

## ETHICS AT THE CORE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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I suspect that if I were to ask the average person on the street whether or not an ethics course should be a part of every student's undergraduate education, most would idly nod their heads in agreement. It sounds good after all. Don't we want students who don't cheat, politicians with the public's best interest in mind, and financiers with the decency not to risk our collective retirement plans and financial stability on dirty deals and high risk bets that could send the global economy into a tail spin? But I think that if you were to ask the average person exactly what is supposed to happen in an ethics class, they likely either have no idea or have some general thoughts of an Oprah-esque talk session where we express our feelings and complain about corruption. Others might assume that ethics is no different than a Sunday sermon. Both of these sorts of preconceptions about ethics as a discipline are mistaken. While there are a lot of things that go into an ethics class, I will discuss four of my goals in teaching introductory ethics. First, I believe that ethics is most fundamentally about critical thinking. That is why each of my ethics courses begins with a brief lesson in logic. Specifically it involves an opportunity to rigorously examine & development one's own conscience. Thirdly, an ethics course represents an opportunity collectively and creatively to imagine a better world. Fourth, an ethics course provides an opportunity to learn to engage morally with others, and fifthly, and perhaps most importantly, an ethics course is a chance to learn who one is and who one wants to become.

Before I go into these goals, I want to caveat my claims. I am not naïve. I do not suppose that my class will literally make anyone pay attention to what they ought to be doing

with their life. I can't force them to read. (Corporal punishment is still illegal after all!) I can't literally force them to pay attention or to think. I can't force the development of good character any more than a trainer at the gym can make you adopt healthy exercise and eating habits. But an ethics class can at least give someone the opportunity free from the din of daily tasks like homework, groceries, texting, and shopping, to develop that sense of conscience.

In a 2008 report by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, a survey of 23,000 undergraduates and 9,000 faculty, administrative and student affairs staff at 23 institutions found that although teaching personal and academic integrity, moral reasoning and openness to difference were identified as a high priority by students, only 30% strongly agreed that their campus emphasized refining ethical and moral development. I am glad that USI includes ethics in the Core Curriculum because I think students know that without having taken the time to think carefully about the moral implications of their choices, their education makes them successful at calculation, but not at meaningful and emotionally fulfilling lives. And while almost every class must take ethics into account, I think it is important to have one class where ethics is not the sidebar in a reading on global economic inequality or a noted point of controversy in a text book describing the beliefs of differing groups. Unlike disciplines which focus upon describing how things are, philosophy, and ethics in particular, asks students to imagine how things should be. While I know that philosophy is not alone in asking students to be creative, I know that it has a unique role to play in encouraging students not only to imagine a better world, but rigorously to defend that vision to others.

## CRITICAL THINKING

Since I teach philosophy and my advisees usually know that before they ever see me, I probably don't get asked as many questions about why they have to take an ethics class. But I suspect that many of the other advisors do get asked that question. And after talking to academics at institutions all over the country, I am often surprised just how little most people, even academics, understand about philosophy and about what professional ethicists do. A colleague once referred to what I teach in my classes as "moral lessons." But I would never in a million years describe my classes in that way. The idea of "moral lessons" conjures up thoughts of folk tales with a pithy lesson, a morale in bold type summarized for children. Or it makes it sound as if the instructor imparts wisdom on young minds like some sort of third grade school teacher listing vocabulary words on the board to be memorized.

While there are surely important facts to know about moral theorists and moral terms like justice and speciesism which need careful definition, an ethics class is not fundamentally about telling students what is right. My goal is not to impart moral goodness by reading emphatically from some sacred text to be taken on faith. Rather, teaching ethics is about doing just the opposite. No text is sacred. On the first day of class, I tell students that there is no way everything we read can be right. The ways the theorists we cover define right action and good character literally contradict one another. The point of ethics class is not just memorizing terms or even learning how to apply principles like The Greatest Happiness Principle or Kant's Categorical Imperative. Ultimately the point of an ethics class is learning to think for yourself.

