

Teaching the Virtues

By Christina Hoff Sommers

Not very long ago, I published an article called “Ethics without Virtue” in which I criticized the way ethics is being taught in American colleges. I pointed out that there is an overemphasis on social policy questions, with little or no attention being paid to private morality.

I noted that students taking college ethics are debating abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, DNA research, and the ethics of transplant surgery while they learn almost nothing about private decency, honesty, personal responsibility, or honor. Topics such as hypocrisy, self-deception, cruelty or selfishness rarely came up. I argued that the current style of ethics teaching which concentrated so much on social policy was giving students the wrong ideas about ethics. Social morality is only half of the moral life; the other half is private morality. I urged that we attend to both.

A colleague of mine did not like what I said. She told me that in her classroom she would continue to focus on issues of social injustice. She taught about women’s oppression corruption in big business, multinational corporations and their transgressions in the Third World – that sort of thing. She said to me, “You are not going to have moral people until you have moral institutions. You will not have moral citizens until you have a moral government.” She made it clear that I was wasting time and even doing harm by promoting bourgeois morality and the bourgeois virtues instead of awakening the social conscience of my students.

At the end of the semester, she came into my office carrying a stack of exams and looking very upset.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“They cheated on their social justice take-home finals. They plagiarized!” More than half of the students in her ethics class had copied long passages from the secondary literature. “What are you going to do?” I asked her. She gave me a self-nocking smile and said, “I’d like to borrow a copy of that article you wrote on ethics without virtue.”

A Hole in the Moral Ozone

There have been major cheating scandals at many of our best universities. A recent survey reported in the Boston Globe says that 75 percent of all high school students admit to cheating; for college students the figure is 50 percent. A U.S. News and World Report survey asked college-age students if they would steal from an employer. Thirty-four percent said they would. Of people forty-five and over, six percent responded in the affirmative.

Part of the problem is that so many students come to college dogmatically committed to a moral relativism that offers them no grounds to think that cheating is just wrong. I sometimes play a macabre game with first-year students, trying to find some act they will condemn as morally wrong: Torturing a child. Starving someone to death. Humiliating an invalid in a nursing home. The reply is often: “Torture, starvation, and humiliation may be bad for you or me, but who are we to say they are bad for someone else?”

Not all students are dogmatic relativists; nor are they all cheaters and liars. Even so, it is impossible to deny that there is a great deal of moral drift. The students’ ability to arrive at reasonable moral judgments is severely, even bizarrely, affected. A Harvard University professor annually offers a large history class on the Second World War and the rise of the Nazis. Some years back, he was stunned to learn from his teaching assistant that the majority of students in the class did not believe that anyone was really to blame for the Holocaust. The graduate assistant asserted that if these Harvard students were sitting in judgment at Nuremberg they would have let everyone off. No one was to blame. In the students’ minds, the Holocaust was like a natural cataclysm: it was inevitable and unavoidable. The professor refers to his students’ attitude about the past as “no-fault history.”

One philosopher, Alasdair MacIntyre, has said that we may be raising a generation of “moral stutterers.” Others call it moral illiteracy. Education consultant Michael Josephson says: “There is a hole in the moral ozone.” Well, what should the schools be doing to make children morally literate, to put fault back into no-fault history, to mend the hole in the moral ozone?

How Ethics Courses Have Changed

First, a bit of history. Let me remind you of how ethics was once taught in American colleges. In the nineteenth century, the ethics course was a high point of college life. It was taken in the senior year, and was usually taught by the president of the college who would uninhibitedly urge the students to become morally better and stronger. The senior ethics course was in fact the culmination of the students’ college experience. But as the social sciences began to flourish in the early twentieth century, ethics courses gradually lost prominence until they became just one of several electives offered by philosophy departments. By the mid-1960s, enrollment in courses on moral philosophy reached an all-time low and, as one historian of higher education put it, “college ethics was in deep trouble.”

At the end of the ’60s, there was a rapid turnaround. To the surprise of many a department chair, applied ethics courses

suddenly proved to be very popular. Philosophy departments began to attract unprecedented numbers of students to courses in medical ethics, business ethics, ethics for everyday life, ethics for lawyers, for social workers, for nurses, for journalists. More recently, the dubious behavior of some politicians and financiers has added to public concern over ethical standards which in turn has contributed to the feeling that college ethics is needed. Today American colleges and universities are offering thousands of well-attended courses in applied ethics.

I, too, have been teaching applied ethics courses for several years, but my enthusiasm for them tapered off when I saw how the students reacted. I was especially disturbed by comments students made again and again on the course evaluation forms: "I learned there was no such thing as right or wrong, just good or bad arguments." Or: "I learned there is no such thing as morality." I asked myself: What was it about these classes that was fostering this sort of moral agnosticism and skepticism. Perhaps the students themselves were part of the problem. Perhaps it was their high school experience that led them to become moral agnostics. Even so, I felt that my classes were doing nothing to change them.

