
Teaching Ethics in the University

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Should the university be a place where students are actively helped to deepen their powers of moral understanding and appreciation? That question will define my theme here. I take it as a given that the university ought to be a place where moral learning occurs, and occurs not just incidentally and informally. The real question for me is how we can effectively be that place. What do students need for their moral education? What do we give them?

I will have a few unkind words about the moral education our modern universities offer, and I will suggest that we do not give our students very much, or very much that's useful.

The university has three resources for students: a library, a faculty and a curriculum. The faculty of modern universities is well trained to carry out its apparent principal function, which is to spin yet finer and finer threads of abstract theory and to refine formal methodologies to the point where technique overwhelms substance. I suspect most academic output nowadays could easily meet some standard like OSHA's standard for the presence of benzene in the workplace: Substance makes up less than 10 parts per billion of scholarship.

Curriculum in our institutions of higher learning reflects the same disciplinary imperatives that drive contemporary scholarship. Course offerings are fragmented across endless departmental lines, and graduation requirements, along with professional school admissions standards, drive students toward a narrow disciplinary grounding. Our universities give only lip service to the goal of a broadly based foundation in the liberal arts and sciences for all students.

Now, this situation doesn't mean that students can't stumble across ethics in the curriculum. On the contrary. The curriculum is easily adjustable to incorporate new academic fashions, and ethics nowadays is box office boffo. Academics are not slow to see where the action is.

In his 1982 book, *Beyond the Ivory Tower*, Derek Bok, president of Harvard University, reported that more than 12,000 courses in practical moral problems were offered in our colleges and universities.¹ Imagine what the number must be today! The business school, the law school, the medical school, the engineering school, the journalism school, the agricultural school — you name it, and it's teaching ethics. I think the only school on my campus at Maryland where you can't take an ethics course is library science. But give it

time. There must be moral dilemmas in classification and circulation we haven't dreamed of yet!

So there is no shortage of ethics taught in the university. But do these courses add up to a moral education? Is there any reason to suppose that they do any good or that they are well taught? Your average professor of bovine science will do his very best, I am sure, but his agriculture ethics course is likely to show a singular emphasis upon the ruminative virtues. His horizons, shall we say, are limited, and the same is true of his colleagues in journalism, business, engineering and elsewhere.

Graduate education creates disciplinary specialists, not broadly learned teachers; academic advancement comes from plowing one's own disciplinary furrows, not from learning the rudiments of other disciplines and acquiring a rich grasp of human affairs in general. The university offers no reward for catholicity of learning or broadness of vision. The dairy science professor who rummages through Trollope, Cicero and the Koran instead of doing the latest herd management theory will soon be an ex-dairy science professor.

Derek Bok, whom I mentioned a moment ago, is very much in favor of universities offering courses that touch on practical moral problems. But he is likewise concerned about how these courses can be taught well. Here is what he says about qualifications for teaching them:

Instructors must have an adequate knowledge of moral philosophy, so that they can select the most useful readings for their students and bring forth the most illuminating theories and arguments that have been devised to cope with recurring ethical dilemmas. Effective teachers must also have a reasonable knowledge of the field of human affairs to which their course is addressed. Otherwise, they will neither seem credible nor succeed in bringing students to understand all the practical implications and consequences of choosing one course of action over another. Finally, instructors must know how to conduct a rigorous class discussion that will elicit a full consideration of the issues without degenerating into a windy exchange of student opinion.²

Bok says these demands are "not insuperable," but they look pretty daunting to me. Even leaving aside the part about knowing how to lead a

rigorous class discussion, how many of your colleagues have both a command of moral philosophy and a working knowledge of dairy science?

Well, you say, here's what we can do: Pair up philosophers with specialists in other disciplines to teach these courses. Novel idea!

The problem with this solution is that although philosophy is, indeed, the queen of the sciences, academic philosophy is just one more disciplinary specialty given-over to theory mongering. Philosophers are no more educated in morality than their colleagues at the dairy barn; they are trained in moral theory, which bears about the same relation to moral life that fluid mechanics bears to milking a cow. Ethics courses taught by philosophers are hotbeds of what I will call, a bit ungenerously, the Philosopher's Conceit, which is the belief that moral theories are devices for attacking and solving moral problems. The student in an ethics class is typically armed with a smattering of utilitarianism, a slice of natural law, a dose of existentialism and a pocketful of social contracts, and then set to solving moral problems according to her favorite view.

