

Alternative Methods for the Teaching of Ethics

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THE STATUS OF ETHICS INSTRUCTION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Since publication by The Hastings Center of the results of its very well-received, two-year study titled simply, *The Teaching of Ethics in Higher Education*, no comparable survey or analysis has appeared (1). The Hastings study focused on graduate education, with emphasis on professional schools. At the time, no comparable study had been made of undergraduate education in ethics. During the intervening years, nothing matching its scope has been tried, nor has the Center announced plans for a comparable follow-up study.

The Hastings study continues to be impressive and helpful. The fact is, that many positive developments have occurred because of its publication in 1980. For example, some surveys of ethics course offerings in particular fields have been done, enhanced public discussion and media treatment have become commonplace, both undergraduate and graduate courses in professional ethics have proliferated, and institutes and centers for ethical study and research have come into existence in universities and in other settings for continuing professional education.

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Nevertheless, despite these many very desirable developments in mainstream higher education in our colleges and universities, comprehensive, qualitative, in-depth changes in the general moral instruction in university settings seems to have occurred only rarely. One hears the same kinds of criticisms of the quality of moral discourse and courses in ethics at universities today as were common in 1980, when the report appeared.

The study begins with an account of the erosion of the place of moral philosophizing from its capstone role in college education in the nineteenth century, and its subsequent, regular displacement throughout this century, due largely to the increasingly intense specialization within the university curricula. The development of higher education retains these characteristics. The demands of specialized curriculum development, especially for professional preparation, show mostly more movement toward more of the same displacement by specialization. In the background, a growing group continues to raise a critical voice about the need for more humanizing and spiritualizing learning experiences, while the possibility of finding time and course design for such experiences seems to diminish space.

In addition, the combination of entrenched subjectivism, especially in contemporary Western philosophy, along with the claims by other disciplines of "value-free" analysis and language, continues to characterize the majority of college curricular presentations. By 1975, with the exception typically of a very few courses in some philosophy departments and some admittedly inadequate attempts in some professional schools, the study indicated that courses in technique and scientific theory had nearly completely eclipsed the presentation of ethics. Ethics had fallen on hard times as an integral academic discipline in the study of philosophy at most nondenominational universities and colleges and, as a practical or applied discipline, it was, with some exceptions, mostly in medicine and somewhat in law, on the border of intellectual disrepute.

In the aftermath of the veritable gorge of public scandals in the 1990s from Wall Street leverage cupidity to banking and finance scandals to doctored medical research to battered children to ruined environment to a nearly secret war in the Mideast to morally bizarre Congressional hearings for federal appointments, signs have appeared in universities of much more formal ethical programmatic activity. At the same time, however, there is scant evidence of growth and conscious development of seriously reflective understanding of the moral dimensions of individual and social choice since 1980. The very same signs seen as negative and specifying at that time in the continuing aftermath of Viet Nam and Watergate have their

counterparts today in current widespread descriptions of the American experience of individual consciousness and public policy.

Because there has been no Hastings update and because there are no studies indicating clearly intensive reform of curricula, it seems reasonable to assume that change in the presentation of ethics in higher education since the Hastings study in 1980 has been at best incidental rather than substantial, mostly a matter of reduplication of programs that nearly everyone conceded were inadequate. The medical ethics programs at Georgetown University and the University of Washington, for example, are outstanding, but we needed to hear more about them. On the other hand, it seems that if there had been dramatically outstanding exceptions, they would not have escaped notice. None seems to have surfaced in management education or engineering for instance, nor in pharmacy or psychology, nor in any of the conventionally accepted health professions, for that matter; all of which, however, have been undergoing otherwise radical changes in their educational development and presentation.

The Hastings study indicated that in 1975, against the background of dispute among academic philosophers about the worth of "applied ethics," one-quarter of the ethics courses listed (significantly, not necessarily actually taught) were under the aegis of philosophy departments, with the remaining three-quarters spread under various headings throughout the rest of the university curricula. Resistance to adding ethics courses had been growing apace to match the increasing perceived need to augment courses in technical areas. Research methodology in ethics was disdained as "soft" research (as distinguished from the quantitative, analytical, statistically verifiable, "hard," or scientific research).

