

Teaching ethics in higher education

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Abstract: *The importance of teaching ethics in professional degrees is well recognised, but what is less obvious is the rationale for this, who is to do the teaching and what the best approach to teaching ethics is. In this paper, it is argued that ethics teaching to professionals should not just concentrate on the professional code of ethics which pertains to their chosen field, but give students a wider appreciation of the place of ethics in their lives. It is argued that students need to learn about and become committed to the fundamental ethical principles which form the basis of the codes of ethics that they adopt. Although case study methods of teaching ethics provide the best approach to teaching ethics, the best equipped to provide a broad ethical education will be moral philosophers and ethicists working in collaboration with professional practitioners.*

Keywords: *teaching ethics, philosophy of education, professional ethics*

Introduction

One of the difficulties that is often faced in the teaching of ethics units to students in professional courses is the assumption that it is the professional practitioner who knows best what it is that students need to know and who, more importantly, has the expertise to be able to convey the relevant content. This attitude is not entirely unexpected because it is not just ethicists who have to make ethical decisions – every human being who lives in relationship with others is compelled to make decisions about how to act. This means that every human being has experience of ethical decision-making, and when it comes to particular professions, experienced teachers, nurses, scientists, business persons and others will have had to make many ethical judgements and typically all without the benefit of a training in moral philosophy. It is small wonder that having, by their own lights successfully negotiated the ethical dilemmas that they have had to face in their daily professional lives (as well as those faced in their private lives), they, like many a self-made man or woman, feel confident in their hard won practical experience to make decisions which are morally good. If they are also educators, they will also feel, with good reason, that they are well placed to not only decide what ethical instruction students in their professional courses should receive, but to also do the instructing.

In the higher education context, given the exigencies of staffing and financial pressure, this has resulted in practitioners in professional courses such as Nursing, Education, Science and Business, to name but a few professional areas, to take over ethics instruction from those traditionally assigned this task, namely moral philosophers and ethicists. The advantage of educators from the profession teaching ethics is that they know what is relevant and are able to teach at the right level for the students. Further it is argued that a truly reflective professional knows what it is to be a good practitioner – something that an ethicist or a moral philosopher is unlikely to know since he or she would not be inward with the discipline.

Cynically, one might add that many professional disciplines act on the assumption that a good teacher can teach anything, whatever the discipline. There is, therefore, no necessity to have professional ethicists or moral philosophers teaching ethics. It is questionable whether this is a good argument.

The argument largely turns on a separation of what it is to be a good practitioner of a vocation from what it is to be a good person, a distinction first noted by Aristotle. What is required of the good musician or a good carpenter is different to what is required of a good person. Clarkeburn (2002) makes the point that an ethics course by itself cannot hope to aim to instil good characters and good virtues in students and so we must settle for training students to be ethically sensitive and able to reason well. For good measure, through such training they may also come to know something of the kinds of moral dilemmas that they will be faced with in their chosen profession. Clarkeburn points out that education which aims to produce good persons must involve all aspects of the student's higher education, not just ethical courses. (Clarkeburn, 2002) This is undoubtedly right and if we cannot do this, then the argument for training by professionals which concentrates on codes of ethics and ethical decision-making specific to a profession is strengthened.

As Clarkeburn concedes, however, this depends on what the aim of higher education is and how far we are prepared to pursue it. If the aim is training rather than education, there is some sense in instilling in students the seriousness of the acceptance of and adherence to a professional code of ethics. The nub of the objection to this though is that we want to train professionals not only to adhere to a code of ethics, but to also be able to think for themselves. Moreover, we want not just good professionals, but also good persons, even if we do not see that this is the primary aim of our professional degree programs. This means that we want more than just discussion of moral dilemmas – we also want to form persons with a commitment to the good, to truth, to justice and compassion. It is self evident that this cannot be done in a single ethics unit run over 12 weeks, but it can be a goal if it is the overall aim of the professional course the student is studying. We want not just good teachers, where this means they know how to teach, we want teachers, social workers and nurses who are committed to the good, to truth, to justice and compassion and, importantly, know what this means.

What the ethicist or moral philosopher can offer to students, particularly in service courses, is the opportunity to learn about the different ways ethical theory can illuminate approaches to ethical decision-making more generally. Though some empirical studies show students do not seem to benefit from an exposure to the types of ethics courses that moral philosophers and ethicist are likely to mount, this is a pedagogical criticism rather than an argument for claiming that there is no need for an understanding of the ethical principles which support ethical decision-making (Arras, 1991; Keefer, & Ashley, 2001; Beauchamp & Childress, 2001). In short, moral philosophers provide the resources that students need in order to have more meaningful discussions about the moral dilemmas that they discuss and to have the tools for moral decision-making. Moreover, the concern of the moral philosopher is not just training in a moral code, but the larger (and more difficult) task of awakening in students a love of the good, justice, truth and beauty. In this much wider task, which is, moreover, more generally the aim of liberal education, the moral philosopher brings together the role of good professional and good person.

