

How Shall We Incorporate Ethics Instruction At All Levels?

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It is a great pleasure to be here. The Hastings Center followed with great interest the organization and early development of the Joint Service Committee on Professional Ethics, and I am pleased to say we even provided a bit of money to assist in the organization of some of the early meetings. Our own concern at The Hastings Center has focused over the years primarily on biomedical ethics, but we have also had a general concern for professional ethics and the teaching of ethics. Since the middle of the 1970s, at the least, the interest in professional ethics in almost all fields has been remarkable and pronounced. This is not to say that there have not been problems, and resistance, but it is most striking how people in all fields have begun taking the questions of professional ethics seriously, and to pursue at both the theoretical and the practical level.

The question I want to address is how we are to situate, understand, and pursue the effective teaching of professional ethics.

One immediate reaction to proposals to teach professional ethics or efforts to improve already existing teaching, is to become quite restless with the "theoretical" issues. There is a great tendency to feel that they need to be put aside, because they are often endless and deep, and one needs simply to get down to the practical issues: how do you teach the subject, what kind of material to use, and so on.

My own strong conviction is that the theoretical issues must be dealt with at all times, and cannot be pushed to the background. There surely are practical problems in the teaching of ethics, but a great number of them in both obvious and subtle ways continue to turn on the very nature of ethics itself. Ethics is, obviously enough, a subject with a long

human history, and a history marked by a great deal of dispute and controversy. In his dialogue the "Meno," Plato has Meno ask Socrates, at the very opening, "Can virtue be taught?" As is typical of the dialogues, Socrates gives no definitive answer to that question, and it is one that has remained with us ever since.

We argue about ethics because it is so fundamental, and because how we ought to live our life is a very difficult problem. Moreover, when one talks about the teaching of ethics in particular fields, whether in elementary schools, in colleges, in professional schools, in military commands, or anywhere else, there will be disputes about that as well. Most of those disputes are intimately involved with questions about what ethics itself is. The teaching of ethics in the professions, then, must always have some relationship to those long-standing arguments and disputes, and though they are theoretical, and difficult, they are part of what we must grapple with. We cannot really do a good job with the practical issues unless we are alert to some of the inherent difficulties of the subject matter itself.

One also, in the teaching of professional ethics, has to combat a great deal of indifference, or sometimes outright hostility, to the subject matter itself. Professionals are often resistant to the teaching of ethics. Sometimes the resistance stems from the rather widespread belief that it is an inherently soft and mushy topic. A common enough belief in our society, at least among many, is that ethics is nothing but a matter of taste and preference, or perhaps the private religious values of people. Therefore, there is nothing one can teach in any rational way, and therefore there is really no subject matter that can effectively be taught.

Another objection, less often stated but I believe always present, is

that the very subject itself is a disturbing and controversial one, and one does best to avoid it. There is no doubt that the teaching of ethics can be disturbing. If it is well done, it forces a confrontation with our basic professional goals, it makes us look at our daily practices, and it makes us ask what it is after all we are living for, working for, and living our professional lives for. A lot of people do not want to confront those questions. They might not like what they find, and they know it.

Still another objection is that too much concern about ethics can be incompatible with competence. It is sometimes felt that, as professionals, people need to be trained in various technical and specialized skills, and trained also to act rapidly and decisively. It is sometimes thought that ethics simply introduces a great deal of muddle, confusion and indecision into thinking, and therefore will get in the way of acting in a professionally competent fashion.

It is important to be aware of objections of that kind, even if they are not stated. I think it reasonable to assume that there is uncertainty, suspicion, and skepticism about the subject of professional ethics.

I believe, however, that ethics can be effectively taught and communicated if one's goals are clear and reasonably limited. The subject is not inherently soft and mushy, though it can certainly be treated that way, and, if poorly handled, can convey to people the notion that there are no clear answers about anything. That is simply false.

