

What’s the Purpose of Ethics Education?

RONALD DUSKA

Business Ethics Zone Consulting

The purpose or aim of ethics education seems simple. It should produce good behavior. People use ethics to evaluate actions and practices by determining whether and why they are right or wrong, good or bad, should or should not be done. The point is to lay out a road map to be followed in doing good and avoiding evil. Aristotle would agree, with his insistence that “the end aimed at is not knowledge but action” (Aristotle 1941, 1.3, 1095a7). This is somewhat puzzling, however, since, presumably, the goal of education is knowledge. But for Aristotle, in the case of ethical inquiry, knowledge is gained not for its own sake, but for the sake of bringing about ethical behavior. Ethical knowledge, then, is a practical wisdom—a knowing of what one should do so that one will do it.

However, we might ask whether ethics education can achieve this goal of improving behavior. There are two possible negative answers to that question. The first would claim that knowledge about ethical matters is not attainable. The second would claim that such knowledge, even if attainable, would have little effect on behavior. So one might argue that ethical education is pointless, since on this negative account it is either impossible or worthless.

What should we make of such claims? Those who claim that knowledge of ethical matters is not possible, call them “ethical skeptics,” insist that any ethical judgment is either subjective or relative. Accordingly, there are only ethical opinions, not ethical knowledge. The second group, call them the “ethical pessimists,” claim that even if knowledge were possible, it would be a waste of time since people are governed by passion and not reason. Aristotle cites this fact as a reason why ethics cannot be taught to the young, where passion abounds, but he extends it to anyone old or young who is ruled by the passions.¹ As he says, “To such persons, as to the incontinent, knowledge brings no profit; but to those who desire and act in accordance with a rational principle knowledge about such matters will be of great benefit” (Aristotle 1941, 1.3, 1095a9–11). Coincidentally, John Henry Newman, in his *Idea of a University*, might be seen as such a pessimist when he claims:

Quarry the granite rock with razors, or moor the vessel with a thread of silk; then may you hope with such keen and delicate instruments as human knowledge and human reason to contend against those giants, the passion and pride of man. (Newman 1852, discourse 5, 177)²

For these pessimists, learning and knowing what is good, even if possible, do not guarantee that education in ethics will lead to good behavior.

In response to these two skepticisms, I will try to show that we do have knowledge of what ethical behavior is and that we can change behavior. After that, there is a third issue to contend with: What are some ways of teaching ethics so that it can be efficacious? I will argue briefly that knowledge of ethical matters is possible, and that it can be effective. After that I will detail two effective ways of teaching ethics. The first I will call “didactic” and the second “educative.” To begin, though, we need to discuss the nature of ethics and whether and how knowledge of ethical matters is possible.

Ethical Knowledge Is Possible

A primary function of ethics is to evaluate or judge actions and practices in terms of their good-making characteristics and justice. We do this by determining whether those actions and/or practices are right or wrong, good or bad, should or should not be done. It is important to note that ethics is a public affair, as indicated in the etymology of the word “ethics,” which is derived from the ancient Greek word, “*ethos*.” An *ethos* is a culture, and cultures exist in communities where certain behaviors (practices) are expected and followed. The existence of ethics arises because all humans are social and political animals raised in communities where they are inculcated into the shared values, principles, and rules of the community’s culture.³

Robert Merton described this public nature of *ethos* succinctly:

There are two important elements of social and cultural structures: The first consists of culturally defined goals, purposes and interests, held out as legitimate objectives for all or for diversely located members of the society. The goals are more or less integrated [...] and roughly ordered in some hierarchy of value.

A second element of the social and cultural structures defines, regulates and controls the acceptable modes of reaching out for these goals. Every social group invariably couples its cultural objectives with regulations, rooted in the mores or institutions, of allowable procedures for moving toward these objectives. (Merton 1957, 132 and 158)

So every culture has its ethics (*ethos*). But aren’t these just culturally relative positions, held by one group or another, none of which have universal validity? Some educators might say this, but it is a position that is impossible to maintain. Let us demonstrate.