The course I had been giving was altogether typical. At the beginning of the semester we studied a bit of moral theory, going over the strengths and weaknesses of Kantianism, utilitarianism, social contract theory and relativism. We then took up topical moral issues such as abortion, censorship, capital punishment, world hunger, and affirmative action. Naturally, I felt it my job to present careful and well-argued positions on all sides of these popular issues. But this atmosphere of argument and counterargument was reinforcing the idea that all moral questions have at least two sides, i.e., that all of ethics is controversial.

Perhaps this reaction is to be expected in any ethics course primarily devoted to issues on which it is natural to have a wide range of disagreement. In a course specifically devoted to dilemmas and hard cases, it is almost impossible not to give the student the impression that ethics itself has no solid foundation.

The "Plain Moral Facts"

The relevant distinction here is between "basic" ethics and "dilemma" ethics. It is basic ethics that G.J. Warnock has in mind when he warns his fellow moral philosophers not to be bullied out of holding fast to the "plain moral facts." Because the typical course in applied ethics concentrates on problems and dilemmas, the students may easily lose sight of the fact that some things are clearly right and some are clearly wrong, that some ethical truths are not subject to serious debate.

I recently said something to this effect during a television interview in Boston, and the skeptical interviewer immediately asked me to name some uncontroversial ethical truths. After stammering for a moment, I found myself rattling off several that I hold to be uncontroversial:

It is wrong to mistreat a child, to humiliate someone, to torment an animal. To think only of yourself, to steal, to lie, to break promises. And on the positive side: it is right to be considerate and respectful of others, to be charitable and generous.

Reflecting again on that extemporaneous response, I am aware that not everyone will agree that all of these are plain moral facts. But teachers of ethics are free to give their own list or to pare down mine. In teaching ethics, one thing should be made central and prominent: right and wrong do exist. This should be laid down as uncontroversial lest one leaves an altogether false impression that everything is up for grabs.

It will, I think, be granted that the average student today does not come to college steeped in a religious or ethical tradition in which he or she has uncritical confidence. In the atmosphere of a course dealing with hard and controversial cases, the contemporary student may easily find the very idea of a stable moral tradition to be an archaic illusion. I am suggesting that we may have some responsibility here for providing the student with what the philosopher Henry Sidgwick called "moral common sense." (Sometimes he spoke of "established morality" as it is commonly understood and accepted.)

More generally, I am suggesting that we should assess some of the courses we teach for their edificatory effect. Our responsibility as teachers goes beyond purveying information about the leading ethical theories and in developing dialectical skill in moral casuistry. I have come to see that dilemma ethics is especially lacking in edificatory force, and indeed that it may even be a significant factor in encouraging a superficial moral relativism or agnosticism.

I shall not really argue the case for seeing the responsibility of the teacher of ethics in traditional terms. It would seem to me that the burden of argument is on those who would maintain that modern teachers of ethics should abjure the teacher's traditional concern with edification. Moreover, it seems to me that the hands-off posture is not really as neutral as it professes to be. (Author Samuel Blumenfeld is even firmer on this point. He says, "You have to be dead to be value-neutral.")

One could also make a case that the new attitude of disowning responsibility probably contributes to the student's belief in the false and debilitating doctrine that there are no "plain moral facts" after all. In tacitly or explicitly promoting that doctrine, the teacher contributes to the student's lack of confidence in a moral life that could be grounded in something more than personal disposition or political fashion. I am convinced that we could be doing a far better job of moral education.

The Philosophy of Virtue

If one accepts the idea that moral edification is not an improper desideratum in the teaching of ethics, then the question arises: What sort of course in ethics is effective? What ethical teachings are naturally edificatory? My own experience leads

ne to recommend a course on the philosophy of virtue. here, Aristotle is the best place to begin. Philosophers as diverse as Plato, Augustine, Kant and even Mill wrote about vice and virtue. And there is an impressive contemporary literature on the subject. But the locus classicus is Aristotle.

Students find a great deal of plausibility in Aristotle's theory of moral education, as well as personal relevance in what he says about courage, generosity, temperance and other virtues. I have found that an exposure to Aristotle makes an immediate inroad on dogmatic relativism; indeed the tendency to dismiss morality as relative to taste or social fashion rapidly diminishes and may vanish altogether. Most students find the idea of developing virtuous character traits naturally appealing.

