

"Teaching the Teachers of Ethics:
Santa Clara University's Center for Applied Ethics Model"

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Martin L. Cook, Ph.D.
Santa Clara University, Center for Applied Ethics
The United States Air Force Academy,
Department of Philosophy and Fine Arts

I. Orientation to the Difficulty

Education regarding ethical issues among professionals has grown rapidly in recent years--so much so that one scholar referred to "Ethics: An American Growth Industry" (James M. Gustafson, The Key Reporter, v.56 n. 3, Spring 1991). Each new revelation of ethical failure in a profession is followed by demands that programs of ethics education be implemented in professional schools and professional organization. Often, there are additional demands that ethics codes be written and enforced among professionals.

Such calls to action raise a severe difficulty: who is available and competent to meet these demands? Ideally, professional ethics should be taught by individuals with two distinct areas of competence. On the one hand, they should be deeply educated in the disciplines of moral philosophy, skilled in the use of its language and concepts, able to range freely over ethical theory and adept in conducting discussions of case studies. On the other hand, ideal ethics teachers should be equally knowledgeable regarding issues of practice as they arise

in the real-life experience of that profession, sensitive to the moral and social realities within which the professional lives his or her life.

For example, teachers of medical ethics would, ideally, be philosophers who have also spent significant time working in the world of physicians, nurses, and other ancillary health care fields. They should not be "ivory tower philosophers," at least not if they are to teach health care professionals. They should bring a working knowledge of the realities of clinical medicine and the social and economic organization of modern medicine to the discussion.

Alternatively, ideal medical ethics teachers might be physicians and nurses who have received significant graduate-level education in moral philosophy. Although there are more such individuals now than there were in the early days of applied medical ethics work, they remain a scarce resource in comparison to the need.

One unfortunate consequence of these realities is that there is much shoddy work and education going on under the banner of "ethics education." Due to the unusual breadth of training experience required for the ideal teachers of ethics, few such individuals exist. Since the criteria for competence for work in these areas have not clearly emerged, it is possible for individuals and groups to "hang out their shingle" and, especially in business ethics consulting, to charge large fees for their work. When professionals are exposed (subjected?) to

poor quality ethics education, the effect is often to reinforce professional prejudices that ethics education is merely faddish do-goodism, ungrounded in a body of disciplined thought, and perhaps hopelessly subjective.

Of all professions needing and seeking ethics education, perhaps the military is most at risk of suffering from these deficiencies of professional ethics training. For obvious reasons concerning career paths and promotion (and perhaps temperament as well), precious few military officers possess or are likely to possess advanced training in philosophical ethics. Therefore, few military officers are competent to teach and write in this area at a level that will attract the attention and respect of their non-military academic peers. On the other hand, the daily reality of professional military life is more unlike the experience of civilians than that of almost any other profession. It is a cliché, but a true one, that the military is a "world apart" from civilian life--and to a degree far more extreme than for lawyers or doctors, with whom "civilians" have at least some contact in the ordinary course of their daily lives.

These generalizations about the military are especially true about decision-making in the midst of battle and in the uncertainty of combat. Non-physicians can, with difficulty and with a degree of error, imagine what it is like to be "at the bedside." Business-ethics cases bear enough analogues to ordinary life for non-business people to participate in their

analysis. But it is the near-unanimous report of those who have combat experience that nothing else is really like decision-making under the pressure of combat.

In addition, all professions to some degree tend to distrust the competence of ethicists who are not "one of them." Ethicists working in medical institutions report that they must earn their credibility with medical practitioners. A mere Ph.D. in philosophy establishes little until that sense of connection to clinical reality is made.

This phenomenon regarding credibility is certainly at least as true of military officers. In fact, there are excellent reasons to think it even more the case. Most other professionals are used to dealing routinely with an interdisciplinary environment where the skills of other professionals are sought and valued. Many military professionals, in contrast, deal almost exclusively with people wearing the military uniform, even though they may have specialized skills. Consequently, military professionals may have at least the perception that they deal only with members on their own profession.