It appears to be the case that those engaged in the business of ethics education, at least those in the areas of applied ethics, are engaged in trying to improve society. They are trying to effect a change. In short, they are promoting a product – a better ethical way to handle a situation. I have yet to meet anyone in this field who is value neutral. As a matter of fact, no teacher is value neutral. Every applied ethics teacher believes the material that he or she teaches is important and should be passed on, or the person would not be teaching or studying it. Of course, for ethics teachers, this means they have to believe there are actions and institutional practices that are right and wrong and institutions that act ethically or unethically. Since these educators devote their lives to teaching applied ethics, they must have some beliefs they think are true. For example,

those who argue against exploitation of child labor by multi-national corporations must believe those practices are wrong or immoral or unethical. And they must believe that cultures that approve of this exploitation are misguided. Otherwise, it would not make sense to argue against those practices and chastise companies or cultures that engage in them. There are, of course, those involved in ethics education who might assert that the primary goal of ethics education is to make the student aware of the many different “narratives” and conflicting beliefs and not be judgmental. But they can't possibly think all narratives are of equal value. If they did think that, it would be relativism, the theory that all beliefs are equally sound. That is untenable, because if all beliefs are ethically sound, ethical argument is pointless.

Ethics education should help make us ethical, help us do what we should do. But ethics education should also help us “know” what to do. But what is knowledge? The epistemology is simple. The best definition of knowledge is justified true belief. If I think “Companies should not exploit children,” I think the statement, “Exploiting child labor is wrong” is a true statement. I must also think my belief is justified, since unjustified belief is mere opinion, and if all opinions are equal, then those who think exploiting children is okay are as justified as I am. There is a difference between the claim “I believe x is true” and the claim “I think x is true.” If I think x is true, I think I have evidence to justify my belief and that those who disagree with me are wrong. Since knowledge is justified true belief, I must hold that those who disagree simply do not know. They are without knowledge. “Gnosis” is the Greek word for knowledge. Those without knowledge are *ignosis* or, in English, ignorant. Our premise, then, is that anyone who teaches ethics with the goal of improving behavior must necessarily think ethical knowledge is possible, meaning that he or she is justified in believing (read = knows) some things are wrong.

Two Ways of Teaching Ethics

1. *The Didactic Approach to Ethics*

If, then, we know what to do, what is the best way to teach it? The first way to engage in ethics education is by simply telling the students what to do. In cultures, accepted behaviors (best practices) are developed in two ways. People are told what to do (taught the rules of the culture) and/or trained (conditioned) into what to do (what the culture expects). I will concentrate on the telling.⁴

I call this approach, where the teacher presents a list of do's and don't's based on some authority, “didactic” or “doctrinaire.” (Didactic means to teach, and doctrines are things that are taught.) The didactic approach involves the educator presenting a set of rules that tell the students how they should behave, what they should do or should not do. It is what we do when we raise young people or inexperienced people facing a new environment where they need to learn the rules. It is a procedure often used in compliance training. The student is taught to be compliant by simply being told which activities are acceptable and which are unacceptable.

In didactic moral education, the teacher simply lays out the rules and delivers demands or imperatives. Just as one can teach the Ten Commandments to a group of young people by simply

laying out the list of shalt's and shalt not's, the didactic trainer can simply recite the rules, tell what scope they have, and if need be interpret them according to some canonical reading of them. The students simply need to know what the rules are and are expected to follow them.

The need for this didactic approach is obvious. It provides the basic training needed for success at different times and in many areas of life where one is learning how to get along in a group or community. The fact is there are certain times when people need to be told what to do. This is obvious in the case of children. Early on in life, children are taught what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Children are told things such as: "Don't play with matches," "Don't take things that don't belong to you," "Don't cheat," "Share!" This is simply a case of teaching the children the rules by which they are to engage in society, thereby socializing them. If children are not taught the rules for getting along with others, society would collapse and life would be nasty, brutish and short, as the philosopher Thomas Hobbes famously put it.

