Along with the resurgence of interest in General Education since the 1970s, there has been an increasing demand for teaching ethics in the University. In the 1990s this demand has blossomed into a desire for “teaching ethics across the curriculum,” sometimes, I would argue, for quite doubtful reasons. In this article, I want to try to make clear what I mean by “teaching ethics,” and point out why I think that both ethical theory and metaethical investigation ought to play a part in any course which calls itself an ethics course. Finally, I will touch on the integration of ethics into general education requirements and on the kind of qualifications that I think teachers of ethics courses ought to possess.

WHAT “TEACHING ETHICS” IS NOT

I first want to be clear about what I do not mean when I talk about “teaching ethics” across the curriculum. It seems to me that when some of the administrators at my university use this phrase, they have in mind the idea that requiring students to take an ethics course in the sciences or in the business school will make them into more law abiding scientists or businessmen, or generally into more virtuous people. I would question this assumption. Although an introduction to ethical theories and ethical debate about specific issues can give students a way to think systematically about the positions to which they choose to commit themselves, it cannot replace good parenting and role modeling early in life. As Aristotle says:

In a word, then, like activities produce like dispositions. Hence we must give our activities a certain quality, because it is
their characteristics that determine the resulting dispositions. So it is a matter of no little importance what sort of habits we form from the earliest age – it makes a vast difference, or rather all the difference in the world.²

One class in ethics, whether it is in the Philosophy Department or the Accounting Department, is not going to shape a student’s character to the exclusion of all of the other influences in her life. Her character will be shaped by her peers and parents, by the models of behavior she sees in her sisters, brothers, friends, favorite musicians, television personalities, and yes, even in her professors. It will be shaped by the sorts of habits she is allowed to develop, by the systems of social control in which she finds herself, by her childhood experiences of the loving and nurturing or hurtful and overpowering nature of her world and the human relationships that she finds there. One college course with three contact hours per week for 14 weeks is not going to make saints out of sociopaths, no matter how much we might like to delude ourselves into thinking that it will. One does not cure the sociopathic murderer either by simply pointing out to her the reasons why murder is wrong or by repeatedly telling her “Murder is wrong. Murder is really, really wrong!”

Now I think that professors all over the University ought to try to bring out the axiological presuppositions and consequences of the work that they do. There are no value-free enterprises; neither the sociologist nor the physicist can get along without the imposition or transmission of a host of values which they try to pass on to the students in their disciplines. And there are values inherent in the behavior of professors, which will perhaps be modeled by students. The classroom process itself may present a sort of model of civic life in which disagreement is allowed to exist without bloodshed. But that is not what I mean by “teaching ethics.” Indeed, since values are presupposed by all sorts of activities, if all we mean by “teaching ethics” is the attempt to transmit values, then we are all teaching ethics all the time. Of course, since I am not supreme emperor of the linguistic community, I cannot simply dictate that the term shall not be used to refer to the attempt to transmit values; I can only urge that such usage is a bit silly. So by “teaching ethics” I do not mean moral training in the sense of producing law-abiding behavior.

Another thing I do not mean by “teaching ethics” is moral instruction in the sense of instilling moral beliefs through indoctrination. As R.M. Hare says,
The educator is waiting and hoping all the time for those whom he is educating to start thinking . . . . The indoctrinator, on the other hand, is watching for signs of trouble, and ready to intervene to suppress it when it appears . . . the aim of the educator is to work himself out of a job, to find that he is talking to an equal, to an educated man like himself — a man who may disagree with everything he has ever said; and, unlike the indoctrinator, he will be pleased.3

Gerald Paske describes indoctrination as “the process of getting a person to commit himself emotionally to a doctrine independently of his understanding of any rational justification of that doctrine.”4 Surely, we want to be on the side of education as opposed to indoctrination in our teaching. If education is about anything, it is about helping students to become persons who can think critically for themselves. Preaching is not the same thing as teaching; indeed, they are antithetical. The preacher is always championing (or simply presupposing) one point of view to the exclusion of others. He encourages an enthusiastic conformity, appealing not to the reason of his audience, but to their emotions. The ethics teacher makes no such appeal and desires no such conformity. He would prefer that his students think things through (together, as part of a community of rational inquiry) and make up their own minds.

These are some of the things that “teaching ethics” is not. It is not a bull session; it is not a sharing of feelings unsupported by rational investigation; it is not role modeling; it is not moral training; it is not indoctrination.

