

## **Ethics after Kohlberg: Catholic Social Teaching as Example and Test**

BERNARD G. PRUSAK

*King's College (PA)*

The first iteration of “Ethics in Focus,” published two years ago, concerned the aims of ethics education at the college level.<sup>1</sup> My introduction began with the Socratic question of whether virtue can be taught.<sup>2</sup> Aristotle’s answer to this question, I noted, appears to be both yes and no: yes, by example; no, by formal instruction. But his *Nicomachean Ethics* 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.”<sup>3</sup> The puzzle here is, if virtue does not develop through formal instruction, how are lectures like those collected in the *Nicomachean Ethics* supposed to help us become good? In brief, what good in this regard is the sort of education that college ethics courses typically provide?

The introduction went on to review various positions in the literature. For example, the political scientist John Mearsheimer notoriously denies that “elite universities,” at least, have any business “providing moral guidance.”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, though on different grounds, Stanley Fish calls for a “purified academic enterprise” wherein instructors abjure any intention to shape students’ morals or politics.<sup>5</sup> Gregory Bassham’s contribution to the forum, “Mearsheimer’s Mistakes: Why Colleges Should (and Inevitably Do) Provide Moral Guidance,” indicates reasons to wonder about the coherence of both these positions.<sup>6</sup> A more promising position in the literature is associated with Lawrence Kohlberg and his students, including Carol Gilligan. According to this school, “morality [...] is neither ‘taught’ nor ‘caught’ but is inexorably developed out of each individual’s personal struggle to make sense of the world”<sup>7</sup>—more technically, the personal struggle to come to terms with “problematic situations of conflict” in which a 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 are invested in maintaining.<sup>8</sup> 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”<sup>9</sup>: reduced to a

catchphrase, “stimulation of movement to the next stage of moral reasoning.”<sup>10</sup>

As its title suggests, the aim of this third iteration of “Ethics in Focus” is to consider what comes “after Kohlberg.” This question is pressing in light of research finding that, in the words of a onetime representative of Kohlberg’s school, “there is only a weak link between moral reasoning and moral action.”<sup>11</sup> As a result of this research, “the centrality of deliberative reasoning in moral behavior” has been called into doubt.<sup>12</sup> Greater appreciation of the so-called intuitive mind, which is “comprised of multiple nonconscious, parallel-processing systems that learn implicitly from environmental patterns and behave automatically, often without awareness,” has led instead to renewed focus on the importance of moral sensitivity, motivation, dispositions, and character—in a word, the virtues, for which sophistication in reasoning is necessary but not sufficient.<sup>13</sup>

This change in focus has generated a lot of excitement and discussion,<sup>14</sup> but two challenges need to be recognized. First, part of the attraction of Kohlberg’s theory is that it holds moral development can in fact be assessed. After all, “verbally expressed rational skills are [...] accessible to measurement” through well-validated instruments like the Defining Issues Test (DIT).<sup>15</sup> Moral sensitivity, motivation, dispositions, and character, by contrast, appear much more elusive.<sup>16</sup> Granted, assessment instruments like the DIT may not scrutinize all that educators seek to accomplish in an ethics curriculum—for example, formation in a particular moral tradition with a distinctive account of the virtues seeks more than development from one stage of reasoning to the next—but the DIT and the like do measure phenomena that otherwise might seem to resist objective measurement.<sup>17</sup> Anyone who does not appreciate this advantage has not recently had to satisfy an accrediting agency!

The second challenge is to the very possibility of character formation. So-called situationists point to experiments in social psychology suggesting that situational factors, not character traits, function as the primary determinants of people’s actions. For example, it has been found that “the greater the number of bystanders present at an emergency, the lower [the] probability that any one of them will offer assistance.”<sup>18</sup> At best, according to the situationists, character traits appear all too vulnerable to “moral ambush.”<sup>19</sup> At worst, either they just don’t exist at all—a claim based on the observation that they don’t appear to make any difference in situations where they would be expected to give evidence of themselves—or they exist only in quite specific circumstances, so-called local situations. Perhaps, for example, they exist within the context of particular professions like the military or medicine, where there are limits to the types of situations people tend to

experience qua soldier or qua physician.<sup>20</sup>

The situationist challenge to ethics education is profound. If situational factors matter more than both character and reasoning capacities, why teach ethics other than to introduce students to the history of ideas? Or, why teach more than professional ethics, where instruction might make some practical difference?<sup>21</sup>

