When I began considering adding a service learning component to my Introduction to Ethics class, I thought that this would be a no-brainer. There are so many organizations in the community that are designed to benefit others to which students could contribute service that finding service learning opportunities would be easy. Students could contribute to, for example, the local food bank, the American Red Cross, the United Way of Omaha, the YMCA or YWCA, a women’s shelter, any one of many hospitals, after school programs for kids, any one of many homes for seniors, and so on. Even if some of these organizations only wanted students to make coffee and copies, there were certainly enough others that really would use the service of my students.

As I began to explore these possibilities, however, it became less clear and more problematic how students’ service to the community would benefit their understanding of ethics. It turns out that ethics is an odd case for service learning, and in this paper I want to share with you why I believe that including a service learning component in a class on ethics is not as simple as it might first appear to be. In order to give a comprehensive account of service learning and ethics I will begin by considering service learning in relation to ethics classes and then I will consider the nature of ethics and what that means for service learning.

Before turning to service learning and ethics, let me say a word about the nature of service learning that informs the rest of this discussion. Service learning may include a variety of activities but, roughly speaking, service learning requires students to “participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs.” This service activity is to be the subject of reflection that provides “further understanding of the course content, a broader appreciation of the
discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility.” Given this description of service learning, there are three quite distinct elements of service learning: 1) service to the community, 2) some kind of experiential learning process, and 3) an enhanced sense of civic responsibility.

You might wish to tinker with or tweak this description, but such fine-tuning will not make a significant difference to the issues related to ethics.

Let me begin by considering service to some kind of charitable organization, for example, the local food bank. What kind of service would students provide the local food bank? One could sort donations, for example, placing various canned goods on the appropriate storage shelves—“putting peas with peas, corn with corn.” One could fill the requests of particular clients—gathering the requested food stuffs from the shelves and boxing or bagging them up for the clients. One could deliver food to families in the neighborhood. One could interview families to determine their financial status—to see if they meet the requirements for using the food bank. One could study poverty in the area and help determine what the requirements for using the food bank should be. One could help to plan a fund raising event or write letters seeking support for the food bank. One could counsel clients regarding other services that might be available to them, such as legal aid. In each case the student would be providing a real service to an organization that meets identified community needs.

What does a student learn by participating in the kinds of service activities identified above? Here are some possibilities. A student might learn something about how a charitable organization works. She might learn that a charitable organization works better as a coop than as a corporation—or vice versa. He might learn that it is better to solicit financial support in December than in July, since people find themselves in the holiday spirit in December. She might learn that there is much more (or much less) poverty in her community than she would have imagined. He might find that there are many fewer resources to meet the needs of the poor and hungry than are needed. She might find that much of the food donated to the food bank is essentially inedible. He might learn that people who are ineligible for assistance try to get it anyway—they try to scam the system. She might learn that the city tries to keep the food bank and its activities out of sight—away from the public. He might learn that religious organizations contribute most of the food to the food bank, or that religious organizations operate in competition
with the food bank. She might learn that it is a good thing to help the poor, or that helping the poor in particular ways only feeds the cycle of poverty and dependence.

The list in the paragraph above is designed to show only the kinds of things that a student might learn while working at the food bank. What students actually learn might be something quite different. There may be other things that might be learned as well, but the list above seems to me both a good example of the kind of thing that might be learned at the food bank and it also serves to indicate the kinds of things that might be learned by students, whatever organization they serve. In other words, the kinds of learning outcomes listed above are the kinds that we would expect in any service learning experience in organizations that meet identified community needs.

The question that we must now ask is what these service learning outcomes have to do with ethics. How do the service learning activities at the food bank help students understand ethics? And, the answers to these questions seem to me to generate exactly the kind of problem that makes ethics an odd case for service learning.

What does putting peas with peas, corn with corn, tell us about ethics? I ask that question because it is the most blatant example of service that tells us nothing about ethics. But, I believe that the same can be said for most of the learning outcomes noted above. What does the fact that a charitable organization works better as a coop than a corporation (or vice versa) tell us about ethics? What does the fact that there is more (or less) poverty in the community than the student thought tell us about ethics? How does knowing that some people try to cheat the system help us understand ethics? And, so on. I think that most of the learning outcomes identified with the food bank fall into this category and that service to similar organizations also would fall into the category of learning outcomes that do not contribute to our understanding of ethics.

There are, however, two possible outcomes that should be considered. First, I think that the food bank (or any charitable organization) has a moral obligation to operate as efficiently or effectively as possible. That is, the moral obligation of those who work at the food bank is to do as much good as possible with the resources available. So, if a student learns that charitable organizations are more effective if they operate like a coop than a corporation, then he knows that the particular organization for which he works needs to change the way it is organized. For the student, the question becomes how do you
get the people of an organization to change the structure of the organization so that it does more good when those people are comfortable doing things in the less efficient way and are resistant to change? This is, I think, the kind of moral problem that a student might encounter while providing service to a charitable organization. And, this is the kind of moral problem upon which a student might reflect in conversation with other students in a class on ethics.