WHAT “TEACHING ETHICS” IS

In “Goals in the Teaching of Ethics,” Daniel Callahan sets out what he takes to be the five important goals of ethics courses. Basically, he thinks that ethics courses ought to give students:

1. An appreciation that there is a moral point of view,
2. The understanding that their own moral convictions ought to guide their actions,
3. The ability to recognize ethical situations,
4. The analytical skills necessary to be critical and self-critical,
5. The training to disagree with respect rather than rancor.5
Furthermore, he stresses the criterion of dispensability; the teacher of ethics ought to try to bring about independent thought in his students, giving them the ability to formulate, criticize, and evaluate ethical arguments on their own, so that the educator, as Hare says, “works himself out of a job.”

I see the ideal teacher of ethics as someone who gives students the tools they need to arrive at what John Rawls calls “Reflective Equilibrium.” This is a state of unstable peace between the principles one adopts cognitively, and the intuitions one holds conatively. It is a kind of conciliation which is to be achieved by moving back and forth between principles and intuitions, sometimes altering principle in order to hold onto strongly held intuition, sometimes relinquishing weakly held intuitions in order to maintain principle, and all of this with the added requirement that one’s moral and factual or scientific beliefs must fit together coherently. The result (hopefully) is that the student can find a place where he can stand, where both his head and his heart are in agreement about what ought to be the case or what ought to be done. This is not a small achievement; indeed, the fact that we are all always receiving new factual information and hearing the call of newly compelling moral imperatives means that it is always an unstable peace, constantly in need of readjustment. But it is what I want from my teaching. I want students to be able to stand on their own and explain not only what ought to be done, but also which principle requires it and why that principle ought to be adopted by all reasonable moral agents in a given situation. They ought not only to recognize their own freedom and the responsibility it brings, but also be able to articulate good reasons for the adoption of a policy or course of action. Such reasons, after all, ought to be the currency of debate in civil democratic society. This is what I think that Callahan means by the dispensability criterion. A student who can recognize and think through new moral dilemmas with the tools he acquires in an ethics course is a student who has been well served indeed.

HOW TO TEACH ETHICS

Although there are many pedagogical strategies one might pursue in teaching ethics, it seems to me that ethics courses must include some attention to three basic elements: applied ethics, ethical theory, and meta-ethics.

Applied ethics, the active attempt to sort through the various conceptual and emotional issues attached to particular moral dilemmas in
medicine, mass communication, engineering, business, and other disciplines has been gaining popularity outside of the Philosophy Department. Most non-philosophy ethics courses are already centered on the investigation of concrete ethical problems, the application of codes of ethics to particular cases, and the clarification of the felt values of students. And even in philosophy, the self-proclaimed queen of the sciences, we are not so arrogant as to fail to recognize that, with regard to this component of ethics, the faculty member’s experience in the specific field of expertise to which the course is devoted may be an invaluable asset to students who are about to embark upon a career in that field. Experience “where the rubber meets the road” (i.e., experience dealing with the practical problems which actually arise in a genetics lab, a boardroom, a hospital emergency room, a TV News studio, etc.) can give the instructor much greater credibility with students, as well as greater insight into the real moral dilemmas which students are likely to face in their professional lives.

But ethics cannot be only applied ethics. Teaching ethics necessarily includes a theoretical component. Any attempt to come to grips with an ethical question is going to involve a process of integrating our felt moral intuitions into a coherent and systematic view of the Right and the Good, and of subjecting these systematic conceptual frameworks to rational criticism. Any course which neglects this component of ethics is doomed either to focus only on narrow and unquestioned “codes of ethics,” or to become an exercise in dueling intuitions, where the expression of one “feeling” is treated as just as “valid” as the expression of another and where neither feeling is subject to rational scrutiny. Without attempts to bring coherence to our ethical principles, rules, and intuitions, we are left to attempt to justify our claims ultimately either by appealing to moral values which we happen to share with whomever we are trying to convince, or by appealing simply to the strength of our own sincere convictions. If we appeal to the strength of our convictions alone, then, in practice, the debate comes down to an argument from the loudest voice: Whoever appears to speak with more force or conviction must be in the right. Surely, that is not what we want to be teaching our students. If, on the other hand, we appeal only to shared moral values or codes, then we fall into a stupefying conservatism, which silences some of the most important ethical questions.

This brings me to a brief remark on codes. The codes of ethics that prevail in the professions are clearly very useful tools. But applying an unexamined code of ethics is, in one important sense, not “ethical” at all.
If ethics refers to a systematizing process, an inquiry aimed at establishing coherence or Rawlsian reflective equilibrium (i.e., aimed at making people of reasoned principle) then the application of an unquestioned code falls far short of ethics. To question any code is the essence of what it means to do ethics. What is the reason for a particular rule laid down in the code? Is it a good reason? Should the code allow for exceptions to the rule? If so, why? Why should we adopt this code at all? These, it seems to me, are questions on the way to doing ethics systematically.

