

## **Mearsheimer’s Mistakes: Why Colleges Should (and Inevitably Do) Provide Moral Guidance**

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Should colleges be in the business of moral education? May college professors—including those who teach ethics courses—openly endorse and defend particular moral theories and values in class? In a much-discussed address and subsequent follow-up paper, John J. Mearsheimer, a distinguished political scientist at the University of Chicago, has answered both of these questions with an emphatic “No” (Mearsheimer 1998a). In this paper I shall argue against Mearsheimer’s view. In particular, I shall defend three claims: (1) Colleges unavoidably provide certain forms of moral guidance to their students. (2) Colleges may and should seek to positively influence the moral characters and values of their students. (3) College professors may, and sometimes should, engage in classroom ethical advocacy, that is, expressly endorse and defend contestable ethical views.

Why does Mearsheimer think that colleges should refrain from ethical guidance and advocacy?<sup>1</sup> His central argument can be summarized as follows.

Today, elite universities like the University of Chicago, Mearsheimer argues, are “remarkably amoral” institutions. By this he doesn’t mean that such institutions actively teach their students to be unethical. They are “amoral” (as opposed to “immoral”) in the sense that they have no “moral agenda” (Mearsheimer 1998b, 195), make little effort to provide moral guidance, and are “largely mum on ethical issues” (Mearsheimer 1998a, 150). There are three ways, he says, that colleges could engage in the task of moral education. First, they could provide students with explicit moral guidance both in the classroom and in university publications that spell out acceptable and unacceptable forms of behavior. Second, they could offer a wide array of classes where moral issues are discussed in detail and students are encouraged to make up their own minds about which views are most defensible. Third, professors can promote virtuous behavior in their students by serving as good ethical role models.

None of these three forms of moral education is viable, Mearsheimer argues. Explicit moral guidance in classroom teaching or in university publications is unacceptable because it involves “preaching about values” (Mearsheimer 1998b, 194) and violates the most important mission of modern universities: to teach critical thinking. In fields such as ethics where there are no “approved solutions” (Mearsheimer, 1998a, 148), the role of faculty is not to tell students “what to think, but how to think” (Mearsheimer, 1998b, 196). The second option, offering classes in which students are invited to think critically and in depth about ethical issues would be great if a “scientific morality” were possible, but unfortunately efforts to develop such a rigorous, knowledge-based morality have “failed almost completely” (Mearsheimer 1998a, 150). As a result, present-day universities “operate on the belief that there is a clear separation between

intellectual and moral purpose, and they pursue the former while largely ignoring the latter” (Mearsheimer 1998a, 150). Finally, college professors should not seek to be ethical role models for their students, because professors are no more ethical than any other class of professionals, nor can they claim any special moral expertise or authority. For these reasons, colleges should not provide moral guidance or engage in moral education. Such a task “is no longer in their job description” (Mearsheimer 1998b, 194). Instead, they should focus, as Mearsheimer’s own University of Chicago does, on “fundamentally amoral” tasks such as teaching critical thinking, broadening intellectual horizons, and promoting self-awareness (Mearsheimer 1998a, 140).

There are multiple confusions in this argument. Let’s begin with Mearsheimer’s false opposition between teaching critical thinking *or* teaching values.

### **Why Colleges Necessarily Teach Values**

Mearsheimer acknowledges one legitimate exception to his ban on values education in college: rules prohibiting plagiarism and other forms of academic misconduct (Mearsheimer 1998a, 150). Such conduct, he says, is inconsistent with the university’s mission to promote truth and independent thinking. He fails to see that a slew of other bona fide educational values can be justified by a similar logic.

All colleges are committed to the pursuit of academic and intellectual excellence. This, of course, involves a great deal more than simply avoiding cheating and plagiarism. Intellectual virtues such as diligence, accuracy, rigor, exactness, persistence, time-management, curiosity, fair-mindedness, and open-mindedness are implicit in the pursuit of academic excellence. If colleges, in virtue of their missions, can rightly “preach” against plagiarism and other forms of academic misconduct, they can, by the same token, “preach” for a great many other virtues of intellectual excellence.

A quick sampling of college mission statements shows that universities nearly always aspire to do more than simply promote academic achievement and intellectual excellence. They also seek to produce graduates who are “well-prepared for the workforce,” “responsible and active participants in civic life,” “environmentally conscious,” and “dedicated to the pursuit of justice and the common good.” If these are a university’s explicit and overarching goals, it’s hard to see why it may not consciously seek to advance them in ways that respect other mission-based goals (including Mearsheimer’s “critical thinking”).