Unfortunately, this kind of problem arises in a particular situation by accident. A student might work for thirty different charitable organizations before encountering this problem. While the service the student provides does raise a question worthy of consideration from a moral point of view, if the question arises by accident, is it worth having students provide service to charitable organizations? My sense here is that service learning ought to regularly help students understand ethics and while there may be some problems like getting people to act more effectively, these will not be numerous and they will arise accidentally.

The second outcome that should be considered is learning that it is a good thing to help the poor. I would have taken this to be one of those things we all learn in kindergarten, but others have argued that you can know that it is good to help the poor in different ways. What we learned in kindergarten is a basic principle—to help others, especially those in need. This seems rather straightforward and uncomplicated. It does not seem to me that someone needs to work at the food bank to learn that we should help the poor. But, it has been pointed out to me that the basic principle is an abstract principle with which we might be familiar—we can repeat the principle when called upon—but which would not have much impact on our behavior. When we encounter poverty first hand, however, the principle may have an impact on our behavior. That is, it may encourage us or inspire us to act on the abstract principle with which we are already familiar but do not act upon.  

I think that the idea of knowing experientially is correct. Having particular experiences does encourage us or motivate us to act in ways that we would not otherwise act. I am willing to accept that experiences may motivate us in a way that abstract principles do not. But, apart from “helping the poor is a good thing,” I am not sure what experiences will change student behaviors or what experiences will help students “know” a basic moral principle differently. I am not sure what other moral principles will be affected by the experiences of the students at the food bank, and, I am not sure to what extent students will come to know even that “helping the poor is a good thing.”
It is easy to see how “knowing” “that helping the poor is a good thing” through some kinds of experiences is different from knowing the abstract principle. It is not easy, however, to see which of the learning outcomes described above will be influenced in some significant way by the service experiences we might expect working for some charitable organization. Before committing to a service learning component in my ethics classes I will want to understand a good deal more about which principles can be known experientially.

This discussion leads to the issue of experiential learning in relation to ethics. I do believe that experiential learning is important to understanding ethics, but I am not sure that the experiences of service to a charitable organization are the best experiences for understanding about ethics. Let me suggest just two possible experiences we might ask students to have in order to better understand ethics. The first is “going hungry.” The second is “lying to your parents.”

Suppose that I want my students to empathize with children who go hungry, to empathize with hungry children to an extent that the students take steps to alleviate hunger in the community. Most of the activities noted above in relation to the food bank do not seem to me to be activities that will generate much empathy. But, if a student delivers food to needy people in the neighborhood or interviews people to see whether they meet the requirements for receiving food from the food bank, that student might develop some empathy for those in need that he or she would not by simply reading a text on poverty in America.

But, if I want my students to empathize with children who go hungry, would it not be more effective to put them on a diet that causes them to go to bed hungry for a couple of weeks? For safety reasons (not to mention university insurance costs) any such diet would have to be physician supervised and this might make putting students on a diet that sends them to bed hungry impractical. But an activity that fraternities or sororities often undertake to develop empathy for the homeless is to spend a few nights living in a tent in the park or on the lawn of the campus. This works best, of course, when the temperature drops down to ten degrees or less, even if the students have expensive, high tech tents. You can give the students, of course, only one thin blanket and take away the expensive sleeping bag usually used by Arctic explorers and this will add to the experience.

When students need to use the bathroom, they will have to find a building that is open. It will usually be a long walk from the tent. When students want to eat, they will have a long walk, especially if the tent is in
a park. And, after a few days without a shower or bath, students will need to find some place where they can shower for free (they do not get to go home for a shower every day). Students cannot drive a car or spend more than ten dollars a day on food. No computer or I-Pod. No cell phone. Two weeks of this kind of activity and it seems to me that students will develop empathy for the homeless in a way that handing out blankets at the local shelter will not do. There may be many different ways to give students the experience of hunger or homelessness—none of which is the result of service to an organization that meets the needs of the community.

The second example is to simply ask students when they last lied to their parents (you can substitute anyone else here). Neither the teacher nor the class has to know the details of the lie, but some role playing here will give students a remarkable experience that does have a great deal to do with ethics. Ask one student to play the role of the parent. Ask the other student to now tell the parent the truth. The student does not even need to say the truth out loud. They simply have to imagine that they are in fact speaking the truth to the parent—here represented by another student. Now we ask the student to reflect on why it is that they lied and how it felt to tell the truth. All of this experience is crucial to changing our behavior—lying less, telling the truth more frequently.