The most important thing, however, in even thinking about the teaching of ethics is to clarify the goals. In our work on the teaching of professional ethics, The Hastings Center developed some very general goals, of a kind we think appropriate in a professional setting. There

is, first of all, the need to alert people to the very existence of ethical problems. A great number of people are not very sensitive about that, and it is important to try to instill into them the ability to spot an ethical issue, to be sensitive to its nuances, and to have some sense how to proceed with it. A second goal is closely related to that: the training of people to be able to analyze the ethical problems once they encounter them. Ethics is something people can think about in ways that are better or worse, and a great part of the teaching of ethics is simply to help people to clarify their thinking, to push forward in a relentless fashion with some of the problems, and to attempt to reach some kind of conclusions. A third, and critical ingredient, is that of stimulating a sense of personal obligation. Ethics can be talked about in an abstract impersonal way, implying that it is not anybody's personal business at all. But the teaching of ethics will get nowhere, or will be utterly meaningless unless the instructor, or the program, is attempting always to get people to take it seriously, to feel that they have a personal obligation to behave well, to think hard about their ethical life, and to consider carefully the ethical implications of their behavior for their professional activities. Ethics, in short, is inherently a practical and applied discipline, one meant to stimulate people to behave as well as they can.

The fourth and final goal we developed is that of both tolerating and resisting the ambiguity of ethics. Ethics often puts people off because it seems that progress cannot be made with the issues, that the controversies are too extensive. On the contrary, people need to be alerted to the fact there is a great deal of ambiguity and uncertainty in making ethical decisions, and that one has to develop a certain toleration for that uncertainty. At the same time, it is important to underscore the

fact that progress can be made with the problems, that the uncertainty can often be reduced, and that progress can be made. Hence, the kind of paradoxical combination of toleration of, and resistance to uncertainty must be a fundamental part of the teaching of ethics.

Once one has some general goals in mind, then one can better take account of some of the criticisms and objections that I mentioned above. Ethics is and should be a disturbing subject. If it is pursued well and responsibly, people should be led to ask about their basic purposes, as individual human beings, and as military officers. The ethics of a profession, I believe, always follows the goals and purposes of a profession. Ethics, to put the matter another way, is not something one simply adds on to professional goals and purposes, but is very fundamental to their achievement. Ethics is often disturbing because it forces people to ask what it is they are all about, and what goals they are seeking as individual people and as professionals. Many people don't want to think about that, but that is one of the primary purposes in the teaching of ethics.

The objection that ethics may perhaps make people, particularly military officers, less competent, seems to me just plain wrong. Good ethical thinking is nothing more than responsible analysis, self-examination, and a recognition that ethics is a fundamental part of making technical and professional decisions. People cannot, of course, read Aristotle in the middle of a battle, or sit down and ponder very difficult moral dilemmas in the midst of a crisis. But they can think about those issues before, much as they can with all other fields in military or other forms of professional life. What one does with the teaching of ethics is to try to get people to think in advance, to be prepared for crises and hard decisions when they arise. The problem in

assuming that ethics and competence are working against each other, is the failure to recognize that one cannot be a competent professional unless one is a moral and responsible professional. Immoral behavior may, so to speak, work for a time. But the history of our institutions, including the history of warfare itself, indicate that bad moral behavior usually turns back upon itself, it is usually harmful to oneself and one's interests. Competence and ethics go fundamentally together.

In the same vein, it is sometimes said that the "real world" is resistant to ethics. That is true sometimes, but the real world is not something that is utterly fixed. One of the purposes of teaching ethics is to convey to individuals, and to institutions, that the real world can be changed, that it is malleable, that it is subject to the values people bring to bear on it. The notion that there is some nasty real world out there, over against some pure and clean ethical world, seems to me false. The real world is shot through with values, some good and some bad, and that world can be changed, just as the individuals who inhabit that world can also be changed.