As student handbooks make clear, all colleges make and enforce rules governing students’ moral behavior. Typical student handbooks include rules governing responsible use of information technology, hazing, hate crimes, unwanted sexual advances, disruptive classroom behavior, employee-student fraternization, excessive noise, and residence hall visitation hours. Reasonable and even necessary rules of this sort surely constitute an acceptable form of “moral guidance.” All colleges (and other organizations and institutions) must “teach values” in this minimal sense of making and enforcing rules that promote institutional objectives and positive human interactions.

Mearsheimer overlooks the many ways that colleges unavoidably teach values because he equates “moral guidance” with academic “preaching,” which he rightly condemns. By “preaching,” he seems to mean offering explicit moral advice to students in ways that amount to “moral value infusion” (Mearsheimer 1998b, 195) and aren’t open to challenge or reasoned debate. Mearsheimer is right that “preaching” in this sense is inappropriate in a college classroom and inconsistent with critical thinking. However, he is wrong to suppose that all moral guidance is a form of preaching in this sense.

Moral guidance, in fact, can take many forms, and need not be inconsistent with critical thinking (on this theme, see Paul 1993, 303–318). Socrates is a prime example of a skilled moral teacher who never sought to impose his own views and always respected the intellectual autonomy of his interlocutors by means of his eponymous “Socratic method.” Indeed, any form of ethical advocacy that appeals solely to reason, eschews sophistries and cheap propaganda tricks, and is manifestly open to debate is fully consistent with critical thinking—*unless*, that is, one thinks that ethics *itself* is incompatible with critical thinking, which may in fact be Mearsheimer’s view. Some of what he says about the failed quest for a “scientific morality” suggests that Mearsheimer is a late-blooming logical positivist or emotivist who thinks that only “facts,” not “values,” can be subject to rational argumentation and critical inquiry. If so, Mearsheimer would do well to browse through an introductory ethics text or two, for as Wayne Booth notes in his reply to Mearsheimer, crude fact/value dichotomies of this sort have long since been exploded (Booth 1998, 174).

The idea of a fact/value gap goes back to Hume, who correctly pointed out that no logically valid argument may move from purely factual or descriptive premises to a normative conclusion. This follows from simple logic. In a valid argument, the conclusion must be implicitly contained in the premises, and no normative conclusion is contained in any set of purely factual premises. A normative conclusion always adds something, or goes beyond, what is asserted by a group of factual statements.<sup>2</sup>

Confusion results when Hume’s purely logical point is confused with much stronger and more controversial claims. Nothing in Hume’s argument implies that “there are no moral truths or moral facts” or that “moral claims aren’t cognitive or rationally justifiable.” Mearsheimer appears to fall into this confusion. Despite obvious differences between ethics and science, there are no sound reasons for denying the existence of moral truths. Nor, *a fortiori*, are there adequate grounds for denying the objectivity of moral judgments. Patently, some reasons for moral conclusions are better than other. (“It hurts” is a better reason to believe that “Punching people in the nose just for the fun of it is wrong” than “Grass is green.”) As ethicist James Rachels argues, this simple fact about good and bad reasons is sufficient to establish the objectivity of ethics. In Rachels’ view, “the right thing to do is whatever there are the best reasons for doing” (Rachels and Rachels 2009, 162). As long as we can distinguish (as we clearly can) between better and worse reasons for ethical conclusions, no hard-and-fast distinction can be drawn between what Mearsheimer calls “intellectual” and “moral” purposes.

### Why Some Forms of Moral Education Are Legitimate

If colleges, as I have argued, unavoidably teach values, it follows (assuming that higher education is a worthwhile endeavor) that they *may* teach values. At a minimum, as we have seen, such values include (a) *academic success virtues* such as accuracy, hard work, and honesty and (b) *student handbook values* such as respect for privacy and responsible use of information technology. Might other values also be legitimately taught? I believe that they can.

Mission-based values of the sort previously mentioned might be legitimately promoted. A college that seeks to prepare its graduates “to succeed in an increasingly diverse global economy” can properly seek to develop in its students qualities of mind and character that are conducive to such success. The same is true of mission-based values such as “active and responsible civic participation” and “commitment to justice and the common good.” The case for teaching mission-values is strongest, of course, at sectarian colleges, which are usually up-front about the centrality of such values in their educational vision. But non-sectarian universities can also properly highlight and advance their mission-based values. At no university is “critical thinking” the be-all and end-all of educational mission.