What the lying to your parent example shows is that students have a wealth of experience related to ethics from their daily lives. To what other people do students lie? Whom have they cheated? To whom have they said unkind words? How have they manipulated or used others? When have they acted cowardly? When have they treated others unfairly? And so on. Daily life gives us a wealth of experience that we can consider in a class on ethics that will be directly related to ethics, both in a theoretical and practical way.

So, the question to be asked when considering a service learning component in a class on ethics is whether or not there are experiences other than those of service learning that will benefit the students to a greater extent than the service learning experiences? If there are, then we would do well to introduce them to our students instead of asking them to participate in service to the community.

Finally, we must ask whether participating in a service learning component in a class on ethics will give students an “enhanced sense of civic responsibility?” It is possible, of course, that studies show that ten years after an ethics class students whose class included a service learning component are more frequently volunteering in the community than
students whose class did not include a service learning component. But I
do not know of such studies. And, students who have volunteered
service in an ethics class have some experience in volunteering, thereby
making it more comfortable in general volunteering again. Having had
the experience makes it easier for them to do it again. Trying something
entirely new is more difficult than doing something a second or third
time.

But, I am suspicious that an enhanced sense of civic responsibility is
much more dependent upon factors other than service learning. Parental
role models seem to me to be the most influential factor in instilling a
sense of civic responsibility. I know a family with two young children that
celebrates several holidays each year by providing service to a charitable
organization in the community. On Thanksgiving, for example, all
members of the family serve meals to people in a homeless shelter. I
cannot imagine those children growing up and not doing something of
this sort on the holidays. Even if parents do not include their children in
their service to the community, the influence of the parents’ behavior is
more likely to affect the children’s behavior than almost anything else.
Schools, including colleges and universities, are no substitute for
appropriate, or in this case ethical, parental behavior.

I also think that the circumstances of one’s life are more likely to
influence service behavior than experience in an ethics class. If my job
requires me to work fifty or sixty hours a week, it is unlikely that I will be
spending much time providing service to the community. If I have four
young children it is less likely that I will be volunteering. If my job
requires travel or if I work for a non-profit institution, I am less likely to
be volunteering. How busy we are and what we focus our attention on
are factors that will have a great deal of influence on our civic
responsibility—much more, I think, than a service learning component in
an ethics class.

There is another factor at work here. When my students “volunteer”
at the local food bank, are they really volunteering? Or, are they
providing service in exchange for academic credit (however credit is
given for service learning)? It seems to me clear that participating in
service learning for classroom credit is not a matter of acting unselfishly
and is not the goal of an “enhanced sense of civic responsibility” to get
people to behave on behalf of others for the good of the other and not
for some reward to the individual? The issue is complicated even further
if students receive, as some do, a scholarship for taking a class in ethics
that includes a service learning component. Given these problems it is
difficult to see how the service learning component encourages an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. These issues, of course, may be the subject of discussion in an ethics class and in that sense they might provide an opportunity to consider generosity, selfishness, and civic responsibility.

II

So far, the discussion has been about service learning and its relation to the study of ethics. I now would like to turn this around and consider the nature of ethics and then as how service learning might contribute to our understanding of ethics.

What does it mean to “teach ethics?” The usual answer to this question is that we are teaching ethical theory or the application of ethical theory to particular problems. On my campus we teach an Introduction to Ethics (theory) and a course on Contemporary Moral Problems (the application of theories to such problems as euthanasia, abortion, social justice, terrorism, the environment, our duty to animals, and so on).

These approaches are understandable. Ethics is a part of academia and academia is about the creation of explanatory theories, whether they be theories in sociology, chemistry, history, biology, religion, economics, or ethics. In the case of ethics the task is to create or develop a theory that explains which of our actions are right and which are wrong. Are actions right or wrong depending upon their consequences? And what consequences make an action right or wrong? Is there some factor in determining which actions are right or wrong that is not a consequence of the action? Can an action be just, even if the result is more overall suffering in the world? Does God determine what is right or wrong? Is an action’s being right or wrong relative to the person doing the act?

Since scholars are not in agreement as to which theory explains rightness and wrongness, the effort to learn about ethical theories seems somewhat superfluous to acting rightly. To make ethics seem to be a more practical undertaking, then, we also teach a class in applying the various theories to contemporary moral problems. This gives the teaching of ethics the appearance of being relevant to the actual lives of human beings. I would note here, however, that the contemporary moral problems to which ethical theories are applied are just the kinds of problems that challenge the different theories that we teach in our introduction to ethical theory classes. Contemporary moral problems
almost never include generosity, friendship, integrity, respect for persons, courage, duties to oneself, civic responsibility and so on.