Undergraduate training in ethics which supplied for many of the professions was mostly externally financed, elective, team-taught, or interdisciplinary, with little philosophic content, mostly using the case method, and issue-oriented. The study described these courses as hampered by lack of scholarly material. There was a strong sense on the part of many that the faculty had inadequate preparation to teach courses in ethics and consequently difficulty in getting students to take ethics courses as seriously as the more vocation-oriented courses.

PRESENT PERSPECTIVE

Despite the increased programming, primarily in applied ethics, is the situation dramatically different today? Do students (and faculty for that matter) at our universities today, seem to be more, or even as much, in process of developing sharper ethical analysis or deeper moral sensitivity

than their predecessors of a decade ago? Do professionals in real work and real time operate generally with any assurance that their successors, in any field, are entering practice better prepared in knowledge of ethics than they themselves were when they began?

Regarding professional schools, the study criticized the dearth of courses involving reflective, contextual self-analysis with the following observation, it is striking how few professional schools offer students an opportunity to examine the nature of their profession—its historical roots, its function in society, its sociological characteristics, and its assumptions about the political and social order, as the Hastings study suggests:

Such questions will of course arise during a professional education, but few professional schools seem to think it valuable to confront them in any systematic fashion. If that is the case even with the professions themselves, it is easy to understand why courses in professional ethics, which inevitably involve the nature of the professions in question, find they must operate in an atmosphere that is cool at best and at times positively hostile. (1), p. 37)

Is there a substantial difference today in professional school curricula from this situation criticized seventeen years ago? At that time, most of those responsible for continuing courses or beginning courses in professional and applied ethics had little or no formal preparation either in general or applied ethics. Many of those who taught then still teach today, or they are succeeded by their former students whom they inadequately taught then. During this time, the drive to change the curricula, to set ethics in a central role in training professionals has not materialized, not least because a supply of new professors who believe in that central role has not been developed within the continuum of the professional educational communities.

Even the traditionally strongest traditions in graduate ethical training, medicine and law, are largely reactionary and issue driven, depending still almost entirely—some would say excessively pragmatically—on case methodology. The point is that the increasing awareness about the need for training and education in ethics during the past decade has produced inadequate results and a lack of in-depth appreciation of sophisticated moral reasoning and informed moral reflection.

As background to consideration of postsecondary education in ethics, the foregoing remarks should help point to the fact that a serious problem remains. While the past two decades have witnessed a great increase in interest in developing programs treating ethics in the university and its professional schools, the quality of intellectual discourse has only been

weakly affected and the establishment of moral evaluation throughout the curricula has not been strongly enhanced.

The title selected for this chapter is "Alternative Methods of Teaching Ethics." Actually it should have the title, "Alternative Methods of Teaching Teachers Ethics." The premise of the essay is that the emphasis in teaching ethics certainly needs changing, but neither primarily nor solely on the basis of course content or course orientation. As the philosophers would have it, changes in course content and course orientation are necessary but not sufficient changes.

Changes in format and curriculum clearly remain crucial. Rather, the primary need seems to emphasize faculty training. Nor is this point new. It is made very strongly in the Hastings study as well.

TEACHING TEACHERS OF ETHICS

While the study denies the necessity of a full graduate training in ethics as a condition of teaching courses in applied and professional ethics, it states that the field of ethics should have a privileged place in the background and preparation of any teacher of such a course:

By a "privileged place" we mean simply that no one can claim competence to teach ethics without some familiarity with the history, the modes of reasoning, and the concepts of moral philosophy or moral theology. That would seem such an obvious point that one might wonder whether it needs making at all. Unfortunately, whether because of a resistance to grappling with moral theory, or because a number of fields include within their domain the study of "values" (particularly in education and the social sciences), many teachers appear to feel no strong compulsion to familiarize themselves with moral philosophy or moral theology. We believe this to be a serious mistake. Those who have not made a strong effort to become familiar with the field of ethics cannot be expected to teach rigorous and well-grounded courses, whether theoretical, applied, or professional. (1), p. 65)

Not only was this compulsion to discover moral philosophy and theology lacking in too many of those teaching, but, the study continues:

The most serious lack at present is that of training programs for those who teach ethics in all the kinds of courses we have discussed. There

are at present few carefully thought-out training opportunities. Many instructors are inadequately trained, as we have mentioned; yet even they and others have used a great deal of ingenuity in putting together courses and practical experience in order to prepare themselves to teach. The lack grows more serious each year, as the courses in ethics multiply. Without well-organized and sustained formal training programs, we foresee increasing difficulties of credibility and solidity in the teaching of ethics. (1), p. 66)

Training enough persons well to teach ethics presented an enormous logistical prospect in 1980. For the reasons rehearsed in this chapter until now, the task seems even more enormous for the current decade, at least at first sight. But, as one looks more closely, perhaps the task is less Herculean than originally appears.

