Ethics, the University, &Society

"What can universities do and what should they do," asks Harvard's president,"to help students achieve higher ethical standards?"

by Derek Bok

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TOWARD A VIABLE PROGRAM OF MORAL EDUCATION

The current controversy over the teaching of ethics echoes a dispute dating back at least to ancient Greece. In fifth century Athens, two schools of thought emerged on how to carry out the critical task of teaching ethics and civic responsibility. The traditional view relied on exhorting the young to do the proper thing and punishing them when they failed. The newer way, urged by Socrates, sought to teach people to know the good by provoking them to think about fundamental moral aims and dilemmas. Socrates argued that those who had not learned to reason about such questions could not apply their principles to the shifting circumstances they would face in later life. In this, he was surely correct. Yet Socrates sometimes talked as if knowledge alone would suffice to insure virtous action. He did not stress the value of early habituation, positive example, and obedience to rules in giving students the desire and self discipline to live up to their beliefs and to respect the basic norms of behavior essential to civilized communities. For this neglect, he was savagely attacked. It fell to Aristotle to see the wisdom of combining both traditions to help young people acquire not merely an ability to think clearly about ethical problems but the desire and will to put their conclusions into practice.

How can a university help students to develop the desire and the will to adhere to moral precepts without resorting to forms of indoctrination inimical to the academy?

In the contemporary university, as in ancient Greece, the key question is how to combine education in moral reasoning with a broader effort to teach by habit, example, and exhortation. The ability to reason is essential to help us make our way through all the confusing dilemmas and conflicting arguments that abound in an era when society's consensus on issues of value has disintegrated under the weight of cultural diversity, self-serving rationalization, technological change, and other complexities of modern life. But moral reasoning alone may not be enough to cause us to behave morally. How, then, can a university go further and help students to develop the desire and the will to adhere to moral precepts without resorting to forms of indoctrination inimical to the academy?

The very question will make many people uneasy. The history of higher education is studded with efforts to develop character that in retrospect seem quaint, ineffective, or

downright objectionable. More often than not, such endeavors have degenerated into crude attempts to impose particular doctrines or petty rules of behavior. Nevertheless, moral education is too important to discard merely because of past failures. Besides, universities cannot avoid the task whether or not they relish the responsibility. Like it or not, they will affect the moral development of their students by the ways in which they administer their rules of conduct, by the standard they achieve in dealing with ethical issues confronting the institution, by the manner in which they counsel their students and coach their athletic teams. The only question is whether they choose to proceed deliberately and with forethought. Let us consider, then, how an institution could construct a program to help its students to enhance not only their capacity to perceive moral issues and to think about them clearly but their ability to put their ethical beliefs into practice. Having described what such a program might look like, we can then ask whether the attempt is worth making.

Early Steps.The first weeks that students spend at a university are often critical in shaping their attitudes toward the institution and their expectations of what they will take away from their experience. Never again are they likely to be so attentive to what the institution says or so open to advice about what aspirations and values matter most. As a result, colleges that are concerned about moral education will need to emphasize this aspect of the undergraduate experience at the very outset in catalogues and welcoming speeches.

Much the same applies to professional schools as well. When I came to Harvard Law School as a student, I was plunged immediately into the mysteries of early English case law. Not a word about the role of the legal profession in upholding justice. No mention of the importance of learning to reconcile the lawyer's duty to his client with his larger duty to the legal system. These were opportunities too valuable to be missed. No one should begin professional school without being reminded that to acquire professional expertise is to acquire power and that it is dangerous to wield such power without learning to use it responsibly.

Ethics and the Curriculum. Although the traditional liberal arts curriculum may not automatically provide an adequate moral education, it undoubtedly helps in many ways to develop ethical awareness and moral reasoning. The study of literature can awaken one's conscience by making more vivid the predicament of others. Traditional courses in ethics can provide a philosophical foundation for thinking precisely about moral issues. Studying the social sciences can help students to understand the causes and effects of various policies and practices and thus appreciate their moral significance more precisely. Indeed, almost any well-taught course can strengthen the capacity to think more carefully about intellectual problems, including ethical issues. Together, these experiences help to explain why several studies have found that young people continue to develop their powers of moral reasoning so long as they remain in school or university and usually cease to do so when their formal education comes to an end.

