

Ethics Education: More than a Good Idea?

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Reporter: *What do you think of Western civilization?*

Mahatma Gandhi: *I think it would be a good idea.*¹

The question more than likely predates the ancient Greeks, but it finds its classic expression in Plato's dialogue *Meno*: "Can you tell me, Socrates, whether virtue is something teachable?"² Socrates, as was his wont, does not answer directly, but asks in turn just what virtue is, claiming not to know himself. Plato's student Aristotle was more forthcoming. He famously tells us, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, that virtue (take courage) lies in the mean between the extremes of excess (rashness) and deficiency (cowardice), and that what is virtuous is relative to the capacities of the person in question (so, in a given set of circumstances, what would be courageous for Achilles to do might well be different from what it would be courageous for, say, a hobbit to do). We also learn that virtue is a state of character disposing one to choose the mean relative to oneself, and that virtue develops, not simply naturally, but *secundum naturam*, in accordance with nature through the cultivation of natural powers, much as a child learns to speak not simply naturally, without any cultivation whatsoever, but through being raised within a linguistic community. As a language then becomes "second nature" to a child—for example, he or she cannot but hear a well-formed utterance in that language as expressive of meaning—so too, if all goes well, may acting virtuously (courageously, temperately, generously, magnanimously, etc.). And we can push the comparison further: not only do language and virtue not develop simply naturally; they are also not picked up first and foremost through formal instruction, which is to say in the classroom. Instead, they develop through what we, in English, somewhat infelicitously call habit—repeated doings, in give-and-take with others of our kind, that call on and give shape to our natural powers and interests.³ Strange though it sounds, a child develops the *habit* of understanding and speaking a language. This habit (from the Latin *habitus* and Greek *hexis*) carries the child into the world and enables the child actively to carry him or herself in it.⁴ The moral virtues do likewise, with this important specification: they both make a human being a good human being and enable him or her to do good deeds.

In brief, then, Aristotle teaches us a lot about virtue—but in the end we might well want to ask again *Meno*'s question of whether virtue is something teachable. On first consideration, Aristotle's answer to this question appears to be both yes and no: yes, by example; no, by formal instruction. But the *Nicomachean Ethics* itself must then puzzle us. For Aristotle says explicitly that its aim is not theoretical but practical: "we are investigating not in order that we might know what virtue is, but in order that we might become good."⁵ The problem here is, if virtue does not

develop through formal instruction, how are lectures supposed to help us become good? Crudely put, what good are lectures, and what good is Aristotle's book as it has come down to us?

From one question we have moved then to two: Is virtue something teachable? And, what is the purpose of formal instruction in ethics of the kind that Aristotle—and, in the typical college classroom of today, Plato and Hobbes and Hume and Kant and Mill and MacIntyre and Nussbaum and Parfit and a host of others—have to offer? Neither question is merely academic in the pejorative sense of mattering little to “real world” decision-making. Instead, how we think about these questions bears concretely on the business of colleges and universities in our world today: more precisely, on what ethics courses at these levels should look like and aim for; on whether they have any place at all in college or core curricula; and on whether it is legitimate or even sensible for colleges to include character formation or, more modestly, increased facility in “moral reasoning” among the aims of liberal education. We might also wonder about the aims and status of the growing number and variety of more focused, pre-professional courses in business ethics, computing ethics, engineering ethics, and medical and nursing ethics, among others.

The aim of this forum is to pick out and pursue the question of what the aims of ethics courses at the college and university levels should be. The literature on this question is remarkably small given the great stakes and the great number of ethics courses nowadays at our many, many institutions of higher education. It is also remarkably small given the push toward *assessment* in these institutions. How can courses in ethics be assessed if it is not clear what aims these courses ought to have and can realistically achieve?—apart from the further question of whether it is possible to measure the achievement of these aims.

One, somewhat notorious position in the literature is that “providing moral guidance is no longer in [the] job description” of at least “elite universities.”⁶ So claims John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago in a reflection (though disputed) on his own institution.⁷ According to Mearsheimer, “Universities do not have a moral agenda and do not give students moral guidance, because that would involve preaching about values, and that is an enterprise that holds hardly any attraction for modern universities,” which he presents instead as devoted entirely to the mission of “teaching critical thinking” so that students might “figure out the truth for themselves.”⁸ Of course, if there is truth to be known, it seems strange not to teach it to students, so it is not surprising to find Mearsheimer state as well that, “[o]ver the course of the twentieth century, the effort to develop a scientific morality failed almost completely”—about which there is surely more to say.⁹ Mearsheimer is surely right, however, to warn us of indoctrination, where this is understood as “clos[ing] off rather than facilitat[ing] open conversation among autonomous moral agents concerning appropriate value choices and moral decisions.”¹⁰ But, to quote a critic of Mearsheimer's, “Intellectual freedom is not synonymous with being value free,”¹¹ and it is doubtful, in the words of a professor down the street from Mearsheimer at DePaul, whether a value-free study of ethics is “either possible or desirable.”¹²