Aristotle's argument

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle argues that a good musician is not the same as a good person. Aristotle outlines those qualities and attributes which we would expect a good lyre player to have – such as appropriate technical skills, and argues that these are very different from those which we might expect a good person to have. This is obvious, since a good carpenter and a good lyre player will have distinctive skills which they need to practise in their particular professions, but both may be good persons. Though the distinction between good musician and good person seems obvious, it is rather more difficult to argue that there is a clear cut distinction to be made between the idea of a good person and someone who

is a good nurse, for example, or a good teacher, or more generally, a good professional. A good teacher, where by this we mean someone with excellent pedagogical skills, may not be thought a fit and proper person to teach children. A recent Australian newspaper report of the discovery of child pornography on the computers of some teachers and their consequent dismissal from teaching suggests very strongly that private values cannot be divorced from public professional values. Similarly, a good nurse is expected to be a morally upright person, though this is no longer stated explicitly. (See Nurses Act Victoria, 1958.) The point to be drawn from this is that professional values cannot be separated from private values. A good professional person is expected to also be a good person.

The reaction to professionals such as teachers who are found with pornographic images of children is not just an expression of repugnance based on emotion, but on the fear that even in those cases where the teacher has always performed his professional duties well and there is no indication that he has ever acted improperly towards the children in his charge, prudence dictates that the teacher be removed from any further contact with children. It is not an irrational fear, for it is based on the view that a corrupt nature will inevitably manifest itself in the ethical decisions that a person makes. The more corrupt a person is, the more likely that such a nature will be manifested in the public professional role that a person has. Aquinas agrees with this, as does Augustine, in his discussion of the judge forced to condemn a criminal to death. Augustine's point being that it is far better for the judge not to have to do this. (Augustine, 1984) Aquinas notes that if a person is cruel to animals, he or she will become hardened and likely to become cruel to human beings. (Aquinas, 1948) This view is also present in the exemptions that certain classes of individuals have from being on a jury – eg those whose job involves killing animals. These examples, show that there are reasons for holding that private values affect public values, and true professionalism involves moral uprightness.

Lord Justice Potter, Chair of the Legal Services Panel in Britain in remarking that that though it is important to have codes of conduct, it is more important that the core values and beliefs which underpin the code are understood. In saying this, he tacitly supports the idea that it is the role of the philosopher-king, as outlined by Plato in the Republic, to which we aspire, but that it is not given to everyone to understand the values and beliefs underpinning the code of conduct. He says, “However, situation-specific rules are not alone sufficient. Any well drafted code should also set out a framework of core values and aspirations to be borne in mind at all times, and which are available both to regulate in situations or dilemmas which are not specifically dealt with, and to guide in the application of provisos which allow discretionary relaxation of the individual black letter rules in particular cases.” (Potter, 2002)

Potter goes on to say, “I consider it is the responsibility of a university law degree to require its students to consider the role of law in society both as an instrument of regulation and of change (ie its political and social role) and as the means by which ‘justice’ is delivered to the citizenry at large. How far does ‘justice according to law’ achieve its aim? What are the tensions which exist between individual and social justice and what should be the priorities of the law in resolving them?” These are much more general considerations than just the inculcation of appropriate codes of professional practice in the conduct of the law. Potter quotes Hutchison of Osgood Hall as saying that: “There are three basic steps that must be taken; teaching ethics in such a way that it encourages students to treat its study as an active and continuing challenge rather than a passive and finite undertaking, teaching ethics in such a way that the method of instruction obliges students to deal with ethical problems in an engaged and participatory session and teaching ethics in such a way that ensures that the process of the product of ethical reasoning is connected to the messy socio-political context in which ethical controversies and their proposed solutions arise.”

Potter's remarks suggest that there is much more at stake in ethics teaching in a professional degree than just training individuals to understand and apply a code of professional ethics. There is a need for a much broader understanding of the principles which guide the choice of the code itself, but not just an understanding of the principles themselves is needed. What is also needed is a commitment to living the values which support the ethical principles on which the codes of practice are based. Professionals need to be habituated to the need for ethical conduct and trained so that ethical behaviour is not an afterthought but automatic but over and above this they need to come to a deep autonomous acceptance of the values on which their ethical conduct is based. This involves an education which commits them to fundamental values such as truth, justice, beauty and goodness.

