

Teaching Ethics

Why Is It Important?

How Should It Be Done?

Twenty-year-old Karl hurries home. The familiar surroundings seem strange to him. His outlook on life is different. When did it all begin? With Helen? He remembers his conversation with the young teaching assistant for his 750-member class at the university.

"Random mutations, that's all, Karl."

"Yes, but you did not elaborate on Creation. Why?"

"Karl, religion is OK. You do that with your folks on Sunday. Here you are, a junior at a prestigious university. You have a scholarship. The scholastic field is wide open to you. Creation is just a theological concept. It really doesn't matter whether you believe in Creation or evolution. One way or another, we are here; we have life to enjoy—that's what matters. You are good looking; you have feelings, desires, ambitions. These are normal, inevitable, and good. They cannot be bad because they are natural. They are vestiges from evolutionary struggles. What-ever enhances survival is good."

"But then human conduct becomes a random mutation, too."

"I call that freedom. You prove to me, Karl, that Creation really matters."

This encounter brings others to mind. In *Introduction to Psychology* he hears of Sigmund Freud's insistence that religion and morality are subsumed as a "universal obsessional neurosis of humanity."¹ Karl is exposed to the idea that people act religiously and morally simply as a result of the cultural heritage of fear or wish-fulfillment, or an extension of the father-son relationship.² Erich Fromm suggested that morality based on the authority that is external to man be

rejected, and called for humanistic ethics.³ Self-realization, self-knowledge, and integration would make humans good, according to Fromm.⁴

In business class Karl is taught that business does not mix with religion or morality. The stronger, the shrewder, the more callous, make it. They call the shots. As for the competitors or consumers, let them look out for themselves.

Karl feels disturbed by these views. He resists the temptation to act according to these concepts because he feels internal contradictions in them.

He wonders, How should I live? Where can I learn a better

way of life?

Karl is not alone in asking these questions. The Hasting's Center Report of October 1978 relates a *New York Times* story claiming that there is a wide-spread resurgence of interest in ethics. The following reasons are mentioned: "the decline of moral standards, the increase in violence, urban decay, political corruption, professional malpractice."

I believe all of this results from a more serious problem: *the separation of religion and morality from the realities of life*. Prayer and worship are viewed only as religious, as unrelated to daily life. Religion is reserved for one day (Sabbath), one location (church), and a few people (ministers). Rarely is it considered a way of life. It tends to be a dogma, a system of beliefs, a liturgy to buy—or to endure. Theology is taught only in religion classes, with the intent of forming religious persons—i.e., professional churchmen.

Morality is caught up in the same whirlwind. Viewed as moralizing, as something you do to somebody, it is defined by a system of laws that prescribe do's and don't's. Few consider morality to be a life-style, a relationship between people, an enhancer of what is good and right. No wonder society invented its own rules and left morality to the Puritans!

Karl and thousands like him are missing a thought-out Christian philosophy of life. Where can they acquire such a world view? In an ethics class? Perhaps. But if Karl is like

Dr. Miroslav M. Kis is Chairman of the Theology and Christian Philosophy Department and Assistant Professor at the SDA Theological Seminary, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan.

BY MIROSLAV M. KIS

most college students, he will not rush out to take such a class, either because it is not required, or because he does not realize how essential it is to have a consistent, integrated life-style.

Much can be said in favor of a style of teaching that integrates moral principles, values, and choices throughout the subject matter. Deuteronomy 6:7 sums up the way religious concepts should be integrated into life: "And you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise" (R.S.V.).

The validity of this approach will become obvious as we consider how to integrate the ethical dimensions within the context of other subjects.

Familiarity With Ethics

Familiarity with ethics and moral principles will enable a teacher of any subject to blend these into his or her teaching. Morality and ethics are not the same, just as religion and theology are not synonymous.⁶ Morality and ethics, though different, must not be separated. Morality answers the question, "How should I be good and just?" Ethics answers, "Why should I be good

and just in this particular way?"⁷ Ethics studies human life, but not all aspects of life. Sneezing, abnormal behavior, or dreaming belong to medicine or psychology and lack a moral

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dimension. Actions and attitudes that emanate from and affect human freedom, will, and responsibility belong to morality and are the subject of ethics.

The most frequent questions ethics asks of morality are these:

1. *The question of authority.* What makes my will diligent and how is it that reason justifies a particular course of action? To what authority is the appeal made to justify a life-style?

2. *The question of values.* What are the priorities of my life? What makes me sacrifice my time, my peace, my energies, my means? Does my hierarchy of values resemble that of people in the Bible and noble characters of history? What, if anything, would I be willing to die for?

3. *The question of consequences.* My present choices are the seeds of tomorrow. Will I be happy with the harvest? Through studying the Bible and wisdom of history, I can look into the future and learn from the experiences of others.

4. *The question of influence.* My attitudes create grooves in my memory.

They soon become habits, which make up character. Moreover, I have a conscience that can be sharp and sensitive to what is good and just. How do I react to the promptings of my conscience? What influence does my conduct have on society?