But such "indoctrination" is not only necessary for children. There are times and situations where it is necessary to instruct adults. Adults need to learn the best practices of a group which they join, be it a business or social group. People entering a new environment need to be taught how to behave in that environment. They need to be trained in standard acceptable practices. The purpose of much in-service training is for the trainees to learn what the rules of the game are, and how to play according to those rules. This type of training occurs when people are exposed to codes of conduct that should govern their businesses activities.

In fact, companies, governments, and professional organizations all require such ethics "training" and continuing education in ethics. For example, the Certified Financial Planner Board of Standards requires an ethics course where the code is simply delivered and, at most, interpreted in some fuzzy cases. Any revisions to the code go through the board. Similarly, the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA) requires that accountants be independent and objective and then spells out exactly the actions that would meet or violate these requirements, and requires ethics training each year. Many industries require "continuing education" courses in ethics so that their members know what they should or should not do.

To reiterate, in such didactic training, little or no insight or rationale is given or required. The individual is simply informed about what are right and/or wrong practices. There is no question of the individual deciding what is right or wrong. These are the rules of the group or game in which one is engaging. The answer to the question, "Why should we do this?" can simply be, "Because that's the way things are done." In short, in order to ensure order in a community, proper behavior is essential and rules need to be laid down and followed. There are many such ethics training sessions, and, clearly, they have a certain effectiveness in producing appropriate behavior. Further, if a person was trained, he or she cannot say, "No one ever told me we can't do it that way."

However, this didactic training, though necessary, is not sufficient for ethics education. The reason is that some issues do not lend themselves to resolution by a simple application of the rules, since there may be a conflict of rules or reasons for action. Situations may change or become too complex. Rules can conflict, or the rules may not always be clear about what should

be done. Hence, there are times when circumstances demand more than simply following the rules. In those situations, knowing the ethical principles or reasons which lie beneath the rules is important. The trainees need to understand those principles and reasons so that they can make proper decisions on their own, and/or be able to justify modifying those rules and even, when appropriate, acting counter to those rules.

2. The Educative Approach to Ethics

People ask, "Why should we do this?" Rules conflict or people question the reasons for the rules. People want to *know* why. This is where the second approach to ethics education comes in, an approach which involves the students in thinking about why the rules are in place, what ethical principles the rules are based upon, and why the rules should be followed. This second approach I call "educative." In this type of education, the aim is to lead the student *out of* (education comes from the Latin word "*educere*," meaning to lead out) mere obedience to the rules to a discovery of whether and why the rules are appropriate and how to decide in different cases what is right or wrong to do. To those familiar with Laurence Kohlberg's theories, this would be leading the student out of the mere acceptance of conventional rules to an understanding of the principles or reasons underlying those rules. The student would move from the conventional stage of cognitive moral development, where he or she accepts the rules as they are, to the post-conventional stage of cognitive moral development, where he or she thinks for him or herself and achieves deeper ethical reasoning.

The "educative" approach is necessary in order to get the student to appreciate why specific rules exist and whether such rules are justifiable. Such an approach should lead students to a point where they arrive at a fuller realization and clarification of what justifications there are for their beliefs about which actions are appropriate, rather than an unreflective settling for the unexamined beliefs they happened to hold before a serious, critical examination. The goal of such education is to help students understand whether and/or why their beliefs are adequate and, if the education is done well, to help students apply their beliefs in difficult as well as novel circumstances. Thus, in the educative approach, the role of the ethics educator is to enable the student first to recognize those bedrock assumptions and unexamined beliefs, then to prod him or her to analyze and evaluate them, to see if they are fit for use as accepted personal and/or professional rules of behavior.