Once the student becomes engaged with the problem of what kind of person to be, and how to become that kind of person, the problems of ethics become concrete and practical and, for many a student, morality itself is thereafter looked on as a natural and even inescapable personal undertaking. I have not come across students who have taken a course in the philosophy of virtue saying that they have learned there is no such thing as morality. The writings of Aristotle and of other philosophers of virtue are full of argument and controversy, but students who read them with care are not tempted to say they learned "there is no right or wrong, only good or bad arguments."

At the elementary and secondary level students may be too young to study the philosophy of virtue, but they certainly are capable of reading stories and biographies about great men and women. Unfortunately, today's primary school teachers, many of whom are heavily influenced by what they were taught in trendy schools of education, make little use of the time-honored techniques of telling a story to young children and driving home "the moral of the story." What are they doing?

Values Clarification: No Right or Wrong

One favored method of moral education that has been popular for the past twenty years is called "Values Clarification," which maintains the principle that the teacher should never directly tell students about right and wrong, instead the students must be left to discover "values" on their own. One favored values clarification technique is to ask children about the likes and dislikes: to help them become acquainted with their personal preferences. The teacher asks the students, "How do you feel about homemade birthday presents? Do you like wall-to-wall carpeting? What is your favorite color? Which flavor of ice cream do you prefer? How do you feel about hit-and-run drivers? What are your feelings on the abortion question?" The reaction to these questions – from wall-to-wall carpeting and to hit-and-run drivers – is elicited from the student in the same tone of voice – as if one's personal preferences in both instances are all that matters.

One of my favorite anecdotes concerns a teacher in Newton, Massachusetts who had attended numerous values clarification work-shops and was assiduously applying its techniques in her class. The day came when her class of sixth graders announced that they valued cheating and wanted to be free to do it on their test. The teacher was very uncomfortable. Her solution? She told the children that since it was her class, and since she was opposed to cheating, they were not free to cheat. "In my class you must be honest, for I value honesty. In other areas of your life you may be free to cheat."

Now this fine and sincere young woman was doing her best not to indoctrinate her students. But what she was telling them is that cheating is not wrong if you can get away with it. Good values are "what one values." she valued the norm of not cheating. That made this value binding on her, and gave her the moral authority to enforce it in her classroom; others, including the students, were free to choose other values "elsewhere." The teacher thought she had no right to intrude by giving the students moral direction. Of course, the price for her failure to do her job in inculcating moral principles is going to be paid by her bewildered students. They are being denied a structural way to develop values. Their teacher is not about to give it to them lest she interfere with their freedom to work out their own value systems.

Preferences over Principles

This Massachusetts teacher values honesty, but her educational theory does not allow her the freedom to take a strong stand on honesty as a moral principle. Her training has led her to treat her "preference" for honesty as she treats her preference for vanilla over chocolate flavored ice cream. It is not hard to see how this doctrine is an egotistical variant of ethical relativism. For most ethical relativists, public opinion is the final court of ethical appeal; for the proponent of values clarification, the locus of moral authority is to be found in the individual's private tastes and preferences.

How sad that so many teachers feel intellectually and "morally" unable to justify their own belief that cheating is wrong. It is obvious that our schools must have clear behavior codes and high expectations for their students. Civility, honesty and considerate behavior must be recognized, encouraged and rewarded. That means that moral education must have as its explicit aim the moral betterment of the student. If that be indoctrination, so be it. How can we hope to equip the students to face the challenge of moral responsibility in their lives if we studiously avoid telling them what is right and what is wrong?

The elementary schools of Amherst, New York provide good examples of an unabashedly directive moral education. Posters are placed around the school extolling kindness and helpfulness. Good behavior in the cafeteria is rewarded by being able to sit at a "high table" with a tablecloth and flowers. One kindergarten student was given a special award for having taken a new Korean student under her wing. But such simple and reasonable methods as those practiced in Amherst, New York are rare. Many school systems have given up entirely the task of character education. Children are left to fend for

hemselves. To my mind, leaving children alone to discover their values own values is a little like putting them in a chemistry lab and saying, "Discover your own compounds, kids." If they blow themselves up, at least they have engaged in an authentic search for the self.

Can There Be Genuine Moral Education?

Ah, you may say, we do not let children fend for themselves in chemistry laboratories because we have knowledge about the chemicals. But is there really such thing as moral knowledge? The reply to that is an emphatic "Yes." Have we not earned a thing or two over the past several thousand years of civilization? To pretend we know nothing about basic decency, about human rights, about vice and virtue, is fatuous or disingenuous. Of course we know that gratuitous cruelty and political repression are wrong, that kindness and political freedom are right and good. Why should we be the first society in history that finds itself hamstrung in the vital task of passing along its moral tradition to the next generation?

Some opponents of directive moral education argue that it could be a form of brainwashing. That is a pernicious confusion. To brainwash is to diminish someone's capacity for reasoned judgment. It is perversely misleading to say that helping children to develop habits of truth telling or fair play threatens their ability to make reasoned choices. Quite the contrary: good moral habits enhance one's capacity for rational judgments.