Two ways to enhance sensitivity to moral issues are the habitual reading of the Bible and the study of literature dealing with ethics.⁸

The main issue facing us here is *how* to integrate moral principles in the context of the varied subjects we teach in college. Certain methods of moral education, though frequently used, do not work very well. Moralizing and condemnation, being judgmental, jumping to hasty conclusions without considering all the implications of the situation; and abstract theorizing may make ethics seem either threatening or irrelevant to students.

These methods of moral education have one common problem—they simply inform. The formation of a character that values the good and a will bent toward acting rightly are never the result of information alone. One cannot become virtuous or help others by simply *knowing* about ethical theories.

Suggested Methods

1. *Opportunities*—At certain times in the classroom (and elsewhere) a student is receptive and open to moral influences. We shall call these “opportune moments.” There are also “opportune people” who have helpful guidance to offer at the right time.

How can a teacher discern—or create—an opportune moment? Often by just being alert to the way students respond to the subject matter or discussions that occur in class, using illustrations and personal experiences to illustrate and integrate the concepts. Sometimes the topic touches a sensitive point, clarifies some anxiety, unearths some secret motive or plan. Perhaps new information seems incompatible with the student’s philosophy of life. At times significant events in the personal or social life of a student make it necessary for him or her to rethink or re-evaluate moral values.

The teacher often creates opportune moments unawares. It is important to remember that one word at the opportune time may have more impact than a thousand later on. “To make an apt

answer is a joy to a man, and a word in season, how good it is!”⁹ Once this moral season—the opportune moment—has passed, the student becomes harder to reach.

Whether a connection is made between the subject taught and Christian values or a spontaneous discussion emerges, apparently out of the context of the class, these are significant opportunities and must not be wasted.

The “opportune person” idea resembles the “significant other” concept. While the significant other functions as a role model and guide for

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children and teenagers on the social and psychological levels, the opportune person is needed on more adult levels in the domain of morality. Because the private moral world is an inner sanctum, most people—particularly adults—do not feel comfortable sharing too many moral secrets with the same person. Adults usually turn to several individuals who at opportune moments appear wise. Even near-strangers sometimes exert considerable influence.

Helen was an opportune person for Karl, and he spoke to her at his opportune moment. Something touched him personally. Something mattered. The inner moral structure of his being was shaken. Helen did not talk about science to him. He did not need that. She addressed his moral questions. However, she oriented him toward a morally dangerous path.

The formative aspect of the moral education cannot be left to opportunities and spontaneity. Deuteronomy 6:7 implies purposefulness and deliberateness. Like flowers and fruit in a garden, the moral concepts must be

nursed along and characters trimmed. Other options are needed.

2. *Position papers*—Among the most basic tools needed for moral life is the habit of thinking the issues through and the ability to take a stand. Left to ourselves we would rather cruise on the level of opinions. Convictions require effort and discipline. I have found position papers¹⁰ uniquely suited to challenging young minds to think as a teacher comes to a morally relevant issue he or she may assign a two- to four-page paper in which the student takes a position. The teacher must make it clear that no one will be evaluated, branded, or ridiculed for the stand taken in the position paper. A feeling of freedom and acceptance are necessary for such exercises to succeed. No one should write what he or she thinks “the teacher wants” or what “the church dictates.” Genuine, honest positions are required. The four previously mentioned questions in this article could serve as a guide.

To get started the teacher may find an article in a journal or the local newspaper. The students can then be asked to take a stand vis-à-vis the author’s position or the issue itself.

For instance, a Christian teacher of science can discuss evolution. When explaining the idea of “survival of the fittest”—so important to grasping the concept of natural selection—he or she could assign a position paper on the adequacy of this principle for social or personal relations. Articles on terrorism, unfair business competition, racial bigotry, or political manipulation may serve as springboards. Assignments may be worded thus: “Do you see any connection between the principle of survival and the events described in this article? What is your position on this issue? Why?”

3. *Guided discussions*—Much time has been wasted in discussing hypothetical and far-fetched ethical problems. Yet this in no way discredits the value of a well-guided exchange of views over a realistic issue. Much may be learned from discussing other people’s views. Such encounters may teach tolerance, admission of one’s own need to learn, and maybe best of all, offer unique opportunities to think quickly and speak up in a friendly, challenging atmosphere.

A business teacher lecturing on con-

sumption and pricing may pause and assign a position paper entitled: "What makes for a just price?" At some later date he or she may select a few papers and begin to discuss the subject in class. The teacher may challenge the students to search for principles that assure justice toward the manufacturer and retailer, as well as the consumer.