*Improving students' moral reasoning skills* is another legitimate form of collegiate moral education. Sharpening students' abilities to analyze ethical arguments, understand ethical concepts, make sound moral decisions, and offer cogent and well-formulated ethical arguments is clearly a worthwhile and appropriate task at colleges that offer ethics classes and value such abilities in their students. As Wayne Booth shows, Mearsheimer significantly understates the number of ethics-related courses offered at elite liberal arts and research universities such as the University of Chicago (Booth 1993, 174–76). And as we've seen, Mearsheimer's claim that colleges such focus exclusively on “intellectual” purposes, not “moral” ones such as improving students moral reasoning abilities, is based on a long-discredited fact/value dichotomy.

Advocates of “character education” have made a strong case for teaching consensus values such as honesty, respect, responsibility, hard work, fairness, kindness, cooperation, and self-discipline in public schools. Supporters note that such core values are recognized as desirable character traits in virtually all ethical and religious traditions; that they are widely seen as essential for individual fulfillment and social harmony; and that teaching them in public schools can make up for ethical deficits in our culture and prevent the formation of “ethical illiterates” (Lickona 1992, 37–47). The case for teaching consensus values in colleges is weaker than it is at the pre-collegiate level. College students are older and have less plastic characters; there is more emphasis in college on intellectual and career training and less on social adjustment; and as Mearsheimer notes, there is a greater stress on teaching students “how to think,” as opposed to “what to think.” Nevertheless, it is a mistake to say, as Mearsheimer does, that teaching values is no longer in colleges' “job description[s].” Universities don't exist simply to promote critical thinking and the discovery and dissemination of knowledge. They have a valid interest in promoting both their students' individual fulfillment and the collective good of society, and for this reason should promote values and character traits that are necessary for these ends. They should not, of course, do this in ways that conflict with independent thinking or amount to

indoctrination or bully-pulpit preaching. The risk of such excesses is inherent in any program of moral education. But the greater risk is that amoral universities will produce amoral graduates. When professors, in the interests of “critical thinking,” refuse to endorse even consensus values like honesty and fairness, many students will naturally conclude that these values are relative or subjective or otherwise empty or cognitively suspect. This was the very concern that led Socrates and Plato to oppose the Sophists.<sup>3</sup> Given the fashionableness of attacks on the objectivity of ethics in academia and the many headwinds confronting moral education in our time, these concerns are arguably even greater today.

### **A Plea for Ethical Advocacy**

Until the last few decades, nearly all ethics textbooks openly took partisan stands for and against various ethical views. For example, William Paley’s *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* defended a kind of utilitarian divine command theory, John Dewey and James Tufts’s *Ethics* argued for a kind of pragmatic ethical naturalism, and Vernon Bourke’s *Ethics: A Textbook in Moral Philosophy* defended a Thomistic approach to moral issues. Nowadays, it is relatively rare to encounter such texts<sup>4</sup>; most leading ethics textbooks today are anthologies that present a variety of competing approaches and leave it to readers to make up their own minds about the merits of these views. This is the sort of non-advocative “critical thinking” approach Mearsheimer evidently favors.<sup>5</sup> I want to suggest, on the contrary, that it is often appropriate and pedagogically effective for ethics instructors to defend in class their own views on controversial issues.

Mearsheimer offers no reason why ethics instructors shouldn’t engage in classroom advocacy other than his claim that this amounts to illicit “preaching,” which we’ve already considered and rejected. So let’s look at another much-discussed argument for the same conclusion: that presented in Stanley Fish’s 2008 book, *Save the World on Your Own Time*.

Fish argues for what he calls a “purified academic enterprise” in which college professors are prohibited from consciously aiming to shape students’ moral, political, or civic values, or taking partisan stands, endorsing contestable ideas, or advocating any values other than those that are immanent in the academic enterprise itself (honesty, thoroughness, rigor, and so forth). Most of Fish’s arguments don’t apply to ethics instructors taking stands on issues discussed in class, but there are two that do: “the responsibility argument” and “the culture-wars argument.”