Both the situationist challenge and that of measuring moral formation have occupied the collaborators of the Catholic Social Teaching (CST) Learning and Research Initiative, organized in 2012.<sup>22</sup> Hence this forum's subtitle. This initiative means to be an answer to a problem. As Roger Bergman, one of the initiative's collaborators, has noted, in the standard CST canon of magisterial pronouncements, "there is almost no mention of how this teaching is to be taught. Or rather, a default pedagogy is implicit: promulgate the documents, teach the principles, exhort the faithful to put these principles into practice."<sup>23</sup> But this pedagogy is little better than none. As Bergman asks, "how do we stimulate the *hunger and thirst*?"<sup>24</sup> More fully, how to present CST to students critically, without preaching, *and* in such a way that they could desire to be formed by it?<sup>25</sup> Further—and here the situationist challenge rears its head—how to present CST in such a way that it could make a difference for students' lives beyond the limited circumstances of the college experience, with its many pre-fabricated opportunities for putting theory into practice? And then, how to measure that students' formation in CST has made a difference? In other words, how are educators to know that the learning of CST has taken place? "You will know them by their fruits," Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount in a pericope that could make an accrediting agency's heart skip (Mt 7:16). What, though, are the fruits for which CST is the seed?

The contributors to this forum represent several disciplines. Jennifer Reed-Bouley is Professor of Theology and Director of the Theology Program at the College of Saint Mary in Omaha, Nebraska. Jerome Zurek is Professor of Communication and Chair of the Communication Department at Cabrini College in Radnor, Pennsylvania. Margarita Rose is Professor of Economics and Chair of the Economics Department at King's College in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. Finally, Heather Mack is Director of Heather Mack Consulting LLC in New Orleans, Louisiana. She was formerly Community Engagement Research and Assessment Director at Loyola University New Orleans. Reed-Bouley, Rose, and Mack are, further, all collaborators in the CST Learning and Research Initiative.

## Notes

1. Note that I do not distinguish here between “ethics” and “morality,” as some philosophers do. For purposes of this discussion, ethics is the Greek for which morality is the Latin.
2. Prusak 2013, 16.
3. Aristotle 2002, 23 (1103b).
4. Mearsheimer 1998, 194.
5. Fish 2008, 153.
6. Bassham 2013.
7. Bereiter 1978, 20.
8. See Kohlberg and Boyd 1973, 371.
9. Kohlberg and Hersch 1977, 56.
10. Kohlberg 1975, 673.
11. Narvaez 2008, 311.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid. See also, for criticism of Kohlberg’s theory in precisely this regard, Spohn 2000, 131–133.
14. One example is the 2014 interdisciplinary conference “Virtue and Its Development” hosted by Darcia Narvaez at the University of Notre Dame: see [http://www3.nd.edu/~dnarvaez/Virtue\\_Development\\_Symposium.htm](http://www3.nd.edu/~dnarvaez/Virtue_Development_Symposium.htm).
15. See <http://ethicaldevelopment.ua.edu/dit-and-dit-2/>.
16. Spohn 2000, 131.
17. Compare Wieseltier 2015, 1, alleging that “[t]he discussion of culture is being steadily

absorbed into the discussion of business. There are now ‘metrics’ for phenomena that cannot be metrically measured. Numerical values are assigned to things that cannot be captured by numbers. Economic concepts go rampaging through non-economic realms [...]. Where wisdom once was, quantification now will be.”

18. Mayer 2012, 60. In addition to the “bystander effect,” Mayer refers to the “urban overload hypothesis,” “pluralistic ignorance,” and deference to authority.