I'm not making this up. I'm not even exaggerating very much! One distinguished philosopher, characterizing the common sense of the profession a few years ago, observed that

[p]hilosophical theories in ethics, such as utilitarianism, do not purport to be *philosophies of* (or about) the morality. . . [of some group], but are offered as practical first-level alternatives, by which anyone who believed in them, might attempt to solve the practical problems which confront him daily.³

A more recent, extensive survey of ethics teaching in colleges and universities shows how deeply philosophy teachers are wedded to the view that

normative ethical theories. . . offer a means of determining in specific circumstances whether an actual or proposed course of action is right. . . . Normative theories compete as to the best general means of arriving at particular normative judgments. . . . To illustrate how each theory works, the instructor usually shows how it applies to specific. . . problems. To apply utilitarianism, for example, to the question of abortion. . .

and on and on: You get the picture.⁴

The Philosopher's Conceit rests on a very elementary but nevertheless common mistake — confusing moral theory with moral life. A moral education is an education in how to live the moral life, and any proper pedagogy of moral education must start with a *description* — a rich, articulated, *accurate* description — of what the moral life is. It must start with the *vocabulary* of moral criticism, assessment and aspiration that makes up the moral life. It must start with *models of success* at leading the moral life, to know where a good education will lead.

Moral life is not life invented from scratch using some philosopher's theory or principle. Rather, it is life negotiated in a world already structured through and through with moral purposes, duties, hazards, authority, roles, ways of life and understanding, ethical traditions — and these supply the languages and the moves available to us.

Consider: I'm standing in line at the ticket office, and somebody pushes in ahead of me. I'm angered. His nerve! I want to say, "Hey, buddy, the line starts back there." But do I want to make a scene? What if he becomes belligerent? Besides, waiting one more turn isn't that big a deal, is it? But wait a minute, it's not right that he gets to do this without a peep. I can't let him just walk all over me. "Hey buddy," I say. . . .

Or: I'm standing in line and someone breaks into the line *behind* me. What a jerk, I'm thinking. Somebody ought to tell that guy a thing or two. Well, nobody behind me is complaining, so maybe they don't care. Besides, who elected me to tell him off? Maybe I should mind my own business. But, look, *somebody* ought to say something. If I speak up, though, people might think I'm just being pushy. Maybe the others in line back there don't want a scene. Ah, it's their problem anyway. Forget it.

That's the moral life, and you can file this example of it under "A" for "Admonition." When is it appropriate to admonish people, and how should we do it? That's the first question explored in the volume I lifted this example from, a volume called *A Book of Jewish Ethical Concepts*.⁵ It begins with "admonition," "advice" and "anger" and works its way through the alphabet, summarizing thousands of years of biblical and rabbinical reflections on the moral life. I could have picked any other source: the sermons of Bishop Butler, the maxims of La Rochefoucauld, Mother Goose, Gloria Vanderbilt, Miss Manners — any of the innumerable sources of reflection and daily

casuistry about the small and large decencies of life, the snares of ambition and self-deception, the projects worthy of our whole-hearted devotion, and the duties of our station. These sources and others like them are the road maps to the moral life: They give the place names, draw the boundaries and chart the highways and byways. And it's as busy a territory as any ever sketched by Rand McNally.

Learning to be at ease in that world — to maneuver deftly, to see deeply, to travel successfully — that is the first end of moral education. It's an achievement that is more likely to be impeded than aided by the Philosopher's Conceit. Moral education means providing a rich moral vocabulary; moral theory supplies an impoverished and generic language. Moral practice speaks in terms of betrayal, good humor, generosity, honor, inconstancy, modesty, guilt, double-dealing, self-denial, pride, charity, trustworthiness, spite, kindness, treachery, cheerfulness, disgrace, obtuseness, surliness, courtesy, greed, atonement, cruelty, stinginess, slander, good heartedness, patience, venality and distress. Moral theory speaks in terms of utility, rational agreement, universalizability or respect for persons. Trying to confront and make sense of the moral world with only utility in hand, or universalizability, or whatever, is like trying to build a cabinet with only a saw. You might get something out of the effort, but it will be a pretty botched job!

This fact is dimly apparent even to philosophers, who now increasingly find themselves in the professional schools, mingling with a worldly crowd. Consequently, they tend to lose their nerve about dispatching moral problems with a single fundamental principle and instead offer us the whole pack. You've got your Principle of Beneficence ("Be good to people") and your Principle of Autonomy ("Don't make people be good to people") and your Principle of Utility ("Be good to lots of people"). It's usually a short list. Justice and Truthfulness should be there, some say. Others demur, claiming those two principles are derivative from the basic three.

The number doesn't matter, in any case, because the problem with this way of thinking is that it represents the whole moral world in one-dimensional space. Moral problems become conflicts of principles, and you solve them by balancing the competing principles. A leading medical ethics text describes a father who is fearful of donating a kidney to save his daughter's life and

who importunes his doctor to lie for him, to tell his family that his kidneys are not a match. The doctor faces a MORAL DILEMMA, according the text: Does he lie for the father to avoid dividing and wrecking the man's family, or does the Principle of Truth-telling outweigh the Principle of Avoiding Bad Consequences?⁶ This way of representing the doctor's problem turns a moral world into a Flatland.