Yet by themselves, traditional courses in the liberal arts do not go far enough.Neither history nor the classics have yielded a sufficiently compelling normative vision to justify the hopes of a Jowett or a Burckhardt that studying these subjects would enable students

to learn how to lead a virtuous life.Humanistic disciplines have become too preoccupied with other concerns to give close attention to ethical questions, and most professors in these fields do not feel competent to teach such material. Besides, courses in the liberal arts are deliberately nonvocational and hence are unlikely to consider the complicated moral dilemmas that arise within the professions.

These are the gaps that the new courses in applied and professional ethics seek to fill. Properly taught, they can yield important benefits. By studying problems that commonly arise in personal and professional life, students will be less more likely to perceive moral dilemmas they would otherwise ignore. By finding that these dilemmas raise issues that are susceptible to careful reasoning and argument, students will be less inclined, not more, to believe that every ethical view is entitled to tolerance and respect. By learning to analyze moral issues more rigorously, students will realize that often such problems *do* have reasonably clear solutions, given basic ethical premises that almost all human beings share.

Skeptics will reply that courses in moral reasoning have no effect on *behavior,* but this criticism seems overdrawn. To be sure, no instruction can suffice to turn a scoundrel into a virtuous human being. But most young people arrive at the university with decent instincts and a genuine concern for others. For them, courses that foster an ability to detect ethical issues more perceptively, to think about them more carefully, to understand more clearly the reasons for acting morally seem likely not only to train their minds but to have a positive effect on their behavior as well. Such evidence as there is seems to confirm this supposition.*

In view of these benefits, there is ample reason to encourage students to take classes devoted to ethical dilemmas arising in their personal or professional lives. The question then arises whether to offer special courses on this subject or to include material on ethical dilemmas in regular courses where such issues

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*There is little correlation between ethical *beliefs* and ethical *behavior*. Countless experiments have confirmed what common sense would tell us: that a host of circumstances--personal danger, fear of disapproval, lack of forethought, the urging of others, the presence of fatigue or stress--can keep people from putting their convictions into practice. Yet a number of studies have found not only that discussion courses in applied ethics have a modest but positive effect on the quality of moral reasoning, but that higher levels of moral reasoning are positively correlated with various types of moral behavior, such as refusing opportunities to steal, disregarding orders to harm another person, or living up to prior agreements. Other research has shown that certain types of people are much more desirous of living by their beliefs and do so to a much greater extent, than those who have a more situation-oriented approach or who think little about ethical standards. Still other psychologists report that people who have learned to be more precise about what they believe and how their beliefs apply to real problems are more likely to act according to their opinions. At the very least, therefore, the evidence

suggests that courses in moral reasoning will have some beneficial effect on the conduct of some people, some of the time arise naturally out of the material. Both alternatives have merit.It is undoubtedly important, at least in professional schools, to encourage faculty members in a variety of courses to discuss ethical issues arising naturally from the subject matter in their classes. Only a comprehensive effort of this kind will make the point that ethics is not simply a specialized topic confined to a separate world but a subject that is relevant to all aspects of professional life. At the same time, without courses specifically devoted to moral problems, there will be no one to teach the subject in depth, no one to carry on sustained writing in the field, no one to whom other faculty members can turn for advice on how to deal with ethical questions arising in their own courses. Under such conditions, efforts to insert ethical issues into the regular curriculum will almost certainly wither. A wise faculty, therefore, will seek to provide *both* special courses in applied ethics *and* opportunities to discuss moral problems as they emerge in other subjects throughout the curriculum.

The experience of the Business School illustrates this point. Years ago, the faculty undertook to insert ethical issues into the regular course material. A survey by the Visiting Committee, however, revealed that instructors rarely spent much time on these questions and often skipped over them entirely. More recently, the school has hired specialists in ethics to teach elective courses, but these courses are taken by only a minority of students and find little reinforcement elsewhere in the curriculum. Having tried each method by itself with unsatisfactory results, the school is now launching a more promising effort to pursue both approaches simultaneously. In similar fashion, after developing a special set of courses in the Core Curriculum devoted to moral reasoning, the College is now making new efforts to help professors in a variety of other courses to introduce ethical issues related to the material they teach.**

to be continued

**This approach deserves attention in treating other components of the Core Curriculum, such as quantitative reasoning, expository writing, and foreign languages. It is dangerous to confine such instruction to specialized courses. Unless the skills involved are called upon in other courses of the curriculum, they may atrophy by the time students graduate.