

ETHICS ACROSS THE CURRICULUM AND THE NATURE OF MORALITY: SOME FUNDAMENTAL PROPOSITIONS¹

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THE PROPOSAL IN BROAD VIEW

I want to argue for an approach to moral education that treats learning ethics as a dimension of a curriculum rather than only a block within it. While I believe that formal ethics courses should be required, I think that we in higher education² can do much more by way of moral education without requiring more courses and without making excessive demands on faculty time. The approach I propose is intended to *harmonize* with the pervasive nature of ethical concerns in the professions rather than to *reduce* them to fit within the confines of any one academic specialty or curriculum content area. To this end I want to suggest a model for Ethics across the Curriculum (EATC) which explicitly acknowledges the ethical concerns that attend almost all areas of professional endeavor, and which seeks to take advantage of that fact for the benefit of students and their professions. As practical ethical concerns pervade the professions, I want to suggest that ethics education should pervade professional education. More, I will argue that specialists in each discipline can often serve as the most effective facilitators of ethics education. While this model for EATC certainly respects the role of professional ethicists, it does not maintain that only professional ethicists can be good moral educators. Indeed, I will attempt to establish that such an assumption is inimical to healthy moral education.

Before beginning to marshal support for these claims, let me acknowledge my debt to some of Samuel Scheffler's insights in his short but important book, *Human Morality*. Of course I cannot do justice to Scheffler's work in a short paper like this one, but I will rely on him for some conceptual work underpinning the model.

SOME BROAD CLAIMS ABOUT MORALITY'S NATURE

Scheffler argues that “morality is *pervasive*, in the sense that no voluntary human action is in principle resistant to moral assessment.”³ This seems to me to be correct, and indeed, something like it must be true if ethics is to be taught *across* the curriculum. The first challenge for philosophers lies in unveiling this fact about morality to faculty teaching in other disciplines. And this task, in turn, probably is best thought of in terms of removing impediments that inhibit non-philosophers on the faculty from exploring ethical concerns as an ordinary aspect of their teaching. I have in mind, then, a view of EATC that consists in large part of *giving permission* to non-philosophers to engage morality in every classroom.

Let me lay out a few more preliminary thoughts to help make my suggestion more clear. I think it is true of most students' experience that there are only a few classrooms in which moral assessment seems appropriate. The exceptions to this claim are obvious — ethics, psychology, and literature classes, among others, often foster moral consideration and assessment, but I think that for most undergraduates these are indeed exceptions to the general rule that ethics is localized in the curriculum. Contrast this compartmentalization to morality's presence in student life beyond the classroom. In much of everyday life, moral assessments seem altogether fitting — both of others actions and our own. And this is even more true in professional life. For most of us, whether one is a student or a professor, conversations involving moral considerations are unremarkable — except in many of our classes.

If this account seems plausible, it appears likely that many undergraduates should naturally be willing to address the moral dimension attendant to almost any discipline. The essential step, then, to bring EATC into being is really quite simple. Non-philosopher faculty can create an environment under which the natural urge to consider ethical topics may receive the sustenance it craves. But, of course, this must be done carefully. At least two related worries emerge immediately when considering EATC on this model: faculty comfort and faculty competence.

SOME SUGGESTIONS REGARDING EATC TECHNIQUE FOR NON-PHILOSOPHERS

Students need to appreciate that moral considerations are a part of the fabric of whatever subject matter they're studying. I hope to show

that fostering this significant educational goal is easy. I've suggested that doing so amounts to removing an impediment that academics themselves have installed — the artificial “stovepiping” of ethics into the philosophy department. We erected this impediment to an interdisciplinary approach to ethics cooperatively; cooperatively we can remove it. Doing so will allow professional academics to do in their classrooms what they probably do already as an ordinary part of their lives — to consider things from the point of view of morality. This is not to suggest that non-philosopher faculty need to add anything to their course content, though it is not to preclude that either. Rather, it is to suggest that faculty make a conscious effort to avoid looking past the ethical dimensions of the content they already teach. This is what I mean by giving permission, and it takes two forms. First, philosophers like me have to grant permission to non-philosophers to take on the ethical. Second, non-philosopher faculty need to accept that responsibility and grant permission to their students to engage the ethical. To a degree, it seems like faculty need to “untrain” themselves by focusing on aspects of their discipline not ordinarily stressed in a traditional curriculum. Living life is an interdisciplinary enterprise — teaching and learning can be too. Of course, that is what EATC is all about — removing boundaries that exist on campus but almost nowhere else.