Fish’s responsibility argument is this: Instructors, he says, have a “fighting chance” of imparting disciplinary knowledge and analytical skills to their students, but they have “no chance at all [. . .] of determining what their behavior and values will be” outside the classroom or after graduation (Fish 2008, 58–59. The next few paragraphs draw freely from Bassham 2009). People are responsible only for things in their power. It is not in instructors’ power to determine students’ non-academic values or behaviors. Moreover, instructors should only aim to achieve what they are responsible for, not things that are unforeseen and contingent. Thus, instructors should not aim to influence students’ moral, political, civic, or other non-academic values and behaviors.

This argument fails for two reasons. First, Fish's claim that people are responsible only for things in their power is an oversimplification. Responsibility is not an all-or-nothing thing; it comes in degrees and can be shared. College professors can bear partial responsibility for their students' nonacademic values and behavior, even though, of course, it is not in professors' "power" (i.e., full or even substantial control) how students will react to their teaching. If I'm a business professor and I spend the whole semester dissing ethics and praising the most callous forms of amoral capitalism, I bear at least some responsibility if one of my students takes me at my word and get caught up in an Enron-like scandal. It is true, as Fish argues, that college professors have very limited ability to influence their students' behavior and values, for either good or ill. But that is not the issue. Limited influence is not the same as no influence. The question is whether there are things professors can do that will positively impact their students' values and their moral and civic behavior, and whether these are things that professors should be doing in light of their other responsibilities.

Second, Fish's claim that people should aim to achieve only what they are responsible for is an overgeneralization. Imagine if parents or church leaders adopted this principle. Parents clearly can't "determine" whether their kids will respect their prohibitions on underage drinking or risky sexual behavior. Should they, therefore, "aim low" and avoid such topics altogether? Should pastors stop exhorting their flocks to live righteous lives because they cannot "determine" how their congregations will react to such teaching? Fish's responsibility argument would prohibit far too much legitimate guidance and exhortation.

Fish's main argument for "purifying" higher education of all partisan or normative advocacy is the culture-wars argument. Fish claims that putting the lid on all forms of classroom advocacy would neutralize the powerful and increasingly effective argument from the right that America's universities have been commandeered by "tenured radicals" who trash patriotism and religion, preach moral relativism, and seek to indoctrinate students with their left-wing politics (Fish 2008, 114). The issue, Fish thinks, isn't whether this indictment is sound—he thinks it's overblown but not wholly off-base—but what must be done to counter it in state legislatures and in the forum of public opinion. Fish believes that conservatives are winning the public relations war, and that as a result public universities are likely to face further cuts in state funding as well as intensified efforts by political conservatives to interfere with university hiring, retention, and curricular decisions in the name of "ideological balance" and "intellectual diversity" (Fish 2008, 117–24). By insisting that all professors—liberal or conservative—avoid ideological politics in the classroom, Fish believes that this potent conservative public relations campaign can be neutralized and the autonomy of America's universities be preserved (Fish 2008, 150–152).

This argument fails for two reasons. First, it ignores several very negative effects of Fish's purification proposal that outweigh any likely advantages. And second, it exaggerates the threat of crippling, ideologically-driven crippling state funding cuts and a right-wing intrusion into university staffing and curricula.

What negative effects would Fish's purification proposal have on college teaching? Recall that Fish doesn't just impose a moratorium on overt political or ideological advocacy. He rejects

any endorsement of a contestable idea, policy, or value. Professors on his view should transmit knowledge, impart analytical skills, teach debates, dissect and weigh arguments—but never draw conclusions. They should be rigorously neutral and non-committal on all issues that are open to debate or imply a commitment to action. Even in an ethics class, he says, students “shouldn’t be arguing about whether stem cell research is a good or bad idea. They should be studying the arguments various parties have made about stem cell research [ . . . ] Analyzing ethical issues is one thing; deciding them is another, and only the first is an appropriate academic activity” (Fish 2008, 26–27).

As someone who regularly teaches ethics, I find this view unreal. The kind of neat separation Fish calls for between weighing arguments and drawing conclusions is impossible. If, in classroom discussion, it becomes clear that view A is true and view B is false, it would be wholly artificial to perform an *argumentum interruptus* and refuse to draw the conclusion that A is true and B is false. By refusing to draw this obvious conclusion, the only lesson you would be teaching your students is the bad one that well-supported conclusions need not be drawn from compelling arguments.

