiality." And there is nothing funny about dishonest letters of recommendation.

Again, I don't want to lack subtlety. We all know the problems that arise when people are always and only candid with each other. Community is impossible if we aren't willing to allow people to live with their illusions. In his play *The Wild Duck* Ibsen puts into the mouth of an alcoholic priest the suggestion that everyone must have a "life-lie" – a precarious and in some ways clearly false view of the world – in order to survive. Academics need these self-deceptions as do nurses and lawyers and people in business.

However, the way to resolve this dilemma between the demands of truth and compassion is not to surrender the truth, it is to be sensitive to the times and places and messengers of the truth – to process. It's important that I be honest with my colleagues, department and campus; it doesn't follow that honesty is the only moral principle in our relationship; another is justice and a third is respect. It is not my responsibility unceasingly to announce my version of truth from on high.

Institutions

As a last point, I want to say something about institutions.

Communities, including academic communities, are not abstractions. They have buildings, budgets, payrolls and responsibilities. These are things that rather spacey faculty members such as me often forget. My vision of a moral academic community is that it is a community of inquiry and conversation. I just said that being a member of that community entails paying a price; that price should be paid on a "pay as you go" basis. Creating community should not be postponed until tenure, or full rank, or retirement but should be seen as required now. If one waits to find the perfect job, the perfect location, the right course load before committing oneself to a group of persons who make up an institution, one will wait a long time.

Sometimes I find myself saying: "Yes, I am committed to the academic life, but just not to these particular colleagues. Yes, I want to work for a big university, but I don't want to teach large classes. Yes, I believe in collegial governance, but I haven't time to serve on that committee." Some of those reservations are right. A college or university, like a family or religious community (or any other profession), will eat one up if one lets it. I agree with a faculty member who once remarked eloquently that he would never "give away his identity to the institution." To which I would, however, add as a friendly amendment: give away, no. Sell out, never. Refuse to identify, also no; refuse to pay a price in career, also never. Identification with a clearly fallible and limited institution is hard, the price is high. But so is the price for refusing to make a serious commitment; when we commit ourselves, the potential rewards to our institutions, the society, and especially to ourselves are surprising and gratifying.

Conclusion

This brings me to the end of a most unusual scholarly lecture. And I will end on an even more unusual note. I talked about the virtues of the academic community of inquiry; I talked about honesty and courage, about justice. But I added an unconventional subject, rather slipped it in without any explanation. It was love.

I don't mean to be cloying about this, or sentimental, or to confuse the university with a family or lovers. But I do mean to suggest that there is more to academic life in community than respect, justice and truth. There is unwillingness to abandon students who are bored or in trouble, easy agreement to teach undesirable courses or at inconvenient times so that a colleague can get a break or help, willingness to serve on that one-too-many committee that the dean or chair asks for. Balancing love and justice is not easy; I mean to make no case for martyrdom. But without love the people perish.

William Buckley once wrote that he would rather be governed by the first 40 people in the Boston telephone directory than by the Harvard faculty. We are not now, nor for the past 36 years have we been either saints or heroes. But we can find the courage to be honest, to listen and seek justice, and to share power. The community we have glimpsed and can create is a moral community of respect, justice and love. And I cannot imagine better sisters and brothers in pursuit of that community than you have been.