The paralyzing fear of indoctrinating children is even greater in high schools than it is in elementary schools. One favored teaching technique, allegedly avoiding indoctrination, is dilemma ethics. Children are presented with abstract moral dilemmas: Seven people are in a lifeboat with provisions for four – what should they do? Or Lawrence Kohlberg's famous case of Heinz and the stolen drug. Should the indigent Heinz, whose dying wife needs medicine, steal it? When high school students study ethics at all, it is usually in the form of pondering such dilemmas or in the form of debates on social issues: abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment and the like. Directive moral education is out of favor. Storytelling is out of fashion.

Let's consider for a moment just how the current fashion in dilemmas differs from the older approach to moral education which often used moral tales and parables to instill moral principles in students in the primary grades. Saul Bellow asserts that the survival of Jewish culture would be inconceivable without the stories that gave point and meaning to the Jewish moral tradition. One such story, included in a collection of Jewish tales that Bellow edited, is called "If Not Higher." I sketch it here to contrast the story-approach with the dilemma-approach in primary and secondary education, but the moral of the contrast also applies to the teaching of ethics at the college level as well:

There was once a rabbi in a small Jewish village in Russia who vanished every Friday morning for several hours. The devoted villagers boasted that during these hours their rabbi ascended to Heaven to talk with God. A skeptical newcomer arrived in town, determined to discover where the rabbi really was.

One Friday morning the newcomer hid near the rabbi's house, watched him rise, say his prayers and put on the clothes of a peasant. He was him take an ax and go into the forest, chip down a tree and gather a large bundle of wood. Next the rabbi proceeded to a shack in the poorest section of the village in which lived an old woman and her sick son. He left them the wood which was enough for the week. The rabbi then quietly returned to his own house.

The story concludes that the newcomer stayed on in the village and became a disciple of the rabbi. And whenever he hears one of his fellow villagers say, "On Friday morning our rabbi ascends all the way to Heaven," the newcomer quietly adds, "If not higher."

In a moral dilemma such as Kohlberg's Heinz stealing the drug, or the lifeboat case, there are no obvious heroes or villains. Not only do the characters lack moral personality, but they exist in a vacuum outside of traditions and social arrangements that shape their conduct in the problematic situations confronting them. In a dilemma there is no obvious right and wrong, no clear vice and virtue. The dilemma may engage the students' minds; it only marginally engages their emotions, their moral sensibilities. The issues are finely balanced, listeners are on their own and they individually decide for themselves.

As one critic of dilemma ethics has observed, one cannot imagine parents passing down to their children the tale of Heinz and the stolen drug. by contrast, in the story of the rabbi and the skeptical outsider, it is not up to the listener to decide whether or not the rabbi did the right thing. the moral message is clear: "Here is a good man – merciful, compassionate and actively helping someone weak and vulnerable. Be like that person." The message is contagious. Even the skeptic gets the point.

Stories and parables are not always appropriate for high school or college ethics courses, but the literary classics certainly are. To understand King Lear, Oliver Twist, Huckleberry Finn or Millemarch requires that the reader have some understanding of (and sympathy with) what the author is saying about the moral ties that bind the characters and that hold in place the social fabric in which they play their roles. Take something like filial obligation. One moral of King Lear is that society cannot survive when filial contempt becomes the norm. Literary figures can thus provide students with the moral paradigms that Aristotle thought were essential to moral education.

I am not suggesting that moral puzzles and dilemmas have no place in the ethics curriculum. To teach something about the logic of moral discourse and the practice of moral reasoning in resolving conflicts of principles is clearly important. But

casuistry is not the place to start, and, taken by itself, dilemma ethics provides little or no moral sustenance. Moreover, an exclusive diet of dilemma ethics tends to give the student the impression that ethical thinking is a lawyer's game.

Three Steps Towards Virtue

If I were an educational entrepreneur I might offer you a four-or five-stage program in the manner of some of the popular educational consultants. I would have brochures, audio-visual materials. There would be workshops. But there is no need for brochures, nor for special equipment, nor for workshops. What I am recommending is not new, it has worked before, and it is simple:

1. Schools should have behavior codes that emphasize civility, kindness and honesty.
2. Teachers should not be accused of brainwashing children when they insist on basic civility, decency, honesty and fairness.
3. Children should be told stories that reinforce goodness. In high school and college, students should be reading, studying and discussing the moral classics.

I am suggesting that teachers must help children become acquainted with their moral heritage in literature, in religion and in philosophy. I am suggesting that virtue can be taught, and that effective moral education appeals to the emotions as well as to the mind. The best moral teaching inspires students by making them keenly aware that their own character is at stake.