Approaches to ethics in higher education

A common perception is that one of the primary motivations behind the drive towards greater ethical sensitivity and consciousness by graduates is the fear that ethical scandals will lead to a loss of public confidence in the particular profession. (Illingworth, 2004) It is this kind of view that we should resist. While it is true that human beings are far from pure in their motivations, ethical behaviour cannot simply rely on the deterrent effect of adverse publicity when it is learned that particular professionals have acted unprofessionally. The dichotomy between public professional ethical standards and private ethical standards cannot be sustained because ethical decision-making at its deepest levels, particularly in situations where a code is unable to guide, relies on the fundamental values which persons, by their actions, reveal that they hold. Though there are several approaches to teaching ethics, not all will aim at a profound autonomous acceptance of fundamental values determined by critical reflection on what is the good for human persons living in community with one another.

There are three basic approaches to the teaching of ethics according to Illingworth – 1) A pragmatic approach which relies on teaching students about codes of ethics. In this approach, the emphasis is on elaborating what it means to be a professional in terms of behaviour which accords with an agreed code of conduct. 2) An embedded approach which bases ethics on the students' emerging sense of identity. In this approach, ethics is taught as part of a more general understanding of morality and so ethical issues in a particular area are embedded in more general concerns. In this way, students are able to exercise greater autonomy in their ethical decision making. 3) A theoretical approach in which students are introduced to ethical theories which can then be applied to a variety of situations and contexts. Each of these approaches can be supported by the use of case studies, which lend themselves to a variety of learning and teaching styles. Significantly, Illingworth also argues for collaboration between ethical theorists and professional practitioners if students are to receive the best possible ethics education. (Illingworth, 2004)

Illingworth argues for the importance of demystifying ethics both for teachers and students and proposes that this implies that the best way to approach ethics is not through theory, but through role play, practice-based learning and narrative. (2004, 46) We can broadly agree with educational practice which begins from the lived experience of students. We also need to have an understanding of the students themselves and how they will interpret the moral principles and conceptions of the good, of justice and compassion presented to them. That is to say, fundamental principles and values come to be known through a process which begins with the subject's interpretation of his or her experience grounded, as Heidegger would put it, in Dasein or being. (Thomson, 2000; 2001; Peters, 2000) Reflecting on experience is a good approach to deepening a student's understanding of ethical issues, but reflection also needs some theoretical tools to help the reflective process. A student needs to know how to reflect on ethical questions and it cannot be supposed that he or she will be able to do this without some exposure to the various ways in which we can think about ethics. A study of ethical theory should not be dismissed so readily.

There needs to be more available to the student than just their intuitions about what is right and wrong. Moreover, leaving matters in such a pass presupposes that there are no ways in which ethical dilemmas can be resolved in such way that one can be confident that one has made the right choice. That is, that one has chosen to act morally well. Ethics is not just a matter of taste, despite the popular view that the only restriction to be placed on human actions is that they not harm anyone. We would not accept, for instance, a plea from someone who, having embezzled to support a gambling habit, nevertheless insisted that he had acted with good intentions and so should be spared from having to accept the consequences of his actions. We would not countenance such behaviour even if, as a matter of fact, it did not harm anyone, as would be the case if the money were fully returned.

A fundamental requirement for an ethics course is that it makes people think about the ethical decisions that they make and that they gain the ability to engage in ethical reasoning. This does not mean that each professional discipline needs its own ethics course, but, from what has already been argued, due regard to context and the situation of the students, leads us to see that examples drawn from professional experience provide the teacher with a very valuable pedagogical tool. The right kind of examples will lead the student to make connections from particular judgements to more universal applications of the principles on which particular judgements are based.

The aim in an ethics course is the acquisition of the intellectual tools that enable students to be able to decide right from wrong and act accordingly, but ethics education demands commitment to moral values. Our moral commitments, based on the values we hold important, justifiably form a crucial element in what is passed on to students, not simply as elements in a variety of ethical positions that may be taken, but as a position which, after considered thought, they can be justified in taking themselves. That is, the values we hold express our commitments to what is right and wrong and so are worthy of consideration. Significantly, being prepared to take a stand teaches students the importance of ethical commitment. It is the view expressed by Martin Luther who says, “Here I stand, I can do no other”. (Diet of Worms, 1521) The moral relativist, who he or she acts on the basis that what he or she decides at that moment is morally right, has no moral commitment. We resist such a view because of its self contradictory nature – as Kant has outlined in his moral theory. Students need to acquire an understanding of what is right and wrong and a commitment to the moral values implied by that understanding. (See also Greer, 1999.)