This means that faculty should convey the idea that moral concerns are appropriate in any discipline, just as, for example, safety concerns are appropriate. We hope that students feel free to call their professor's attention to an unsafe, or seemingly unsafe condition in a lab or practicum. Likewise, EATC should make calling a class's attention to moral considerations unremarkable. Professors can facilitate this without bludgeoning students with dry ethical theory or awkward self-righteousness. All that's necessary is to be eager to engage problems and concerns. EATC, under this model, does not require faculty to supply solutions to tough ethical problems. Its real impact is in fostering an expectation that raising and discussing the ethical dimension of any discipline is perfectly unremarkable. Frequently, such a discussion can take place without ever mentioning the word “ethics.”

Faculty's service as exemplars in this fashion can foster students' moral sensitivity and increase their confidence in engaging ethical concerns. This may be one of the most pedagogically salient aspects of EATC on the model I propose. If successful, it surfaces moral considerations without making them seem out of the ordinary and without requiring an ethical specialist. It conveys by demonstration that such

discussions are fitting. Most professionals are aware of the ethical dimensions of their profession, and engage them competently as a matter of course. This is possible in the “real world.” It is possible in higher education too.

EATC initiatives are sometimes objected to on the grounds that non-philosopher faculty are not educated in ethics as a discipline of its own. “How can we expect the engineers or the management professors to teach ethics — they have no background.” It is certainly true that the philosophic background necessary to teach formal ethics classes usually is found only in the philosophy department, just as the experts in chemistry are in the chemistry department, and it would seem absurd to suggest that the philosophers should teach formal chemistry classes, so of course it is absurd to have chemists teaching ethics.

But EATC, on the model I have in mind, does not entail that every class should be a formal ethics class or even that they have a formal ethical part. Experienced educators know that students learn far differently than they’re taught. Ethics education can and often does occur outside of formal classes in ethics whether we wish it to or not. This is true because of the pervasive nature of morality and the incessant learning our students are doing. The objection relies on a picture of EATC that requires non-philosopher faculty to have a specialist’s competence. And, insofar as that picture of EATC is correct, the objection is a powerful one. But I’m proposing a picture of EATC that asks for no special competence outside of what non-philosopher faculty already possess. All that’s required is an ordinary understanding of morality’s relevance to one’s discipline coupled with the ability to teach. Chemists know what bothers their consciences much more accurately than most philosophers can, because most of the ethical concerns of chemistry are first discovered and appreciated by chemists themselves. I recall discussing EATC with the chemistry department on my own campus, and I remember being gratified to hear them express professional concern over the chemical processes used to assess suspected drunk-drivers’ blood alcohol levels. Though I’ve been teaching ethics for years, worries over chemists’ obligations to create and enforce accurate testing techniques had never crossed my mind. The chemists already have a kind of competence suited to conducting classroom discussion on this sort of problem — probably more than most philosophers have. If we exploit this competence using a problems-based pedagogy, we’ll have all the fundamental pieces in place.

Facilitating a discussion of ethical concerns is its own kind of giving permission. Space precludes a detailed description of a problems-based

approach to ethics education here, and I will have more to say later, but a few quick remarks are in order now. As students begin to consider ethical worries as a class, they will often clarify things for each other. Faculty should help to guide the discussions, and I grant that experience and education in ethics helps here, but for the most part problems-based techniques that work in other fields work for ethics too. Keep the discussion focused on the problem, ensure that students make an effort to understand one another before disagreeing, and avoid lecturing. Faculty should bear in mind that ethics is a normative enterprise; that is, it is about what ought to be and why. Philosophers can usually assist with worries about the nuts and bolts of pedagogy in ethics.

Before leaving the topic of faculty comfort and competence, let me stress that EATC does not work if it is contrived. Engaging ethical concerns with students does not demand a special background in moral philosophy, but it does demand a genuine concern for the issues and for students' development of ethical sensitivity and reason. Faculty certainly should not "force" ethics down students' throats, but neither should they be afraid to engage students' concerns and their own.