Despite that warning, all too often after a long debate on animal rights or drug policy, students will still ask me with a look of exasperation on their face, "What is the *right* answer?" But this isn't one of those kinds of classes. It's not my job to tell you the right answer. A moral

position that is taken up simply because someone else told you to do it, is not authentic and actually represents a kind of moral failing. A person who does not think for themselves about what counts as right and wrong is a person who is hiding behind ignorance. On a subconscious or maybe even not so subconscious level there is this idea that if I just don't think about the fact that 1.4 billion people live on less than \$1.25 a day, then I am not morally responsible to do anything about it. Thinking hard about ethics, for most students will inevitably lead to feeling something too. And what a student feels and whether or not they act upon those feelings of empathy or righteous indignation tells a student not just what they think is the truth about tough moral questions. It also tells them something about who they already are and who they want to become. If, for example, you see a documentary where a mass of chickens are squished into a cage with the legally minimum required space of half a sheet of paper for each bird and you find yourself unable to do anything but turn away in disgust that tells you something about your own feelings of sympathy for those animals. Allowing oneself fully to experience the knowledge and the emotional reactions that knowledge brings also bring to light potentially inconsistent behavior when it comes to acting on those feelings. This is where the examination of conscience comes in. Critical thinking about morality, if it is carried through with honesty and rigor, will inevitably lead to an examination of conscience.

## **EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE**

When I was a kid, I spent no less than 14 years being educated by the Catholic Church. While I no longer feel compelled to double check the conclusion of every moral argument with the Pope's official position on the matter, I do still very much value something that the nuns encouraged us to do from the age of six or seven. Our teachers would line us up to go to

confession but beforehand we were required to spend ten to thirty minutes making what they called an examination of conscience. We were supposed to think of all the ways in which we were not actually being the people we wanted to be, the ways in which we hurt others when it was not necessary to do so. Unlike children who were only instructed to reflect on their moral failings after being caught and forced to spend quiet time in a corner as punishment, we were expected regularly to think long and hard about how we could be better and to put ourselves in the shoes of those affected by our action and inaction. Even if you were not caught, even if you had not done anything particularly bad, you could always be better. But to be better, you first had to recognize your personal failings and imagine the person you could be instead. While many would probably call this the source of the infamous Catholic guilt complex, I think the world really could be a better place if everyone made a more careful examination of conscience. If we made an examination of conscience a part of lives, thinking about our character in quiet moments of reflection and not just when pangs of guilt torture one out of sleep and relaxation, we would be taking the first steps towards being morally decent people. I hope that students in my ethics classes not only learn to decide for themselves what they care about, what they think is right and wrong, and how they want to live responsibly in the world. I also hope that my class gives them the opportunity to engage in that examination of conscience. Like any other skill, a conscience grows with hard work and mindfulness. While we may race to the gym to lift weights and tone muscles or contort ourselves into yoga postures to stay limber, how many of us take the time to develop a truly good conscience as well? This may be the one time in their lives, when for several months students are tasked with thinking about what, if any, moral obligations they have to the poor of the world, to animals suffering from cruelty, to future generations

deprived of the biodiversity, topsoil, and climate stability that has helped all of us to thrive, or to individuals whose civil liberties are regularly violated.

## **MORAL IMAGINATION**

An examination of conscience not only reveals our moral failings. It also reveals our collective moral hopes and dreams. Moral imagination is crucial both to a good ethics class and to a flourishing human life. If all of us strove to spend some time thinking of how much more amazing the world could be if we only strove to be a little better: a little kinder, more just, less wasteful, and more honest, then perhaps we could find a way to create and live in such a world. The surest way to fail is never even to try. Similarly the surest way to never achieve a more just, humane, and sustainable way of life is not to give ourselves the time to imagine our own potential role in creating that world together. Do we want to live in a world where nearly half of all children live in dire poverty? Do we want to live in a world where we use four times the resources as the planet can withstand? Do we want to live in a world in the throes of its 6th mass extinction, but this time humanly induced—a world with drastically less biodiversity? Do we want to live in a world with 7 billion people, which is the number we will have by the end of this year according to the United Nations? If we can not articulate the world we want to live in, if we focus too much on our moral failures like racism and wanton environmental destruction, we will become so obsessed with our failures that we can not find the vision, hope, and courage to create lives worth living and a world whose beauty and diversity is valued rather than squandered. This is a lesson that I think Paul Hawken's book on *Restoration* imparts well. With 7 billion people on this planet by the end of 2011, we must evolve quickly towards more just and sustainable lives if our species is to thrive. But evolution does not happen in a top down fashion.

Movements towards progress are often diverse and few will see the end goal towards which so many disparate groups are striving. It is easy to see the problems and hard to see the solutions. But taking the time to collectively determine where we want to be, is important otherwise no one can be sufficiently motivated to be a part of a collective action whose ultimate results will likely only really be felt long after one is dead.