The Hastings study indicated that little existed already well in place within the framework of the university in 1980 to prepare teachers of ethics. All the professional schools shared the need for teachers and for development of programs and curricula. All were at the same disadvantage as well of no longer being able simply to turn to philosophy departments as the source of those who treated the study of ethics in such a way as to support the development of what had traditionally been called "applied ethics." In fact, faculty members in many of the departments of philosophy throughout the country preferred then (and very many continue) not to be called on to treat ethics in a way that presupposed that ethics belonged specifically to the enterprise of philosophical reflection. The situation right now is slightly better, but only slightly.

As a matter of fact, the logistics of training have compounded and their costs multiplied. We have an increasing and intensifying need for students to learn ethics, with an insufficient rate of supply of teachers coming out of educational preparation that itself needs development, even while its costs keep increasing.

A MODEL PROGRAM

At the University of New Mexico, a simple program, based primarily on faculty education, took form in September, 1989. The cost is modest, and the program involves all the University's colleges. It aims primarily at faculty and graduate student development, but is designed to include upper level undergraduates as well. Once fully implemented, it will have presentations for the University community at large as well as the professional community beyond the University.

Perhaps its most appealing feature is that the program is strongly congruent with conclusions in the Hastings report itself as well as insights developed since, for example, in the work of Albert Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin, which they describe in their well-received volume, *The Abuse of Casuistry* (2).

About five years ago, the deans of the University of New Mexico (UNM) graduate professional schools began to meet regularly to investigate possible programs to overcome the deficiency in teaching ethics within the various professional curricula. Their fundamental conclusion was that education and development in personal and social ethics first of all had to occur among the faculties of the professional schools. They also expressed the need to discover cost-effective methods for infusing this faculty learning process into teaching and class content in graduate and undergraduate courses which would deal knowledgeably with the state's cultural differences. To this end, they agreed in March, 1989 to support the initial semester of a program to be conducted under the broad aegis of the University's General Honors Program.

Titled simply the Honors Ethics Project, the program established a framework to: 1) facilitate strongly improved faculty education in applied ethics; 2) transfuse graduate and undergraduate curricula and teaching strategies in the study of ethics; 3) support profession-specific design of graduate courses in ethical analysis, whose primary authors would be professional faculties themselves; 4) develop aligned outreach programs of lectures, professional community seminars, and weekend retreats; and, 5) establish a program of distinguished scholars-in-residence for varying amounts of time to lecture, teach, and consult generally and in connection with the various professional schools.

The foundation of the Honors Ethics Project is faculty development. The project offered the first faculty seminar, beginning spring semester, 1990. One faculty member from each of the professional schools agreed to participate in bimonthly two-hour seminars. The basis for the seminars would be readings from the giants of classical philosophic ethics, using authors such as Mortimer Adler and Alisdair MacIntyre, and currently Toulmin and Jonsen, to orient the seminars and give them structure and continuity.

Considerations in social ethics include, for example, identification of common classical themes with the philosophical thinking of the framers of the American Constitution, using intermediary authors ranging from Walter Lippman and John Courtney Murray to Michael Harrington for structure and continuity in the discussions. These cross-disciplinary encounters will encourage participants to learn from one another about each other's

discipline-specific concerns, to share in problem solving, and, ideally to collaborate in both research and curriculum design.

Originally, as the basic text for orientation, the seminars used Mortimer Adler's writing in ethics, primarily his *A Vision of The Future* (3). Adler's classical scholarship is excellent; he is rooted in the natural law tradition, and he is uniquely mainstream American with a strong appreciation of the Scottish enlightenment philosophers and social critics. What's more, his work in his own theories of education, and his well-documented critique and analysis of contemporary academic philosophy provides an excellent departure point for criticism of the aversion to practical ethics still prevalent among American and British academic philosophers. Adler's writing, however, can be somewhat viscous, and for those not accustomed to classical philosophical analysis, his exposition can be somewhat forbidding.