Ethical Sensitivity

But how is this to be done? One very important element in the educative approach is to create what moral psychologists call cognitive disequilibrium or cognitive dissonance. In that way, the educator helps the students become sensitive to ethical issues they may not even have been aware existed. I use the term "ethical sensitivity" to denote the ability to recognize the existence, extent, and seriousness of an ethical problem in a situation. This is not always an easy task because students, enamored of their own disciplinary perspectives, oftentimes do not even

recognize the ethical dimension of a certain behavior. Some simply do not see that a particular situation raises moral questions. For example, an individual who looks at his job solely from the perspective of selling as much as he can to please his boss and meet company sale quotas, a goal he was taught, might not see that selling to people who can't afford a product is morally questionable. Or a purchasing agent might not see that accepting gifts from certain vendors might constitute a conflict of interest, since everyone does it, and that's how he was trained, namely, to do as others in his business do. A lawyer might not question his duty to defend his client no matter what the cost to society, or a doctor might invoke confidentiality at the expense of public health.

So an initial task of the educative approach is to raise the sensitivity of students to the moral dimensions of an issue they might not have seen. For example, an approach in teaching business ethics might be to get the student to overcome a one-dimensional, tunnel-vision analysis that views only the bottom-line economic components of a situation.

Of course, there are some situations where it is clear what the right thing to do is and there are good reasons for following certain courses of action. There are a large number of moral imperatives that are unproblematic – for example, don't cheat, don't steal, etc. But there are also cases where it is not clear what should be done. In these cases, we need to learn how to make sound judgments. Thus, we need two things: a method for developing sensitivity to moral issues and a method for developing sound moral judgment. Thus, the task of the teacher of ethics, who thinks there is an ethical way to do things, would be to get the student to look at a situation in such a way that the value at stake manifests itself to the student and the student sees the situation in its ethical dimensions. The function of ethical teaching here is rhetorical. It is to enlighten, sensitize, and, perhaps, change attitudes.

Further, I would suggest that one of the most effective ways to accomplish these goals is to get students to see the good or bad in a situation in much the same way that a person engaged in teaching art appreciation gets his or her students to see the work of art as he or she does. For example, I might think a Picasso is a worthwhile work of art, but, in order to say it is good and not just that I like it, I *must* tell why it is so (that is, I put myself on record as having reasons for my judgment). But my telling why is done not by telling what criteria it meets (in other words, what rule or rules for good art Picasso followed), but by *showing how*, as it is constructed, the work's particular lines and colors come together to give me satisfaction, with the assumption that, since my student and I are basically likeminded or have a certain unanimity (*sensus communis*, in the sense of common sensibilities), if the student sees the situation in the same way I do, the student will then share my appraisal of it. The effective art appreciation teacher finds out where the student is with respect to a Picasso, and takes him by the hand and shows him how the teacher looks at it, so that the student can view it as the teacher does. The ethics teacher should do something similar in order to get the student to see an issue as an ethical issue.

For example, take the GM plant closing in Flint, Michigan as portrayed by Michael Moore in the film *Roger and Me* (1989). Moore, of course, is engaging our sensibilities to show us that plant closings are unacceptable. Moore tries to show us, get us to see, what closing the plant does

to the people and the town. If you want to convince people that plant closings are unethical, you will show the disastrous economic effects the plant closing had on the town and its people. On the other hand, any number of people will argue simply that this plant closing was acceptable. To do that, they will try to show us, which is to say to get us to see, that plant closings are a necessary part of economic change, which must weed out dead wood for the sake of future prosperity. After all, if “x” number of people in Flint are jobless, it is also the case that a number of people in Mexico will now be employed, and such growth leads to more prosperity overall (it will be argued) down the line.

To develop such sensitivity requires the educator to get the student to see the ethical dimensions or aspects of a case – to see anew. This is necessary so the student can overcome what Ludwig Wittgenstein called “aspect-blindness”: in the case of ethics, the inability of a person to see the situation at hand as having a moral dimension. Wittgenstein likened the aspect-blind to those who are color-blind or tone-deaf, with the important exception that the aspect-blind person can learn to see a problem as a moral problem, for example, whereas the color-blind and tone-deaf lack the capacity to distinguish colors or tones. The aspect blind person fails to “see that” a moral problem exists, but this blindness is of a kind that education can seek to repair (Wittgenstein 1953, 193–214).