In short, I think one has to fight very hard against the notion of any incompatibility between ethics and competence. On the contrary, the main message in the teaching of ethics has to be that the two are one and the same, and that there is no such thing as a technical decision that does not have its ethical implications, and that will not be influenced by the moral considerations of those who have to make decisions, give commands, or take action.

What can one hope to reasonably accomplish with the teaching of ethics? It is important to get straight on this question, since many people expect the teaching of ethics to accomplish much more than it possibly can, and one simply opens the way for a great deal of

disappointment if there is not some general understanding about what is possible and what is not possible.

It is certainly possible to signal the existence of moral issues. That ought at least to be a minimal goal, and one that can be accomplished. One needs to find ways to quickly and readily identify the moral problems that people in the military will encounter, and to label them as ethical where that is appropriate and justified. Even if people don't take the whole subject seriously, they will at least know that there are ethical problems out there. I think that one next has to show that those problems are closely related to the competent discharge of one's duties. Here we go back to the question of the relationship between ethics and competence, and I think one has to do everything possible to show that the two are closely related.

I think it is no less a basic goal to give people, whether officers or enlisted men, some sense of why ethical problems arise. Ethical problems do not arise out of a vacuum: they are usually the result of certain situations, or institutional arrangements, or other structural elements. The fundamental goal of anyone who tries to be ethical should be to avoid terrible ethical dilemmas in the first place. Frequently, ethical dilemmas are a result of bad institutional arrangements. The people in those institutions should not even have such problems; that is, they should not have the problems if things were properly ordered and managed. In any case, it is important to give people some sense of why ethical problems arise, and what their institutional and social setting is.

I think it is perfectly feasible to show that thinking about ethics can be helpful, productive, and interesting. It is a great mistake in teaching ethics to begin with the worst possible dilemma one can think of.

That simply discourages people, and makes them depressed about the whole subject. Moreover, all of the moral life does not consist of dealing with utterly impossible dilemmas, but usually with simpler situations. I think the teaching of ethics should best begin with rather simple issues and problems, where some agreement can quickly be reached, and then move on to the harder ones. Pick cases that touch on people's life and experiences, make them as interesting as possible, and do everything to stimulate their imaginations.

I think it is very important to use consultation heavily and extensively. Ethics is the kind of subject best handled by discussion, rather than by the didactic lecture. I say this for a very simple reason: the teaching of ethics is as much a process as a result, that is, a process of getting people to think well and responsibly about their moral life and the moral dilemmas they will encounter. The result is, so to speak, the very process of the thinking itself. The more involvement one can get in even identifying the problems, and in talking out the problems, the faster one will move toward effective teaching.

I think it is important also to be prepared to move back and forth between some of the theoretical questions and some of the practical questions. The old issue of "why should I be moral?" --a question that is close to 2,500 years old--will continue to arise as much now as it did for earlier generations. You have to be prepared to cope with that very theoretical and very difficult question. Moreover, one has to be prepared to deal with the question of where we get our moral rules, how do you justify moral obligations, how do you develop notions of what are appropriate virtues for people? The justification of all such things requires some kind of theoretical foundation. It is a mistake to try to dodge those questions, even if one does not feel one can handle them

adequately. No one can handle them adequately, since they are very hard and very old, but it is the process of seriously trying to do so that is often most convincing, and the most that any of us can do in any event. The final thing I would say is that there are really no hard and fast ways for effectively teaching ethics. We have to each find that method that works best for ourselves, and that enables us to convey the importance of the subject--the need for personal character, and the possibility of combining effectively professional competence and moral behavior. I think one ought constantly to experiment with teaching methods and techniques. Don't be rigidly fixed on what is likely to be more or less effective. The important thing is to steadily pursue the centrality of morality in the professional life, to try to understand that professional life, and to know the way in which moral problems present themselves to individuals as they carry out their professional activities. A seriousness of purpose is the most important ingredient in good teaching.