In this context, the survival principle may be attractive but not just. It assumes first that consumers must watch out for themselves and at the same time that they have trust in the retailer. This is a contradiction. The principle of love will be found unquestionably ideal in this situation, though too vague. The principle of equality itself makes things more attractive, but falls short in fairness. How can a Christian know what is fair in a particular pricing structure? This can be a profitable subject for discussion. Often all of these principles must be considered in searching for what is loving and fair.¹¹

4. *Role-playing*—Drawing from resources of the class, the teacher may instruct one student about some serious moral implications connected with the subject matter. During the lecture the teacher and student(s) will enter into discussion. One may wish to play ignorant or inquisitive, thus provoking the interest of the class. The teacher may play the role of "devil's advocate." However, this must be carefully handled. Students must know when the role-playing is "on" and when it is "off." No Christian teacher wishes to give false messages or exert evil influence.

5. *Meeting the consequences*—The law of cause and effect in the realm of nature has its parallel in the moral life. This may be called the harvest principle (Galatians 6:7). In teaching this truth to our young people we affect greatly their moral consciousness. They thereby learn that there are consequences to our actions. Meeting one of those consequences may be worth more than hours of lectures.

Social science teachers may speak of socially acceptable behavior. But their burden will go far beyond mere theoretical discussion of such issues. What is socially tolerable is not necessarily morally good. Film or personal experiences can portray this difference. An interview with a hobo in a large city changed the life of a classmate of mine.

A visit to a prison or hospital may vividly demonstrate the consequences of some habits that are morally suspect or harmful. After being exposed to such situations few young people would have much difficulty finding the path from actions to consequences.

Conclusion

The main concern of this article touches a basic tenet of a Christian philosophy of education: forming Christian professionals. We believe that teachers can accomplish this if they (1) become informed about how ethics relates to their own specialty,¹² (2) look for opportune moments during class and use them effectively, (3) recognize that they are opportune persons and cherish this responsibility, and (4) become creative in using participatory methods.

In the natural sciences, the teacher can look for opportune moments when dealing with the question of origins, research as a service to humanity, ethical treatment of animals, interference of political and economic powers in science, genetic research, and the place of God in natural phenomena.

In business class the teacher could present such concepts as competition, labor relations, management, free enterprise, buying and selling, while suggesting how one would function as a Christian businessperson. The business teacher should also draw attention to the moral implications, risks, and even dangers involved in doing business.

Behavioral and social scientists could suggest that the descriptive and quantitative study of human behavior, important as that is, accounts only for causes that can be observed and measured through the processes and tools of science. They can also warn against considering averages as standards. If "normal" means "average," this does not necessarily imply "good."

Fine arts and physical education teachers will seek to differentiate between the beautiful and the good, amusement and recreation, good art and the good in art. They will watch for opportune moments as they choose the means of expression, shape the tastes of their students, and select the type of physical training and sports that take place in their classes.

Humanities teachers may have less

trouble than others in finding the appropriate moment for moral influence as they teach about history, literature, or foreign cultures. In dealing with these topics, they can find many opportunities to draw parallels between ethical dimensions of the past and present.

This type of education and concern, offered in a Christian college, may attract Karl away from his prestigious university. Integration of religion and "secular" subjects will not only give him the skills to earn a living, but will also offer him something to live for. Including moral concerns in the teaching of every subject will demonstrate to students that Christianity is integral to every part of human existence. □

FOOTNOTES

¹ S. Freud, *The Future of An Illusion* (New York: Laveright, 1919), p. 76ff.

² *Ibid.* See also _____, *Totem and Taboo* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1952)

³ E. Fromm, *Man for Himself* (London: Routledge and Kegan, 1949), p. 8ff.

⁴ _____, *The Same Society* (New York: Fawcett World Library, 1965), p. 241.

⁵ Peter Caws, "On the Teaching of Ethics in a Pluralistic Society," *Hastings Center Report* (October 1978), p. 32.

⁶ *Religion* is a life-style that acknowledges God and unfolds in the God-context. *Theology* is the science of religion. *Morality* is a life-style that correlates relationships among human beings, and defines what is good, right, and just. *Ethics* is the science of morality. "The science of holiness."—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1948), vol. 7, p. 276.

⁷ See H. Stob, *Moral Reflections* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978) pp. 3-27; L. B. Smedes, *Mere Morality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), pp. VII-19; A. F. Holmes, *Ethics* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1984).

⁸ In addition to the works in Footnote 7, consult the following: G. Kainer, *Faith, Hope, and Clarity* (Mountain View: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1977); G. W. Forell, *Ethics of Decision* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955); M. J. Erickson, *Relativism in Contemporary Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1974); C. F. H. Henry, *Baker's Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973).

⁹ Proverbs 15:23 (R.S.V.).

¹⁰ Position papers are not research papers. The student may wish to seek information on the subject, but the main purpose of the exercise is to take a stand and be ready to defend it.

¹¹ The abundant literature on business ethics can provide valuable guidance. See among others: G. C. S. Benson, *Business Ethics in America* (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath and Co., 1982), which includes a good bibliography.

¹² In searching for sources, teachers will find useful references dealing with business ethics, ethics of science, ethics of teaching, et cetera, as well as works dealing with particular issues.