From these observations, I believe it follows that experienced professional military officers are the best and most credible candidates to be teachers of military ethics. But as we noted above, very few military professionals possess the training and skills in moral philosophy that would, ideally, prepare them for the task. If they are the most credible, and yet are unlikely to be well prepared, we must then ask: How might the

teachers of ethics be taught?

II. Santa Clara's Intensive Seminar Method

At Santa Clara University, California, our Center for Applied Ethics confronted a problem similar to the one I've outlined above. Partly as a consequence of the commitment of Jesuit university tradition to value-based education and partly because of the attention of the various disciplines nationally to ethical issues, various departments in the university approached our ethics center for assistance in preparing their faculty to teach the ethical aspects of their subjects in their existing course offerings. Over the course of the past few summers, the departments of Accounting, Marketing and Management, in the Business School and Communication, Sociology, and Anthropology in the College of Arts and Sciences, have participated in intensive summer seminars of a week or less, intended to prepare them to engage in such teaching.

Our goal in these seminars has been to develop a method of preparing faculty in the various specialized disciplines and professions to gain the requisite skills in the language and methods of ethics while drawing on their own superior knowledge of the material of their respective disciplines to develop course materials.

The remainder of this paper will describe that method, report on its successes, and suggest ways in which it may be applicable to teaching of ethics in the military in the various

contexts in which JSCOPE members function. Although there are variations in detail in the seminars we have conducted, you will find in your packet an outline of the syllabus for the 1990 seminar, a fairly typical example of the seminars we have conducted. In brief compass, this outline presents the materials and the order of presentation we have used to prepare teachers of ethics to do their jobs. You might want to pull it out and follow along as I describe the sequence of topics.

Before the seminar begins, each participant will have received a fairly large packet of materials. This includes a syllabus and a large number of readings. Some of the readings are suitable for use with almost any group; others are tailored more specifically to the disciplines represented in the specific seminar group. All participants are required to have read these materials carefully prior to the first meeting of the seminar.

Typically, the seminar begins with a specific case of moral choice. The goal in this portion of the seminar is get participants thinking about the nature of ethics as an intellectual discipline, and to draw some distinctions between normative ethics and descriptive accounts of how people do behave. In disciplines that have ethics codes, we often spend some time as well on the nature of such codes and their strengths and weaknesses as approaches to codifying the ethics of an area of practice. Interaction with the group usually allows discussion and clarification of a number of other related matters: ethical and cultural relativism, often a first pass at

questions of religious conviction and morality, etc.

Apart from the content of this first session, there is a major "group process" goal as well. We have found that it is very important to make participants feel very comfortable as a group, and to encourage individuals to speak freely. At the same time, however, it is also important to model in the way the conversation is conducted that ethics is not mere self-expression, but is capable of careful and reasoned discourse. In other words, especially with highly practical professionals or disciplines such as marketing or accounting, it is necessary to "establish credibility" for the seminar leaders as possessing a body of knowledge and intellectual skill that will motivate participants to take the seminar process seriously.

After a short break, the seminar continues with an example of clear moral reasoning. We have found Peter Singer's "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" a very effective piece for this purpose. Its effectiveness, we believe, results from two features of the article. First, Singer is crystal clear regarding his theoretical framework in utilitarianism and very rigorous in developing his argument from that perspective. In that respect, therefore, it models very clear philosophical reasoning. Second, the conclusion Singer draws--that each of us is morally obligated radically to change our lifestyles to provide food aid to the third world--is predictably one that participants will want to challenge, or at least that few are prepared to act on to the extent that Singer's article would require. These two features

combine to generate heated but carefully focused debate.

Following lunch, the seminar resumes with a review of the empirical science literature on moral development and the efficacy of teaching ethics. We have found that for many participants, this helps to "ground" the more theoretical and philosophical material in an empirical framework that is often very helpful to them.