Wittgenstein’s point is that if a person lacks the ability to “see as,” i.e., to see the issue *as* a moral issue, that person lacks moral sensitivity. But we believe most people have this ability, so the role of the teacher is to get students to see an issue as a moral issue and not just as, for example, a jobs issue. Josiah Royce calls the most important kind of *seeing as* “moral insight” (Royce 1988, 88) and suggests that one achieves this insight by putting oneself in the place of another, seeing things as the other sees them. This is, of course, what lies beneath the Golden Rule.

Ethical Judgment

A first step in the educative process is, then, to develop sensitivity to recognize the moral aspect of situations. However, if the situation is a moral dilemma, where there are good reasons to perform an action and good reasons not to perform the action, we need the ability to evaluate those proposed courses of action from the moral point of view. Thus, the development of a decision procedure for making ethical judgments is another purpose of an ethics course. An educative approach to ethics should help the student sort out those reasons and structure them into a decision procedure. Moral judgment is simply the process of rationally appraising an action to see whether it is ethically appropriate or not—in other words, of justifying true beliefs. An educative approach to ethics teaches the student how to utilize and prioritize reasons in structuring approaches to a decision. This is the realm of ethical theory, which investigates the reasons most often utilized in ethically evaluating an action. Those reasons are as follows: An action is appropriate or acceptable on the grounds that it is either (1) legal, (2) in my and others’ interest, (3) socially acceptable, (4) fair or just, and/or (5) fulfills duties or responsibilities

generated by one's commitments. Any action, which is in accord with all of those *reasons* will be unquestionably acceptable. Actions contrary to one of those reasons are problematic.

We need to judge whether courses of action are respectful of the law, beneficial to us and to others affected, fair to all concerned, and fulfill our commitments or responsibilities. We need to see them from all those perspectives. In the case where some of those aspects which set out the criteria for moral acceptability are not met, or are not in conflict, we have difficult dilemmas. The solution to those might not be easy, but here we can show our students how such situations might have been avoided.

It is unlikely such capacities can be developed in one-shot lectures or by purported attempts to integrate ethics across the curriculum. They require for their fruition extended and arduous work by the teacher in sensitizing, providing examples through cases or best-practices sessions, and showing what adequate principles are and how they are to be utilized. But, as we saw, this is an enterprise based on the fact that the teacher does think that some activities are unacceptable. Articulating such judgments and defending them, or at least persuading students that such judgments are sound, is not a task most academics are comfortable with. It is the job of a morals salesman. To be done effectively, it cannot be coercive. The teacher must use the best tools available to get the student to "see as" he sees, which is to say, to see that, if he looks at the matter as the teacher does, he will come to agree that certain actions, in cases where it is clear, are ethically acceptable. The student will also come to see where the difficulties lie in cases where there are genuine dilemmas, that is, in cases where there may not be one right way of doing things. As we saw, in at least some dilemmas, you are damned if you do, and damned if you don't, because there are good reasons for acting in opposing ways. Helping the student to distinguish between clear cases and difficult ones and to use the best reasoning possible will hopefully in a small way fulfill the aim of ethics education.

It is appropriate to conclude with a final consideration of Aristotle's with respect to the caution that one should follow in ethics education.

Our discussion will be adequate if it has as much clearness as the subject-matter admits of, for precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions, any more than in all the products of the crafts. Now fine and just actions, which political science investigates, admit of much variety and fluctuation of opinion, so that they may be thought to exist only by convention, and not by nature. And goods also give rise to a similar fluctuation because they bring harm to many people; for before now men have been undone by reason of their wealth, and others by reason of their courage.

We must be content, then, in speaking of such subjects and with such premises to indicate the truth roughly and in outline, and in speaking about things which are only for the most part true and with premises of the same kind to reach conclusions that are no better. In the same spirit, therefore, should each type of statement be received; for it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits; it is evidently equally foolish to accept probable

reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician scientific proofs.
(Aristotle 1941, 1.3, 1094b12–27 [emphasis added])

In short, expect only as much clarity and sufficiency of answers in a subject as the subject allows. There are some ethical issues – hard dilemmas – where we cannot definitively say what is right or wrong. What we can say at most is that, in this situation, there are good reasons for acting this way and good reasons for not acting this way.