Theory, then, allows us to raise ethical debates from the depths of browbeating or forced ignorance and avoidance to a level where we can appeal to good reasons, valid arguments, and, if not a guarantee of truth, then at least the certainty that we have struggled to achieve the greatest coherence, consistency, and simplicity within the set of our most deeply held ethical principles, rules, and intuitions. Of course, we should not insist on settling on a particular ethical theory before we begin an investigation of applied ethics. Indeed, the demand for theoretical investigation ought ideally to spring from the students’ wrestling with concrete issues in applied ethics. But if ethical inquiry never gets to the level of theory, it is doomed to shallow superficiality.

The presentation of ethical theories ought to focus both on the arguments which are presented in their favor by the likes of Mill, Kant, Rawls, Aristotle, etc., and on some of the arguments which have been raised against them. Real thinking requires that the question: “Why?” always be in order. Since every ethical theory is advanced with some kind of an argument for its basic principles, students who study ethical theory are afforded an opportunity to investigate the attempted justifications set forth for each view.

Metaethics, the systematic investigation into both the meaning of and the foundations of ethical claims, is another necessary component of any course that calls itself an ethics course. In my experience, American undergraduate students show an alarmingly strong tendency to fall into either an unreasoned acceptance of dogmatic ethical codes (e.g., religious codes), or an unsupported ethical relativism. Part of the task of an ethics teacher is to teach them the falseness of this dichotomy. Those who unquestioningly accept the dictates of an external ethical/religious code need to be confronted with some of the problems inherent in appealing to divine commands in order to ground ethical life (e.g., the problems of which God to obey, which set of texts to take as the expression of God’s will, which interpretation to put onto such texts, the problem of *The Euthyphro*, etc.). But those who reject or question an externally imposed
ethical Truth need to be steered away from their tendency to accept (instead) the most facile form of ethical (and even epistemological) relativism. The fact that the majority of freshmen seem to be drawn (in a knee-jerk fashion) into either culturally or individually relativistic metaethical positions may be the result of a sort of intellectual laziness; if every ethical claim to which I commit myself is only “true-for-me” or “true-for-members-of-my- (sufficiently narrowly defined) culture”, then any challenge which demands rational support for my claim can easily be deflected. In other words, if there is not even the possibility of objective moral truth, then the demand for ethical reasons can be answered with the expression, “Well, that’s just how I feel”. In my own courses, I find that the only way to counteract this relativistic reflex is to raise the strongest arguments for objective moral realism which I can find (e.g., the analogy between ethics and the physical sciences, the appeal to apparent moral progress, pointing out the conflicts between relativistic views and our common usage of moral language, etc.). Students need to be shown that the rejection of unreasoned ethical codes does not entail the acceptance of unreasoned relativism. They need to be shown that there is a place for reason in their moral lives.

I suspect that some of the “supportive” and “esteem-building” feedback which students receive in American elementary and secondary schools makes a relativistic response to any moral dilemma almost second nature for them. If Tommy makes a statement in class which presupposes that abortion is evil, and then Mary makes a claim that we must preserve the right to abortion, and then their teacher merely thanks them both for their contribution, or says “Yes, those are both very interesting comments”, without trying to get at the core of their disagreement, then it is no wonder that Tommy and Mary and all of their classmates assume that the disagreement is irresolvable and that expressions of strong and sincere conviction will always hold sway over clear arguments and the demand for reasons in controversial ethical matters. I cannot see how an ethics course could even get off the ground at all if it does not first squarely address some of these central metaethical issues.

**How to Structure an Ethics Across the Curriculum General Education Requirement**

With regard to the question of how best to structure an ethics across the curriculum General Education requirement, I think I would first want to ask “Why?”. There are a number of factors which might be motivating
the demand for ethics in undergraduate education. As I have already pointed out, I think that some proponents of teaching ethics across the curriculum believe (perhaps mistakenly) that it will make students into more virtuous citizens. Perhaps some are motivated by recent political rhetoric about “a return to traditional American values.” If we were truly cynical people, we might think that teaching ethics across the curriculum is merely a public relations or marketing ploy. If that were the motivation behind this suggestion, then I suppose that the most cost-effective means of implementing it would be to create a new Gen-Ed “ethics and values” requirement and then accept a whole bunch of “fluff” courses with the word “ethics” in their titles to fulfill the requirement. Such courses needn’t require any learning of the major ethical theories in the history of philosophy, or any knowledge of metaethics, or even any demand for reasoned arguments to back up ethical claims. Everyone can feel validated and the university can add to its brochures and advertisements the claim that every student “receives a thorough grounding in ethics.”