## **LEARNING TO TALK ABOUT MORALITY WITH OTHERS**

Part of showing appropriate moral respect for others is taking their viewpoints seriously. Simply ordering others to work with you on ending abortion or feeding the starving is not only ineffective, it is also a sign of a lack of moral respect for the autonomy of others. Others may have different values or different priorities amongst shared values given their own life experiences and emotional attachments. They may also simply not have particularly well informed or morally decent ideas about how we all ought to live together. But we will never know for sure unless we actually engage in debate with our opponents. I truly believe that the most important thing an ethics class can do is to teach students how to talk to people with whom they don't agree. To debate with someone who you not only believe to be fundamentally mistaken, but whose beliefs if enacted you believe will cause the world to be an essentially less just and humane place to live, is extremely difficult. But it is also necessary if we are to have a functioning democracy and a responsible moral community. Whether it's the poor who will suffer disproportionately from the effects of global warming or LGBTQ youth who opt for suicide in the face of public condemnation, the only way to meet our greatest moral challenges is together.

Global problems are rarely created by one individual and they will rarely be solved by one person either. But this means that we need to be able to talk to each other about the points upon which we disagree and find ways to convince one another to work on policies for which we can garner both moral agreement and impassioned collective commitment. An ethics class forces students to talk to one another about those usually taboo subjects at the dinner table: sex, abortion, homosexuality, transgender and intersexed individuals, race, poverty, war, sexual assault, recreational drug use, and more. In philosophy, everyone is also encouraged to play devils advocate. That means that every student is required to put themselves in someone else's shoes for a minute. Imagine looking at the world in a fundamentally different way that is in conflict with your own worldview. Listen to those who say you are wrong. And then come up with a reply grounded in empathy and logic.

This is part of why my ethics classes always end with a debate and a personal position paper after that debate. I hope that students will learn that knowledge itself is intimately tied to ethics. To understand the world and ourselves, we need perspective, we need multiple data points. We can't just assume that we already know everything. In short, we need others and all of the experience they can bring to bear. But for that data to be reliable, we also need to be able to trust that others will tell the truth and not try to undermine our collective pursuit of truth. If interlocutors rely on well reasoned argument rather than upon manipulation, lies, or sheer force, then we can have at least some minimal assurance that the knowledge we create in our collective endeavors is more likely to be accurate and reliable. If others merely aim to win for their side without seriously listening to others or trying to engage with them, then our ability to understand the truth about ourselves and the world is undermined. So, although cable news and talk radio would lead an alien observer to believe that humans never listen to each other and make

collective decisions by screaming or repeating words together enough times that people start to think that Iraq really is working with Al Qaeda, philosophy demands something more. It demands greater honesty, greater rigor, and greater respect for the other beings with whom we share this planet. It also demands greater humility.

## **LEARNING WHO YOU ARE**

John Stuart Mill was an impassioned defender of free speech because he knew that the pursuit of truth depends fundamentally upon our collective ability to hear opposing viewpoints and to work together with those whom we might otherwise dismiss as too far out there to be worth a hearing. But Mill also believed that we needed free speech and debate to develop personal character and critical thinking skills. Each time we simply dismiss someone with a different perspective out of hand, we undermine our own ability to move forward in comprehension and become stagnated in our beliefs. Mill argued that we move closer to the character of one who wallows in dead dogma rather than feeling the truth of our convictions. Learning how to engage in moral debate with others is not only essential to the pursuit of truth and to showing respect towards others. It is also a question of letting ourselves feel and comprehend the full vitality and power of beliefs about the things that matter most to us. Learning how to talk to others about moral values is how one can come to know oneself. It is often in the heat of debate that the full awareness of how much we do or don't care about the wellbeing of others is made manifest. It can be hard to admit that one is calloused and insufficiently motivated to be kind and empathetic. It can also be hard to realize that one is crushed by the injustice of the world and nevertheless compelled to combat that injustice.

People don't engage enough in careful moral debate for all kinds of reasons. We get busy. We worry it won't do any good and we will get stuck talking things to death and not getting anything done. We worry about offending others. We think we don't know enough—the whole “Who's to say?” argument rears its head. But my worry is that one of the biggest reasons we don't engage in moral debate is because it would hurt too much to fully realize and admit how much we really do care for this world. To engage in moral debate is one way that we come to know the persons we want to be, the persons our emotions have already geared us towards becoming, however little we may want to rise to the challenge. I hope that students taking my ethics class get to experience a little bit of what Mill referred to as the vitality of belief.

## **CONCLUSION**

Whatever conclusions they come to about their moral beliefs, whether they are for the death penalty or against it, decide to remove animals from their diet or go on eating meat, I hope that they at least learn a little something about themselves—who they are, who they want to become, and whether or not they can defend that vision of themselves and the world embodied by those values to others. Doing this is the first and most crucial step in becoming a more educated, knowledgeable, and civic minded individual. Ethics truly is at the core of higher education.