Clarkeburn holds, as we have noted already, that it is unreasonable to aim for virtue and character development in an undergraduate ethics program. This is not because these are not admirable aims, but because it is impossible for this to be carried out in the space of an ethics class. Changing character requires change at a fundamental level and needs to be an overarching aim of the whole of the educational process. Clarkeburn is right to argue that there is little possibility for virtue and character development to occur in its entirety in an ethics class, but is unduly pessimistic about the prospect of virtue and character formation in an entire undergraduate course. She commits the atomistic fallacy by claiming that because one ethics course unit does not lead to character and virtue formation, and because a fortiori each and every other course unit that a student studies contains either very little or no references to ethical values, that the overall education that a student receives does not result in character and virtue formation. But of course individual units in a course of study are not entirely separated from one another; each subject will contribute some small element to character formation, just as each contributes to the professional development of the student and so, taken together, provided that attention is paid to moral values throughout a course of study, they will result in character and virtue formation. Clarkeburn is right to say that the whole of an undergraduate program must be directed towards character and virtue formation, not just individual elements. Seen within a broader canvas of the entire undergraduate program that a student undertakes, an ethics unit which acts as a capstone unit will be involved in character and virtue

formation. Each and every course unit needs to include some aspects of what it is to live morally in the community, as Newman in his account of liberal education makes clear. (Newman, 1996) It is not all or nothing, as Clarkeburn seems to suggest.

Nevertheless, in practical terms, Clarkeburn's blueprint for an ethics education has much to recommend. She says, "A third possibility for ethics education is to concentrate on the process of moral decision making: to support students in developing tools to recognise, analyse and solve moral problems and to create opportunities to practice [sic] these skills." The emphasis, she suggests, should be on the recognition of ethical facts and rules and on practical reasoning to solve moral dilemmas. An ability to solve moral problems is an intrinsic good and should be one of the aims of education. Clarkeburn advocates skills based moral development on the grounds that someone who is able to see the wider implications of his or her actions and who is able to use practical reason in his or her decision-making is more likely to make good decisions than someone who does not have these skills. If this is so, then moral development is a reasonable aim of an ethics program. There is little to disagree with here.

The shape of an ethics course

There are two main elements in a skills based ethics course: i) ethical sensitivity, which means being able to recognise the moral dimensions of a particular situation and ii) moral reasoning, being able to use reasoning and practical decision-making skills to solve a moral problem. Bebeau (2002) supports the need for ethics courses which enable students to engage in reflective thinking, arguing for training in ethical sensitivity. That these courses should be reinforced by integrating a consideration of other values throughout the remainder of a student's program is supported by other educational theorists, as well as empirical research. (Bielby, 2003; Taplin, 2002; Halsted & Taylor, 2000, Noddings, 1995) Clarkeburn says that to be successful, an ethics course unit has to get four elements right: 1) the course designed has to be at the right development level for the students and meet their needs; 2) ethics courses should be run at those stages of their lives when students are most receptive to a study of ethics. This could begin in the first year and continue on into other years. 3) The course should be of the appropriate length. Clarkeburn suggests this should be 4-12 weeks in length. 4) Study has shown that optimum learning takes place when a case study approach is taken which allows students to practise their moral decision-making skills. Least successful, says Clarkeburn, is a didactic method which emphasises ethical theories. (Clarkeburn, 2002)

That didactic methods which emphasise ethical theories do not work well is supported by other research which shows that case study methods of teaching ethics work best. (Keefer and Ashley, 2001) Experienced ethical reasoners, that is, ethics graduate students, were careful to identify issues and to specify conditions under which specific professional role obligations recommend particular actions. They also elaborated the conditions which would affect the moral analysis of a problem and they justified resolutions in terms of those conditions which they concluded applied to the problem. This is an ideal way to approach to approach ethical problems. This suggests that the ideal ethics course involves experienced ethics theorists who are able to present case studies to students which pertain to their particular professional area in such a way that different theoretical approaches to reaching moral decisions are learned. It is moral philosophers and ethicists who have the deepest understanding of different ethical theories and so the different ways in which ethical decisions can be reached. Ideally, then, ethical theories should be introduced to students through a variety of case studies. In an introductory twelve week ethics course there is scope for a number of ethical theories to be introduced together with a number of case studies drawn from a professional area. In advanced units in a professional degree ethics can be then be reinforced through further case studies. In all this, ethical theorists and educators in a professional course from the relevant disciplines should be in constant dialogue to ensure that the case studies chosen remain fresh and relevant to the professional area.

In a basic ethics unit students need to be taught some of the basic normative theories of ethics which provide the tools for thinking about ethical decision-making. Thus, students need to know something about virtue ethics, deontological theories, natural law and utilitarianism, to name a few of the main ethical theories. Once they have a grasp of the basic theories, they can begin looking at more context dependent case studies. For example, for nurses, it is vital to consider end of life issues, as well as resource allocation questions, for business students, the rights of employees to a just wage and the responsibilities of company directors to their shareholders. Law students would be vitally interested in questions related to the nature of justice and the justification for punishment. Such a unit, taught by moral philosophers in dialogue with relevant professionals, would begin the task of enabling students to make firm moral commitments and to integrate these into both their professional and private lives.

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