But let us put such cynical thoughts behind us and assume that the real motive is a sincere belief that it is important and valuable that students learn to integrate their moral intuitions and principles and to articulate and defend their moral views with good reasons. There seem to me to be (at least) two ways we might go about implementing a Gen-Ed ethics requirement:

The Two-Tiered Approach

We could require each student to take an “Introduction to Ethics” course in the Philosophy Department. Such a course would give him a thorough grounding in ethical and metaethical theory. Then we could either require or suggest that he take one of a host of courses in applied ethics taught in the various disciplines which would have “Introduction to Ethics” as a prerequisite. Ideally, these courses would connect the theoretical background he would get in Philosophy to the practical problems encountered in the disciplines. When Utah Valley State College decided to require Philosophy 2050 (Ethics and Values) as part of their general education requirements, they hired six full time ethicists to teach this course in the Philosophy Department. The University of Montana’s Center for Teaching Ethics has also adopted this two-tiered strategy.
The Integrated Approach

We could train enough faculty members in ethical theory so that each discipline would have a sort of resident ethicist. This is not to say that we ought to require such people to earn advanced degrees in Philosophy, only that we ought to require that they seek out enough formal training in ethical and metaethical theory so as to become what Callahan calls ‘competent amateurs.’ Then we could simply have a Gen-Ed requirement that students take a rigorous course offered by such trained personnel. Since we could demand that such courses provide a solid grounding in ethical and metaethical theory in order to receive Gen-Ed certification, we could be confident that they were not merely fluff calling themselves “ethics” courses, but were actually requiring students to learn something about the discipline of Ethics.

How might we evaluate these two approaches? Well, first of all, we can see that there are serious logistical problems with the two-tiered system. Given an entering class of 2000 students at my own university, if the Philosophy Department were required to provide each one with a theoretical grounding in ethics, we would either have to hire ten new full-time ethicists, or I would have to teach 40 sections per semester. Given the recent rejection of our department’s request to hire one new full-time ethicist, I do not think it very likely that we will be hiring ten any time soon. And, despite my youthful enthusiasm, teaching 40 sections per semester is beyond my abilities.

With regard to the integrated approach, let me say this. Philosophers can be both the most insecure and the most arrogantly self-assured people at the same time. My own arrogance might tempt me toward the two-tiered approach because it might lead me to believe that only people who are trained in logic, fluent in the manipulation of thought-experiments, and steeped in the traditions of Socratic dialectic (that is, only philosophers) are qualified to teach ethical theory. But that is, after all, only arrogance. Like every budding ethicist, I was once wholly untrained and ignorant about ethical theory. Yet (although I cannot claim to know as much about it as I should) I can at least do a satisfactory job of teaching it today; and I am no more intelligent than my colleagues outside of the Philosophy Department. Therefore, if I can be trained to teach ethics, so can they. All that is required is a patient teacher, a comprehensive set of primary and secondary texts, and the sincere willingness to commit the time and effort which any kind of learning demands.
But it does require this time and effort. It seems rather arrogant to me that all manner of scholars (in biology, marketing, business administration, mass communication, theatre, nursing, etc.) think that they can teach “ethics across the curriculum” with no training at all in the discipline of ethics. If I decided that I ought to teach “biology across the curriculum” with the little biological training I received in high school, not only would the Biology Department kill my course proposal before it ever reached the catalogue, but I would be rightly laughed out of the university. As Callahan says, “Enthusiasm, good will, and interest are not sufficient qualifications for teaching courses in organic chemistry, microeconomics, or Greek literature. There is no reason why they should be thought sufficient for the teaching of ethics.”

Theory and foundations are important components of any course which calls itself an ethics course. Of course we want to present students with the ambiguities of applied ethics. Of course we want to make them formulate and express their sincere moral convictions and to recognize the sincerity of those who hold different convictions. But without theory, without some attempt to ask “Well, why should we agree with that?” and then “And why should we accept that?”, without a serious engagement with the process of establishing a coherent set of moral beliefs and justifications, without trying to reach what John Rawls calls a state of “Reflective Equilibrium”, students are left either with unsupported codes or with dueling intuitions.

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NOTES

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8 My thanks to Santiago Sia and Michael Pritchard for making clear to me the pedagogical fact that in order for students to see ethical theory as something more than simply an alien imposition, it must be introduced in response to a felt need arising out of problems in applied ethics.

9 One of my students took an “Ethics of Scientific Research” course in the Chemistry Department, and reported her frustration to me. The entire course was devoted to discussing case studies (with literally less than one hour out of the entire semester devoted to discussing ethical theories). Every “analysis” of a case would end with a sort of tyrannical vote, and the majority would literally shout down dissenting voices rather than submit to the demand that they give reasons for their position or seriously consider the arguments that my student would try to offer for opposing views. This is surely not the ideal of either political life or intellectual inquiry that we want to be promoting.