19. Ibid., 61.

20. Ibid., 64.

21. Readers will not be surprised that the situationist challenge has hardly gone unanswered. One answer is simply that students should be made aware of the factors that prevent people from recognizing the moral stakes of a given situation. Research suggests that people can be prepared to overcome “moral ambushes” precisely through learning about the obstacles to moral sensitivity. See Mayer, 61–62. Ronald Duska’s contribution to this forum two years ago, “What’s the Purpose of Ethics Education?”, insightfully compares the work of ethics education to that of art appreciation: what is needed in both cases is to learn to “see as,” to overcome “aspect blindness,” to develop an eye not only for the dimensions of what is before us, but for what it is about ourselves that occludes our vision. See Duska 2013, 46–48. In the course of criticizing the top-down approach to teaching ethics, beginning with theories and moving to idealized cases, Karen Adkins and Abigail Gosselin’s contribution, “Learning from the Labs: Reimagining Ethics Instruction,” emphasizes the importance of *complicating* moral reasoning. Adkins and Gosselin urge in particular drawing attention to “relations of domination and oppression” that code “the moral reasoning and perspectives of those in positions of privilege as neutral and normal standards against which other forms of reasoning and other perspectives are judged.” See Adkins and Gosselin 2013, 26. From *this* perspective, “situationism” names not an insuperable challenge to ethics education, but one of its principal concerns.

22. See <http://blogs.nd.edu/cstresearch/>.

23. Bergman 2011, 14.

24. Ibid., 9.
25. Compare Issing 2013, 53, proposing that “teaching Christian ethics is ultimately all about” transporting “the student beyond a narrow view of self and world to become amazed by the mystery of human existence.” Issing beautifully discusses in this regard the film *Of Gods and Men* (2010), which he describes as having “the potential to carry the viewer inside the discernment of the monks” and thereby to appreciate “the *coming* of Christian faith” even if the student does not share it (55–60).

## Works Cited

- Adkins, Karen, and Abigail Gosselin. 2013. “Learning from the Labs: Reimagining Ethics Education.” *Expositions* 7.1: 22–32.
- Aristotle. 2002. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. Joe Sachs. Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing.
- Bassham, Gregory. 2013. “Mearsheimer’s Mistakes: Why Colleges Should (and Inevitably Do) Provide Moral Guidance.” *Expositions* 7.1: 33–41.
- Bereiter, Carl. 1978. “The Morality of Moral Education.” *Hastings Center Report* 8.2: 20–25.
- Bergman, Roger. 2011. *Catholic Social Learning: Educating the Faith That Does Justice*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Duska, Ronald. 2013. “What’s the Purpose of Ethics Education?” *Expositions* 7.1: 42–52.
- Fish, Stanley. 2008. *Save the World on Your Own Time*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Issing, Daniel J., C.S.C. 2013. “The Virtue of Teaching Christian Ethics.” *Expositions* 7.1: 53–63.
- Kohlberg, Lawrence. 1975. “The Cognitive-Developmental Approach to Moral Education.” *Phi Delta Kappan* 56: 670–677.

- \_\_\_\_\_, and Dwight Boyd. 1973. "The Is-Ought Problem: A Developmental Perspective." *Zygon* 8: 358–372.
- \_\_\_\_\_, and Richard H. Hersh. 1977. "Moral Development: A Review of the Theory." *Theory into Practice* 16: 53–59.
- Mayer, Christopher. 2012. "The Possibility of Character Development." *Teaching Ethics* 13: 55–69.
- Mearsheimer, John. 1998. "Teaching Morality at the Margins." *Philosophy and Literature* 22: 193–198.
- Narvaez, Darcia. 2008. "Human Flourishing and Moral Development: Cognitive and Neurobiological Perspectives of Virtue Development." In *Handbook of Moral and Character Education*, eds. Larry P. Nucci and Darcia Narvaez. New York: Routledge. 310–327.
- Prusak, Bernard G. 2013. "Ethics Education: More Than a Good Idea?" *Expositions* 7.1: 16–21.
- Spohn, William C. 2000. "Conscience and Moral Development." *Theological Studies* 61: 122–138.
- Wieseltier, Leon. 2015. "Among the Disrupted." *New York Times Book Review* January 18. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/18/books/review/among-the-disrupted.html>.