“Teaching the Virtues”

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Preview: The “death of ethics” has been declared by Time magazine. The Washington Post opines that our society is bereft of conscience. And the scandals which have made headlines in the last few years touch every aspect of American life. Our nation does indeed appear to be in a genuine crisis.

Here Professor Christina Hoff Sommers, co-editor of Virtue and Vice in Everyday Life, argues that this crisis can, in large part, be attributed to the deterioration of moral education. This is the second Imprimis issue based on Hillsdale College’s Center for Constructive Alternatives March 1991 seminar, “As the Twig Is Bent: The Conflict Over Teaching Values in Our Schools.”

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.

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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?"

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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, some politicians and financiers have added to the feeling that college is merriment that, 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 the 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 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: there is no 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 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. 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 their 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?"

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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 me 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.

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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 egotistic preference.

stand on honesty as a moral principle. Her challenge of moral 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 themselves. To my mind, leaving children alone to discover their 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 learned 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 traditional 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 saw him take an ax and go into the forest, chop 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 *Middlemarch* 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 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.

Versions of this lecture appeared in the *Sovereign Citizen (Institute of American Values)* and the *Newsletter on Teaching Philosophy (American Philosophical Association)*.

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