By the time the first seminar had finished the semester, it was evident that the cross-pollinated seminars provided an excellent approach. Indeed, one of the seminar members, a member of the philosophy department faculty, stated in his evaluation that the seminar was the most important work he'd done in eighteen years in philosophy. The group included faculty members from medicine, law, pharmacy, nursing, engineering, theater, philosophy, and a community member, an executive from Sandia Labs, one of the Department of Energy's major contractors for nuclear weapons research.

Despite the fact that the discussions were so beneficial and the reading provocative, for some of the participants Adler was too philosophically abstruse. In casting about for something to use as a text which would support the need for philosophic reflection as the basis of ethical awareness while indicating the necessity as well of reflection based on expertly developed praxis to deal with the particularity of cases, the Toulmin and Jonsen book, *The Abuse of Casuistry*, was discovered. Its emphasis on shared, processive moralizing which arrives at commonly reasoned conviction, implies the unity of reasoning which underlies all the processes of learning, and allows each professional formation has worked marvelously so far in our third seminar which uses it as a basis. Currently the plan is to continue to use the newer book, with forays into Adler and others to support and clarify deeper issues.

As of September, 1991, 31 participants representing all of UNM's professional schools have been attending three ongoing seminars. Of that number, 19 have been able to endure. Those who have had to leave the sessions have done so on the basis of scheduling or other professional demands.

Most of the original group has continued into this current, third year, and this year they will meld with the second group. This group not only wants to continue the seminar sessions, but their discussions have led them to begin to lay the groundwork for a large-scale conference on the theme, "The Role of The University As Social Critic," and they have been instrumental in the Project's inaugurating a series of breakfasts for the general faculty to serve as a forum for what's currently happening in the various colleges on campus regarding the presentation of ethics, primarily in curriculum.

The evolving plan involves dividing up responsibility now for chairing the seminar sessions. The expectation is that the original group can supply its own chair for its sessions, and, on that basis, the Director of the Project (the author) can begin a new seminar group next semester, for which a number of interested applicants from all of the professional schools have already been identified.

From the beginning of the Project, the development of the Distinguished Visitors series has paralleled the seminars for faculty. Funds have permitted the program to invite a distinguished guest for a period of two full days. To date, each visitor has given an open lecture during the day at the Honors Center, a major talk in the evening, and participated in a faculty seminar session. As scheduling permits, each has also been available for class involvement or conversation as much as possible during the time on campus.

The first speaker was the eminent moral theologian and social ethicist Charles Curran, whose talks were on liberation theology and secular religion of America as presented critically in the writings of Robert Bellah, primarily his *Habits of The Heart*. Tony Jones, Director of Chicago's Art Institute was next; his presentations were on censorship. In 1990, the program invited David Toolan, S.J., former associate editor of *Commonwealth* and currently associate editor of *America*; his area of expertise is the so-called New Age phenomenon and also the Mideast. Reginald Wilson, scholar in residence for the American Council on Education gave presentations last semester on minority concerns and the developing tensions over the notions of "political correctness." The speaker for fall semester, 1991 was Professor John Houck, Co-Director of the Center for Business and Ethics at Notre Dame University, who addressed questions of ethics in business and economic theory.

The two final phases of the Project, involvement with upper-class undergraduates, especially those immediately matriculating into graduate school, and recruiting of community professionals to participate in the faculty seminars are scheduled to begin spring semester, 1992.

Financing of the project predictably has turned out to be, as the students might have it, "The Problem From Hell"! The Project is expected to generate its own support and is employing the standard techniques, seeking grants and trying to join forces with other groups sponsoring speakers. All universities are financially constrained, but New Mexico is among our poorest states, and therefore UNM is particularly restricted. In any event, the process is in progress; in effect, it has built and continues to build a positive record; all that remains typically is to ensure that funds will be identifiable and acquirable to continue.

Because of the positive record, the hope is that the Project will be increasingly attractive to funding sources and that the University administration will be increasingly willing to underwrite as much of the costs as possible. In any event, the foundation has been established, the concept validated, and, most important, clear indications of increased faculty interest and openness to curriculum development in all of the University's professional schools.

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