Almost everyone has seen something that's bothered the conscience. Exploiting that experience can be an excellent stimulus for thinking about EATC. Faculty might imagine the sort of classroom discussion that might have prepared them better for the moral challenges they've experienced. This can serve as a starting point for weaving ethics education into the classroom. In any event, faculty must bear in mind that students take their professors as examples — how we handle moral concerns is a kind of teaching in itself.

The chemists' example illustrates that EATC on the model I propose is more about acknowledging and embracing a professional's obligation to confront the ethical than it is about the content of ethics as a subject matter itself. This model does not focus on supplying solutions. It is about fostering an appreciation for the relevance of ethical concerns across disciplinary boundaries as a way of strengthening competence in recognizing and handling these concerns. Everybody has a conscience — EATC turns it into an educational asset.

Now we're in a better position to understand why non-philosophers can sometimes be the most effective ethics educators. Imagine two models for ethics education. The first keeps ethics education "stovepiped" in the philosophy department. The second keeps the formal aspects of ethics education in the philosophy department, but adds an EATC initiative along the lines I've been describing above. It is not implausible that the

first could inadvertently undermine moral education in the professions by conveying the unintended message that professional pursuits are immune from ethical concerns. In other words, it may facilitate compartmentalizing ethical worries even though no one may intend that they be compartmentalized. Under such an approach, students progress from chemistry to literature to ethics to engineering classes on the same day with no educational interaction among the classes. EATC on the model I'm proposing would preclude the compartmentalization by infusing ethics throughout the curriculum, and, more importantly, through the students' educational experience. For a graduate of this model of ethics education, ethics is never "done."

MORE SPECIFIC EDUCATIONAL GOALS FOR EATC

Good ethics education should help undergraduates develop away from unexamined dogmatism and radical skepticism toward sensitive, reflective, and mature ethical judgment. Good discussions of ethical issues aren't concluded by shouting, nor are they concluded by shrugging. Instead, they are concluded by understanding various reasons for differing opinions, and then making the choice that has the best reasons behind it. Students may enter our academic programs believing that their unexamined beliefs are perfect. They should not leave the same way. Or they may enter believing that ethics is a waste of time — that no answer is better than any other. They should not leave that way either. Instead, over the years of EATC education they should learn to respect the enterprise of critical thinking and discussion of problematic ethical issues. We would hope to develop an appreciation for the fact that professionals are *accountable* for their judgment, and to foster that judgment as a part of the educational experience. While we may not always arrive at perfect answers, some answers *are* better than others just because they have better reasons behind them. EATC on the model I propose seeks to facilitate the development of clear *thinking* about ethical concerns. This requires overcoming obstacles to thinking such as nonreflective commitments or hopeless skepticism.

THE PROBLEMS BASED APPROACH AND EATC

I hope it is clear that I want to advocate EATC as an outgrowth of the nature of morality in our experience. The ethical dimensions of our lives do not evolve in lockstep to formal ethical theory. While ethical

models and theories can certainly help us sort out problems and resolve them, understanding theories and models is only one facet of good moral education for the professions. It is in the actual making of decisions and resolving of problems that theoretical understanding bears fruit, and good moral education should, consequently, respect much more than theory. EATC should take as its starting point real world problems, which may often be very untidy. Here's where basic teaching competence is all that's really necessary. If active learning techniques are employed, students do their own discovering. Cases from real life experiences are especially suited to this method. While I admit that such an approach may well raise more questions than it answers, I think this is a strength of EATC rather than a weakness, for practical moral problems do not conform to neatly delineated ethical theory. Professional moral education, if it is to be credible and effective, should take this fact into account.

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NOTES

¹ Opinions expressed in this paper or its associated conference session are those of the author alone and not necessarily the official policy of the United States Air Force Academy or of any other government agency.

² Almost all of my professional academic experience has been in the professional school environment of a military academy, which also grants bachelor's degrees. While I believe that most of the conceptual work I do in this paper is applicable to all institutions of higher learning, I am more confident of its application to the professional school environment than to other sorts of schools.

³ Samuel Scheffler. (1992). *Human Morality*. Oxford University Press, New York, p. 25.