In the real moral world, the doctor's lying would not look like the outcome of a contest between competing principles. Rather, it would look like a thoughtless weakness, a flight from the discomfort of seeing the father embarrassed and the family in turmoil. Get hold of yourself, we'd want to say to the doctor. Your job is not to keep families from breaking up or to save people from their cowardice. If you refuse to lie for the father, then perhaps he will face up to what he ought to do. Perhaps not. Perhaps the family will be thrown into turmoil, but out of that turmoil they may find the resources to stay together. Perhaps not. Whatever happens, this family's got to work out its own destiny in this matter, whether it does well or badly. You've got your responsibilities, and they don't include saving fathers from coming face to face with their own cowardice. The father has a priest and friends who can counsel him and his family. Don't kid yourself that it's your business to keep the world aright. You're not conscientiously balancing competing principles, you're shirking from an unpleasant duty, from an ugly moment.

Anyway, that is how I think we would start to address the doctor in the real moral world. If he had a persuasive answer to make, it would draw from the same common ground: a structure of institutions, practices and actors, with their distinctive responsibilities, their special capacities and their unique temptations.

The large principles philosophers use would be harmless if they simply served as "chapter headings," so to speak, and the "chapters" went on to talk in detail about the varied and distinctive features of the moral life. Of course, then the principles would be doing little genuine work. The distinctive temptation of philosophers, who are the curators and caretakers of the world of principles, is to give the big principles a real job.

Now, it would be truly advantageous to us philosophers if great principles *were* the right stuff and indispensable to good moral thinking. It would be easier to establish the need to provide us with high-paying jobs in law schools, medical schools and business schools. After all, even the

experienced surgeon who's up to his elbows in gore every day, even the hard-nosed lawyer who turns widows out into the street without a tear — even they become woozy and faint in the presence of principles. Philosophers to the fore! We know how to handle those babies!

Now, I've labored the philosophers pretty heavily here not because they are particularly bad people — in fact, I think they are the best of people! — but because they are centrally located at the crossroads of ethics teaching in the university, at the crossroads of those 12,000, or 18,000, or 20,000 practical ethics courses.

Pair up philosophers with the professors of business, journalism and engineering — that was our starting point a few pages back, and I've been trying to offer some second thoughts on that idea. But what if no pairing up is done? When the Professor of Journalism has used up all of his lore about the professional ideals of journalists in the third week of his fifteen-week ethics and journalism course — when the Professor of Dairy Science has found that contemplating the place of the cow in the larger scheme of things still leaves large gaps in his syllabus for the ag ethics course — these good professors are unlikely to retire to their studies to rummage through Cicero, Trollope and the Koran. Instead, they are quite naturally going to hasten off to the philosophy department and the philosophy books. And, of course, we know what they'll find there. Grateful for any course filler they can get, they will soon be testing their students on how Kant would differ from Mill on the morality of farm subsidies or exit polls.

I've been grouching and groaning about what a moral education in the university is not. Let me turn briefly to saying what it is. It is training in three things — sensibility, imagination and reasoning.

Sensibility is our capacity to respond directly to moral situations. I'll explain what I mean with an example, the parable that Nathan tells David in 2nd Samuel:

[T]here were two men in the city: the one rich, and the other poor. The rich man had exceeding many flocks and herds: But the poor man had nothing, save one little ewe lamb, which he had bought and nourished up: and it grew up together with him, and with his children: it did eat of his own meat, and drank of his own cup, and lay in his bosom, and was unto him as a daughter. And there came a traveler unto the rich man, and he spared to take of his own flock

and of his own herd, to dress for the wayfaring man that was come unto him; but took the poor man's lamb and dressed it. . . . And David's anger was greatly kindled against the man; and he said unto Nathan, As the Lord liveth, the man that has done this thing shall surely die: And he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.⁷

The reader of this story is likely to have the same reaction as David, a reaction not mediated through the abstract subsumption of the concept "selfishness" under the concept "wrongness" but directly responsive to the palpable ugliness of the rich man's behavior. Sensibility is knowing what the ugliness of evil looks like, and the beauty of goodness.

But sensibility is as much intellectual as emotional. It requires concepts for its refinement, concepts that direct and guide its recognition of good and evil in their many guises. A story like the parable of the rich man and the poor man anchors our understanding of selfishness and guides our future reactions to other instances of selfish behavior. A moral education carries this process to greater and greater complexity, letting students see in real life, in drama and stories, and in history, exemplifications of the virtues and vices, of failed and successful lives, of duty done and shirked, of harmony and discord, of the melancholy and pessimism that make all experience taste like dust and the optimism and cheerfulness that let nothing defeat or crush them.