The next module of the course introduces participants to three sets of terms and concepts of philosophical ethics--a kind of working vocabulary for teachers of ethics. You will note that we largely avoid the often-traditional large trooping through deontological and utilitarian theories, and this is deliberate. We have concluded that some of that terminology needs to be introduced, but that teachers of ethics drawn from professional schools and other disciplines need not wade through the niceties of the terminology at a level that would satisfy philosophers. We concluded that a working knowledge of utilitarian concepts and methods, some precision in the language of rights, and some of the distinctions in concepts of justice would serve as such a working vocabulary.

You will note, therefore, that this first day concludes with case-based discussions carefully chosen to elicit utilitarian and rights-based moral theories. The same method continues the next morning with a case intended to elicit concepts of justice.

Once each area of technical terminology has been developed in relative isolation from the others, we introduce a more

complex case that requires participants to draw on and relate all three sets for an adequate analysis. Again, while the case approach grounds the theoretical concepts in practical reality, simultaneously we, as facilitators, are modelling ways of keeping a class discussion orchestrated with an adequate conceptual complexity while also remaining "on track."

The second day concludes with some "nuts and bolts" matters: problems and techniques for integrating ethics teaching into courses which do not have the teaching of ethics as their central goal, and some tips and pointers for how to conduct an ethics discussion. Here we largely review and point out explicitly what we, as facilitators, have been doing throughout the seminar. This is also the time when participants can air their own concerns and anxieties about this role they are about to assume, and ask for specific suggestions about problems they see as they anticipate fitting ethics teaching into their own course material or in keeping control and focus over ethics discussions in their own classrooms.

On the third day, we spend a few minutes on the relation of religious claims and appeals to moral thinking, since this inevitably arises in the classroom setting.

The culmination of the seminar is that each participant teaches a forty-five minute module of a course they already teach in which they demonstrate how they would, in fact, use the materials of the seminar in their teaching. This seems to us especially important and appropriate since these seminars are

highly focused on the outcome of preparing new teachers of ethics to teach rather than more generally philosophical education.

During the presentations, other seminar participants and facilitators attempt to behave like typical students, giving the "teacher" an opportunity to try out skills of getting and keeping a serious ethics discussion going. Each presentation is followed by a critique by the group as a whole, pointing out the successes and make recommendations for improvement in the pedagogy employed.

III. Evaluation of the Method

As I indicated at the outside, our Center has conducted seminars of this type for a number of years, so we have a considerable body of evidence that the method is successful. Typical evaluation comments from past participants are as follows:

"The workshop gave me a framework for dealing with ethical issues in the classroom."

"Before the workshop, I felt I was groping when ethical issues were raised in the classroom, and I didn't feel that I knew what I was doing or the value of what I was doing. After the workshop, I felt I had the tools, the vocabulary, and a systematic way of approaching ethical issues in the classroom."

"The workshop gave us, as a department, a common language for dealing with ethics, and a common framework we can provide to students."

"The research on moral development presented at the workshop helped me understand the effect that ethics discussion will have on the student's moral development."

More objective measures of the seminars' success are the

following: All members of the Marketing Department reported that they had introduced ethics discussions into at least two of their courses. One member of that department has developed an entire new course on ethical issues in advertising. All faculty members in Communication also report integrating ethics discussion into all of their courses, and that department also is developing a new course on ethical issues in communication as a result of the seminar. The evaluations have been similar for all other departments that have participated.

In short, although not perfect, our Center for Applied Ethics has developed an effective short course for teachers in other disciplines to acquire the basic skills, vocabulary, and techniques to effectively bring ethics education to their classrooms.

The method has a great cost/effectiveness advantage over the more cumbersome, although perhaps more ideal, method of team teaching between an ethicist and a practitioner of another discipline, and gains the credibility of the discipline as compared to similar teaching by an ethicist less familiar with the realities of a given profession's moral dilemmas.

It is, we believe, a method that could be replicated with little difficulty by any skilled ethicist facilitators working with professionals in a wide variety of fields.

I hope my brief presentation of the method has stimulated some thoughts on how a similar approach might be useful to you in your various professional spheres.

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