Teaching Ethics Without Ethics to Teach

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ABSTRACT. Changes in American society have brought both increased concern for solving practical problems and decreased concern for whether foundational ethical theory can be, or needs to be, understood when solving them. A systematic study of newly established institutes of applied ethics reveals that the directors of all of them claim that ethical theory, or knowledge of the ultimate bases for moral appeals inherent in human nature, is not necessary for proposing solutions. Quotations from claims of directors of five prominent institutes are cited as evidence for the thesis that teaching applied ethics without teaching theoretical foundations of ethics is the ‘main line’ policy today.

Sissela Bok, author of Lying, estimates that “at least 12,000 courses in ethics are currently taught in undergraduate and professional levels...”. But her extensive two-year study, coauthored by Daniel Callahan, discovered “a high degree of ambivalence toward the idea of trying to ‘teach ethics’”. (‘The Role of Applied Ethics in Learning’, Change (1979), 24, 25.)

Why?

Changes in American society, from earlier confidence that what is ethical can be understood, explained and taught, through a prolonged period of growing uncertainties of many kinds, have brought about a widespread, almost standardized, absence of concern as to whether ethics can be, or needs to be, understood at all. By ‘understand’ I mean explained in terms of some ultimate bases accepted as compelling consent for convincing reasons.

Decline in the power of sectarian explanations of the ultimate bases for moral appeals has long been recognized. Many, believing their ethics to be founded in their religion, regard abandonment of religion as also abandoning foundations for their ethics.

Those turning from religion to science for reliable knowledge find several obstacles to confident understanding. Anthropologists assume cultural relativism. Physical scientists advocating mechanistic materialism provide bases for behavioristic psychologists interpreting persons as stimulus-response mechanisms not blameworthy of wrong doing because all acts are determined by their causes. Psychoanalysts appeal to frustrating conditionings of Freudean libido in explaining the naturalness of varying expressions of sexual interests. Social scientists emphasize cultural conditions, e.g., poverty, as naturally causing acts formerly considered unethical. Economists appeal to the benefits of an automatically adjusting market place to justify competitive failures. Logical positivistic influence on philosophies of science convince many that science must be completely value-free and thus that no scientific bases for knowledge of ethical ultimates exists.

When both religion and science provide unsatisfactory answers, where does one turn for help? Asian philosophies have appealed to some: The yogin seeking Nirvana, a condition freed from all ethical concerns, must devote himself to seeking separation from all such interests. The Zen Buddhist, spontaneously willing to accept whatever appears at each moment, has no time for moral scruples. Shin Buddhists claim that Amida will save all, especially the worst wrong-doers. European philosophies, such as existentialism, which reduces existenz to each momentary act of will that remains ‘authentic’
only when not permitting itself to be imposed upon by any law (moral, legal, logical, natural) or any other will, and such as linguistic analysis, which has specialized in demonstrating that words commonly used in ethical discourse are really ‘meaningless’, have effectively reenforced antiethical attitudes.

When religion, science and philosophies fail, where turn next? To government? Watergate, Koreagate, Lockheed, Senatorial and Congressional scandals are tips of an iceberg of rising crime rates with nothing in sight to stop the rises. To business? Changing attitudes toward law violation are illustrated by views expressed by students in my University’s Graduate School of Management. Earlier students recognized costs of crime as expected budget expenses, but not as income. Now some reason: “If by violating a law I gain $10,000, I’ll do it. Why? Chances of getting caught are slim. Even if convicted, I will be fined $1000. Net profit: $9000. That’s still good business.” To education? Recently a mental development lecturer visiting our campus asserted that parents are reluctant to talk about moral education because they see morals as relative and prefer to raise their children in a moral vacuum.

In our world of cultural changes, where beliefs about the ultimate bases for ethical knowledge have become unsettled, we know from whence we have come but lack a clear conception of where we are going. Returning from a Boston conference recently, I sat next to a college student also working as an insurance adjuster. Becoming aware of my interests, he volunteered: “Older people often wonder what youth today have as a purpose in life. You may ask me.” I asked. He replied: “I don’t have any, except to earn enough to serve my basic needs”. Commitments to a purpose in one’s life imply basic values serving as foundations or judgment. How many generations are being suspended between our previous consensus and any future consensus not yet in sight? How can we teach ethics in an age when people lack confidence that reliable foundations for ethical beliefs exist?

Now Daniel Callahan writes about ‘The Rebirth of Ethics’ (*National Forum*, Spring (1978), 9–12.) Whatever the reasons... educators, professional organizations, and even the federal government are rushing about at a furious rate to revive an almost-dead interest in moral problems.... It is as if the American people, particularly the well-educated, are profoundly attracted to moral problems and yet, at the same time, exceedingly skeptical that they can be dealt with in a rational fashion.

and that “there would be little profit in attempting to work out some systematic response to moral problems”. He quotes one respondent as saying “There are no answers to ethical questions, so it’s not worth spending time on”.

Where, then, is “the rebirth”? “Close to 1000 courses in medical ethics or bioethics are taught at the undergraduate level. The interest in applied ethics has spread... into schools of business, law, journalism, and most other professional fields.” (*The Role of Applied Ethics in Learning*, p. 25.) In addition to new courses, we have new professors, chairs, departments, and institutes or centers, and a flourish of new articles, textbooks, curricula, conferences, and societies. Two new associations of applied ethicists have sprung up during the past year: the Society for the Study of Professional Ethics and the Society for the Study of Business Ethics.

Perhaps most significant of all is the establishment of several new centers or institutes funded to organize and facilitate interests in promoting applied ethics. What are these institutes? How do they represent (both as products of and reenforcers of) our mainstream attitude? The following five are selected as exemplary.

1. The Hastings Center, or the Institute of Society, Ethics and the Life Sciences, Hastings-on-Hudson, established in 1969, had a half-million budget already in 1973. It has become perhaps the most influential institute through its conferences, workshops, fellowships, internships, books, articles, and the *Hastings Center Report*, six times a year.

   Its director, Daniel Callahan, explains:

   Our own institute has from the very first been concerned with the foundations of ethics.... It is central to our work. At the same time, I really do not think it possible, either philosophically or psychologically, to attempt to settle fundamental questions of