What kind of curriculum trains sensibility? A solid, general liberal arts curriculum.

Along with sensibility goes imagination. Moral response is response to particular situations. An apt response requires knowing both what the situation *is* and what the possibilities in it are. To be in a situation and see it for what it *is*, is very hard, perhaps the hardest of all moral tasks. To see a situation for what it is means to see it not just as it looks from your point of view but as it looks from other perspectives — the perspectives of the other persons who are in it, of those who might judge it from afar, of those looking from the widest angle and the most distant vantage. This task takes imagination. Imagination is the power of taking images apart, of taking the given of experience and mentally rearranging it, manipulating its parts, adding, subtracting, making new juxtapositions and new alignments, turning them this way and that to see what they look like. It is only by imagination that we can escape ourselves and see

the world as it might be seen by not-ourselves. It is only by imagination that we can enlarge our point of view to encompass the views of others.

Imagination feeds off experience and grows through exercise. The same education that trains sensibility builds imagination. Through living vicariously the historical or fictional lives of others, we take up their points of view. Through experiencing music, art and poetry, we encounter the plasticity of nature and the power of creativity — and all these elements shape the sympathetic imagination that is necessary to good moral responses.

What kind of curriculum educates imagination? A solid, general liberal arts curriculum.

Sensibility, imagination — and reasoning: Reasoning is the third focus of moral education. Morality is a social exercise of justification and argument. We accuse and stand accused. We pass judgment and receive judgment. We defend ourselves and others. So a moral education is an education in moral reasoning. All parts of a curriculum train reasoning — mastering the protocols of scientific experimentation, learning the canons of historical detection, solving mathematical problems — but education in distinctively moral reasoning comes from two places. First, it comes from the same exercises that educate sensibility and imagination.

Moral reasoning is commonly reasoning by analogy. We compare or contrast one case with another. The conceptual richness provided in the education of sensibility and imagination sharpens our powers of discrimination and makes our contrasts and comparisons more illuminating and convincing. The second place in which moral reasoning is educated is in practicing the grammar of moral argument. Here, attention to structure is important. Students need to see how moral reasons behave — how sometimes they are overridden, sometimes defeated; how sometimes they are limited in scope, sometimes in force; how sometimes they exclude other reasons and sometimes compete; how sometimes they arise from our own actions and sometimes not. Students need to distinguish revenge and retribution, desert and entitlement, reason and cause, hurt and harm, justification and excuse, ideal and actuality, wants and interests. It helps students to learn when their teachers are adept at this moral grammar.

In short, the moral education that students need is the responsibility and result of an entire liberal arts and sciences curriculum, not specialized ethics courses that merely reflect the disciplinary

fragmentation that already exists in the university. The existence of 20,000 practical ethics courses does not mean we in the university are serious about the moral education of our students. If we were really serious, we would see that our students *all* got a substantial grounding in the liberal arts and sciences. We would not let them take all their courses in the dairy department, grafting on the occasional agricultural ethics course in which the students can learn new and principled ways to defend milk price supports. Or, if this is too utopian and ag ethics it must be,

at least we could reward our good professor of bovine science for taking the time to rummage through Cicero, Trollope and the Koran — in short, for trying to acquire a smattering of that liberal learning we can't afford to give his students.

But this is utopian thinking, too, I fear. The imperatives of the modern university mean we are not going to have a faculty and a curriculum much different than we have now. All is not hopeless, however, for every university still has that one glorious resource for moral learning — the library!

¹Derek Bok, *Beyond the Ivory Tower: Social Responsibilities of the Modern University* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 123.

²*Ibid.*, p. 133.

³Kurt Baier, "Indoctrination and Justification," in James F. Doyle, ed., *Educational Judgments* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 74.

⁴Bernard Rosen, "The Teaching of Undergraduate Ethics," in Daniel Callahan and Sissela Bok, eds., *Teaching Ethics in Higher Education* (New York: Plenum Press, 1980), p. 175. For recent examples in action, see Annette Baier, "Hume, the Woman's Moral Theorist?" in Eva Feder Kittay and Diana T. Meyers, eds., *Women and Moral Theory* (Totowa, N. J.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1987), p. 39, and the Kittay-Meyers introduction, p. 8.

⁵Abraham P. Bloch, *A Book of Jewish Ethical Concepts* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1984), p. 13.

⁶See James F. Childress, "The Normative Principles of Medical Ethics," in Robert Veatch, ed., *Medical Ethics* (Boston: Jones and Bartlett, 1989), pp. 29-35.

⁷II Samuel 12: 1-4.