Moreover, how would Fish’s ban on classroom advocacy be enforced? Would department chairs and deans conduct classroom observations to monitor the ideological and normative neutrality of professors’ classes? The very idea flouts any concept of academic freedom.

One must also consider how Fish’s proposal would affect the attractiveness of college teaching as a career choice. A great many college professors—myself included—chose teaching as a profession because we hoped to have a positive impact on young peoples’ lives. America’s colleges and universities have been very successful in attracting highly qualified faculty. Would they still be as successful if it were known that college professors are barred from making value judgments or attempting to influence their students’ values and ideals?

*Pace* Mearsheimer, Fish is right that many college professors do go beyond merely “studying the arguments” and do argue forcefully for their own views. And this, I suggest, is often a *more effective way of teaching* than purely noncommittal Socratic discussion or Sophist-style devil’s-advocate argumentation. Many of the best classes I took in college were those in which professors boldly set forth their own views and invited critical responses from their students. Often, this lent energy and passion to the discussions, and students appreciated the compliment of being treated as worthy interlocutors. Such classes allowed professors to test out their ideas, and often better and more sophisticated ideas emerged for discussion than would have been elicited by purely Socratic dialogue. There was no conflict between telling students “what to think” and teaching them “how to think.” We learned how to think by critically engaging with views that were powerfully defended.

But what of Fish’s fears about the effectiveness of the right’s public relations campaign against radical left-wing professors? If the very existence and autonomy of America’s colleges and universities are imperiled, shouldn’t we bite the bullet and “purify” our campuses as Fish recommends?

Fish is here crying wolf. For all the complaints about rising costs and tenured radicals, Americans are justly proud of their institutions of higher education and understand their value in keeping America strong, safe, and prosperous. To suggest that either we make our campuses ideologically pure or we put our world-class system of higher education at risk is to pose a false choice. The right-wingers may be scoring points, but they are a long way from winning.

## Conclusion

Mearsheimer's claim that elite colleges and universities like the University of Chicago don't and shouldn't teach values is false both descriptively and prescriptively. As Fish notes, many college professors do engage in ideological and normative advocacy in their teaching—arguably, sometimes, to a fault. Mearsheimer's claim is thus false as a description of what actually takes place in college classrooms. It is also false, I have argued, as a statement of what college instructors should be doing in their classes. There is no clear separation between teaching students “what to think” and teaching them “how to think.” The educational aims Mearsheimer endorses—“critical thinking,” “academic success,” “intellectual excellence,” “self-awareness,” “broadened intellectual horizons”—are thoroughly value-laden. Moreover, a strict embargo on classroom value advocacy would weaken America's colleges, lead to less effective teaching, and ultimately result in *less* critical thinking by faculty and students alike. Every college does and should have a “moral agenda.”

## Notes

1. Mearsheimer claims that he is “mainly trying to describe how Chicago and other like-minded schools deal with ethics,” not “laying out my own thinking on whether and how universities should teach morality” (Mearsheimer 1998b, 193). However, it is clear from his discussion that Mearsheimer doesn't think that any robust or self-conscious form of moral education is desirable at universities such as his own.
2. An apparent counterexample: “Whatever Bassham says is true; Bassham has said that he is the most virtuous—not to say, best-looking—person alive; therefore, Bassham is the most virtuous (and best-looking) person alive.” This obviously valid argument apparently moves from purely descriptive premises to a normative conclusion. To avoid such counterexamples, Hume's fact/value argument needs to be careful in its definition of what counts as a “factual” or “descriptive” statement. No value terms can be included.
3. See, for example, Plato's *Protagoras* 1956, and *Republic* 1992, Book I. For a more recent statement of the concern, see Bloom 1987, 25–43.
4. Notable exceptions include Rachels and Rachels 2011, which critiques a number of notable ethical theories and defends a kind of good-reasons approach, and Thiroux and Kasemann, 2011, which defends a “humanitarian ethics” and critiques competing approaches.

5. Significantly, Mearsheimer doesn't claim that instructors must *never* engage in personal advocacy in class. He says, "The key point [...] is that we will not attempt to impose our theories on you. We will certainly tell you what we think, and we will try to convince you that our perspectives are the correct ones, but we will also present you with the alternative views and then leave it up to you to decide what you think" (Mearsheimer 1998a, 149). Given his blanket embargo on "moral guidance" and "not telling students what to think," however, strict limits on such advocacy would need to be observed.

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