In conclusion, we recommend using both students' experience with issues and their commonly held beliefs as a way into ethical reasoning. They will appreciate that there are some simple issues where right and wrong are clear. However, they will also appreciate that some issues are complex. What an ethics course can do is to arm them with a set of tools (good reasons) at least to clarify the issues if not always to resolve them. Thus, the final purpose of ethics education would be to help students develop modes of assessing and evaluating complex ethical matters in a rationally guided way.

Notes

1. "A young man is not a proper hearer of lectures on ethics; for he is inexperienced in the actions that occur in life, but its discussions start from these and are about these; and, further, since he tends to follow his passions, his study will be vain and unprofitable, because the end aimed at is not knowledge but action. And it makes no difference whether he is young in years or youthful in character; the defect does not depend on time, but on his living, and pursuing each successive object, as passion directs. For to such persons, as to the incontinent, knowledge brings no profit; but to those who desire and act in accordance with a rational principle knowledge about such matters will be of great benefit" (Aristotle 1941, 1.3, 1095a2–11).
2. Knowledge and reason can help, but they are delicate instruments contending against the nature of human beings and their susceptibility to incentives and temptations. From that perspective teaching ethics is much like the role of Sisyphus. It is why some ethics educators have lost the faith in the possibility of having a good effect. But what we have shown is how ethics education seeks to be effective in bringing about good behavior. But to do that we need to do several things: teach the rules, develop the sensitivity, and educate in the reasons for ethical action. If we do those, ethics education will be of use.
3. How should such ethical training proceed? Aristotle insists that ethical knowledge begins by reflecting on commonly held beliefs, what he calls "*endoxa*" and others call the "*sensus communis*" or common sense, i.e., beliefs held in common. Experience in the classroom invariably shows that students come equipped with commonly shared beliefs. They have significant agreement about the appropriateness or inappropriateness of certain kinds of behavior. Such agreement often makes people think ethics training is unnecessary, because it is clear to them what's right and they believe everyone should know that. Indeed, if all ethical

issues were simple, there would be no need for ethical training. Those situations where it is clear some course of action is right or wrong we call “no-brainers.” For example, I usually get unanimous agreement that defrauding another is simply wrong. Such shared beliefs make us part of a moral community. Those who don’t share them are “outriders” or “anti-social” or some such term. Since people are societal beings, they get the initial guiding principles of their life from their society or societies (since we are all part of numerous groups with rules for getting along). Those societal rules become inbred, almost second nature. Since business is a social institution, it has its own set of rules governing acceptable behavior, which we learn as we mature in business. That becomes part of our endoxa or common sense.

It is an interesting phenomenon that, in my business ethics classes, I get almost universal assent to the proposition that “the owner of the means of production of a company is entitled to the profits of that company.” This entitlement claim is an ethical claim to which virtually all my students assent. It is an excellent example of an agreed-upon principle that undergirds our basic tenets of market capitalism. The students were taught it as part of their culture, and they accept it unreflectively. If I ask why owners are entitled, the students answer that the owners took the risk. They have been indoctrinated into a principle of distributive justice without ever asking why that is so.

4. Aside from telling the students what the rules are, there is training. To understand training, reflect on how a culture inculcates rules. I will suggest one of two ways. Just as non-human animals are trained by the carrot and the stick, young human beings are trained either by punishments (a stick in an era when one believed that a child was spoiled if the rod was spared, nowadays timeouts or grounding) or by rewards for good behavior. That is simple behavioral conditioning which involves operant conditioning because humans behave largely as they are incentivized to behave. Just as we stimulate children to behave in certain ways by rewards and punishments, we stimulate older people to behave in certain ways by incentivizing (rewarding and punishing) them. Whether one wants to call this type of training ethics *education* is of little import. This operant conditioning helps fulfill Aristotle’s goal of bringing about appropriate action.

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