Another position in the literature is that ethics education at the college level should aim, not at shaping character, inculcating principles, or communicating a vision of the good life—all

controversial propositions, the effectiveness of which can also be questioned—but at fostering students’ moral development toward more adequate *forms* of reasoning. This position is associated with the psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg and his students, including Carol Gilligan. Gilligan famously dissented from Kohlberg’s account of the terminus of moral development on the grounds that it reflected predominantly male modes of thought, but she subscribed with him to the thesis that, for women and men alike, moral development occurs over three basic levels, “from an egocentric through a societal to a universal perspective,” differentiated into five or six stages.¹³ For Kohlberg and his students, “morality...is neither ‘taught’ nor ‘caught’ but is inexorably developed out of each individual’s personal struggle to make sense of the world”¹⁴—more technically, the personal struggle to come to terms with “problematic situations of conflict” in which one or other previously settled mode of structuring our relationships with others is found no longer to fit with, or quite literally to “do justice to,” new elements of our experience that we find ourselves deeply interested in maintaining.¹⁵ In light of this conception of morality as developing out of our “structuring tendencies,” the aim of moral education, Kohlberg claims, “should be to stimulate people’s thinking ability over time in ways which will enable them to use more adequate and complex reasoning patterns to solve moral problems”¹⁶; reduced to a catchphrase, “stimulation of movement to the next stage of moral reasoning.”¹⁷

Kohlberg presents some evidence that students at higher stages of moral judgment cheat much less than do students at lower stages,¹⁸ but it is important to understand that, for him, “[s]tructures of moral judgment must be distinguished from the *content* of moral judgment,” which is to say both that *how* persons formulate a judgment does not issue in an invariant judgment about *what* ought to be done (or all the more that they will do it) and that, again in Kohlberg’s words, “the mere fact that a stage is later does not make it morally better.”¹⁹ Another way to put this point is to say that, even as a person grows able “to use more adequate and complex reasoning patterns to solve moral problems,” whether he or she will in fact come to the *correct* solution of a problem is a further question. Here psychology must pass over into philosophy, as Kohlberg himself acknowledges.²⁰ The upshot is that whether the aim of moral education in fact *should* be “stimulation of movement to the next stage of moral reasoning” depends on whether there is reason to hold that the later stages correspond to progressively more defensible philosophical theories of what we owe to each other—for Kohlberg, the core of morality.²¹ Kohlberg was at one point willing to make this claim: in a paper dating from 1975, he sought to justify the claim that “the latest or principled stages of moral reasoning are morally better stages” by appeal to “the liberal or rational tradition, in particular the ‘formalistic’ or ‘deontological’ tradition running from Immanuel Kant to John Rawls.”²² It is interesting that Kohlberg never considered, at least in print, whether the natural law tradition represented by a thinker like Aquinas might better support what a fellow psychologist called his “faith in nature” that, under “properly nurturant [...] conditions, not only the form of moral reasoning but its content and ensuing behavior will develop” in ways that moral theorists could hope for.²³

There is one last important question to note by way of introduction. This is whether, as Kenneth Goodpaster nicely asked some years ago, the activity of teaching ethics “leans more

toward *poiesis*”—that is, a *making* the good of which is a product external to the activity—”or more toward *praxis*”—that is, a *practice* at least some goods of which lie internal to the practice itself.²⁴ To use Goodpaster’s examples, “Making a musical instrument, like a flute, would be *poiesis*. [...] Playing the flute would be *praxis*.”²⁵ To the point for present purposes, when we teach ethics at the college level, do we aim to *make* students more ethical—or, in any event, more skilled at moral reasoning—or to involve and interest students in a practice of inquiry and reflection that has an integrity and purpose of its own, which we do not properly appreciate when we focus only on how it *leaves* students after the course is done? Another possibility is that the contrast here is overdrawn.

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Notes

1. This quotation, oft repeated and attributed to Gandhi, appears to be apocryphal.
2. Plato 2004, 91 (70a). For the prehistory of ancient Greece, see Burkert 2004.
3. Compare book 1, chapter 14 of Augustine’s *Confessions* on how he learned his native Latin from nurses and through childish games, as opposed to Greek in school.
4. See Joe Sachs’s introduction to Aristotle 2002, xi–xvii.
5. Aristotle 2002, 23 (1103b).
6. Mearsheimer 1998b, 194.
7. See Booth 1998.

8. Mearsheimer 1998b, 195. See also Mearsheimer 1998a, 151: “collectively we are silent on the issue of morality, and instead we concentrate on teaching you to think critically.”
9. Mearsheimer 1998a, 149.
10. Camenisch 1986, 503.
11. Hayes 2007.
12. Camenisch 1986, 503.
13. See Gilligan 1977, 483; see also 515. Toward the end of his life, Kohlberg qualified “our sixth stage [as] a theoretical hypothesis” which he was not ready to consider “empirically confirmed.” See Kohlberg 1982, 523.
14. Bereiter 1978, 20.
15. See Kohlberg and Boyd 1973, 371.
16. Kohlberg and Hersch 1977, 56.
17. Kohlberg 1975, 673.
18. Ibid., 672.
19. Ibid., 671. Compare Kohlberg 1982, 525.
20. Ibid., 672.
21. Ibid., 673: “moral principles are ultimately principles of justice.” See further 674: “it is not clear that the whole realm of personal, political, and religious values is a realm which is nonrelative, i.e., in which there are universals and a direction of development.”
22. Ibid., 672, but see again Kohlberg 1982, 525.
23. Bereiter 1978, 21.
24. Goodpaster 1982, 37.
25. Ibid.

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