If we take this approach to teaching ethics—the most common approach—then the question is how service that meets the needs of the community helps us understand ethics and how the experiences of service learning help us understand ethics. The answer is that if, in our service and experience, we encounter particular problems to which we can apply a moral theory or that challenge our theoretical understanding of ethics, then we can learn something about the nature of ethics (where ethics is the creation of theories and the application of those theories). But, I think that problems coming out of service (or experience) that are helpful to our understanding of ethics are few and far between. They are possible, but I think that they will arise only by accident and we will not be able to count on student service to provide the kinds of problems we can easily create for testing ethical theories or for the application of ethical theories.

I would note here that finding problems in service activity is not the kind of thing that gives students an “enhanced sense of civic responsibility.” We can ask, of course, the age old question: Why should I be moral? If we can answer that question in the affirmative—that we should be moral—then we have some kind of justification for civic responsibility (assuming that ethics has something to do with doing good for others). But one can provide a justification of civic responsibility without reference to service learning and the end result will be about the same for the sense of civic responsibility for students.

There is another way to understand what it means “to teach ethics,” however, and that is “to teach students how to be better human beings or to be good persons.” This is not merely a matter of knowing what the right action is. It is a matter of having the character required to actually do the right thing. So, one might describe this as character education or one might refer to this as teaching virtue. However one describes this approach to teaching ethics, the goal is to have students act rightly more frequently than they would have before taking the class in ethics.

Teaching students to be good persons may be seen as beyond the scope of academic ethics or as something interesting but unnecessary to ethics. Aristotle, however, suggests that doing the right thing means not only doing the correct action but also doing the right action “to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right way...” He goes on to say that acting rightly in this way is not easy; “wherefore goodness is both rare and laudable and noble.”
I take from this that being a good person means not only doing the right thing (the focus of much academic ethics) but doing the right thing with the right motive. And I take it that being a good person is as much a part of ethics as is determining the right action. If I am correct about this, then teaching ethics has a great deal to do with teaching students to consider their motives as well as their actions.

The first question to be asked, then, about teaching ethics as teaching good character is: does service to the community help students to understand what motivates their actions? If we return here to the learning outcomes associated with volunteering at the local food bank, I think that the answer is no. The expected learning outcomes (how the organization works, how to raise money, that there is more poverty than expected, and so on) seem to have little to do with what motivates the students’ actions.

The second question, however, is about what we learn from having particular experiences. And here I think that the experiences we have are a requirement for understanding our motives. But we must ask if the experiences we have in volunteering at the food bank are the best kinds of experiences to consider in trying to understand what motivates us in our actions. It is quite possible, I think, that we can have any number of experiences while working at the food bank that would serve as the object of discussion or considering our motivations. But I do not think that these experiences are unique to our work at the food bank. The experiences that we would have at the food bank that would serve to teach us about our motivation are the same experiences that we have living our ordinary lives. Again, if our concern is with our motivation, daily life provides us with more than enough experience to consider. So, while experiences are important teachers, there is no experience (or few experiences, at least) that are both helpful and unique to the service a student might provide to the community.

Finally, we can ask about the relationship between being a good person and having an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. Does the service a student provides to the community generate an enhanced sense of civic responsibility? Do the experiences a student has while providing that service generate an enhanced sense of civic responsibility? It is true, I think, that examining the motives of our actions will in the long run generate an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. But the irony is that the experiences that will generate best a sense of civic responsibility are not those experiences we might expect a student to have by serving the community. That is, the experiences that we reflect upon and that will
enhance a student’s sense of civic responsibility are not the experiences of service learning, but rather the experiences of everyday life. But, if the experiences of daily living are to enhance our sense of civic responsibility, they must become the object of reflection in the classroom, as they do when we see teaching ethics as teaching students to be better human beings—when the class turns its attention to goodness rather than rightness.

We have now examined service learning and ethics from both the perspective of service learning and from the perspective of different ideas about what constitutes the teaching of ethics. I am not yet ready to say that there is no service learning activity that will help students better understand ethics, but given the discussion above, what seemed at first glance like a no brainer has turned out to be something remarkably complicated and difficult. Service learning and ethics may yet go together, but I do not think that we have figured out so far how to utilize service learning in the teaching of ethics.6

NOTES

1 Zlotkowski, p.xiv.

2 Ibid.

3 Leever, Daniels, and Zimmerman-Oster make the point that working with people in need might well generate some empathy in students for those in need. The question is: How many of the service learning opportunities available to students put them in a position to work closely with those in need? To the extent that service learning does put students in direct contact with those in need, it should be considered for inclusion in ethics classes, although students are put in contact with other students and do have the opportunity to develop empathy for those who are unlike themselves.

4 McKeon, p. 963.

5 Ibid.

6 An earlier version of this paper was presented to the Fourth Annual Conference on Applied Learning in Higher Education held at Missouri Western State University, St. Joseph, Missouri.
REFERENCES

