

Ethical Teachers: Ethical People

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In "Teaching Professional Ethics to Educators," Daniel Vokey considers the question of how we help educators resolve what Jerrold Coombs describes as the most vexatious issues of professional ethics: issues of relevance (do our ethical principles apply, and how?) and issues of conflict (what to do when two or more ethical principles dictate two or more different actions).¹ He explores the promises and problems with three different approaches to professional ethics courses: "applying ethical theories," "developing moral reasoning," and "multiple ethical languages." He concludes his essay by sketching an approach to professional ethics rooted in an "ethics of transcendent virtue;" one that pays more attention to the role of intuition in the process of developing a "capacity for sound practical judgment."

Any serious discussion about developing ethical professionals assumes that the individuals who are or are preparing to become professionals are ethical to begin with; people who are not ethical in their personal lives are unlikely to be ethical in their professional lives. Ethical behavior is motivated by the desire to be ethical, not merely to conform to some set of rules or principles; the ethical rules or principles must become *norms*; they must become *my* rules, *my* principles. One who merely follows rules is compliant, but not ethical, since being ethical requires that one is not only doing the right thing, but doing it in the right way, at the right time, and for the right reasons.² I do take it that Vokey's talk of intuition is something akin to this Aristotelian view of ethics, and also to Dewey's view of habit as a way of acting characteristically that is subject to intelligent formation, consideration, and reformation.³

As Vokey points us to an "ethic of transcendent virtue," I would like to emphasize here the other side of the dialectic: the groundedness and specificity of the ethical demands of the teaching (or any other) profession. First I will consider the meaning of the fact that we are here talking about something called "professional ethics." Then I will consider the implications of this view.

PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

What I particularly like about the approach Vokey suggests in the final section of his essay is that it avoids the mistake of saying that professional ethics are a different breed of moral commitments than ethics in general. In the pedagogy he briefly sketches, if I read him rightly, we bring moral commitments to our professional practice. If our moral sensibilities are reasonably well-formed, and if we understand the purpose of that profession, then we are justified in having some degree of confidence in our intuitive responses to ethically significant situations, as well in our intuition about when we are in such situations.

However, and I hope this is a congenial reading of Vokey's approach, the mapping of our ethical commitments onto the demands of professional practice requires a deep examination and understanding of the meaning and purposes of the

profession, its teleology, if you will. This teleology is not transcendent, but is socially constructed. Once constructed, ethical practice is about actions that advance or impede the attainment of those purposes. The ethics of the profession are ingrained in the practice of the profession within that social frame.

This is the meaning of Tom Green's observation that the term "professional ethics" is a redundancy.⁴ To be a professional is to enter into a practice that is defined by its ethical commitments. To practice unethically is to place oneself outside the profession. Hence, when we accuse doctors or lawyers of "unprofessional conduct," we mean their actions violate the meaning of their profession in a profound and significant way.

If we want ethical professionals, there is no short route to that goal. To the extent that Green is right, what is required of us is that we ground all courses in the professional sequence in the ethics of teaching. Teaching good, or even "best," practice without specific reference to ethical import, and then adding courses in professional ethics, is a sign that there is something amiss in our understanding of and preparation for the profession. Unless all courses intended to be part of professional preparation are about professional ethics, the courses with that as their specific aim are not likely to be very effective in shaping actual practice.

If I am right, the only sense in which there is such a thing as "professional ethics" would seem to be in the sense that ethical people act in their professional capacity in ways that are consistent with the meaning of the professional practice under consideration. Another way of putting this is that it is not one's personal ethics that change, but that the goods being pursued — the intrinsic and defining purposes of the profession — are made specific, and it is to these that my behavior must conform if I am to be counted as an ethical member of the teaching profession. In the sense that our lives have some ethical purpose, one might even say that *all* ethics are "professional ethics."

Therefore, the ethical meaning of the profession is probably not best taught in a course in professional ethics, but in courses that are about the practice itself, the "how" courses in pedagogy, testing, special education, and classroom management. If these aspects of professional practice are taught merely as techniques and skills, the ethical frame of the profession is too easily lost.

It should, but might not, go without saying that the above comments should not be taken to disparage either skill or technique in the practice of teaching. Competence, too, is an ethical requirement. But that is the point: competence is an *ethical* requirement, subordinate to, and not constitutive of, the purposes of the profession.

RELEVANCE AND CONFLICT

While I accept the notion that there is something transcendent about the human impulse to be moral, I also think that it is rooted deeply in our human desire (or need) to belong to a social group. We develop a sense of ethics and morality in the process of acquiring a set of norms, those norms by which some social group is defined and formed. These norms are the social contract by which a group of people becomes a "we," and specifically a "we" to which I wish to belong.

By this line of reasoning, the process of developing into an ethical professional is the process of (1) desiring to become part of norm-constituted group (educators), (2) learning what the norms are that define that group (what is it that makes an educator an educator), and (3) practicing that set of skills that are central to the attainment of the goals of education.

Once we have an habitual grasp of these skills as connected to the purposes of the profession, the question of relevance becomes easier to resolve. When I am habitually cognizant of the meaning and purposes of professional practice, I am to that extent more likely to know when my actions within that domain are ethically relevant.

I am less sure about questions of conflict in this regard. It is in the nature of some goods to compete in the world, and while deep understanding of the purposes of the profession and the nature of the goods may clarify the dimensions of the conflict, I am not sure that this understanding goes a long way toward resolving it.

We might, for example, find ourselves faced with a situation where the good of the class or group might conflict with the good of a particular student. If we have a deep grasp of the meaning and purpose of education, we might see the conflict quite clearly; that is not necessarily an aid in resolving that conflict, which remains a conflict for all our insight, and may be even more of one given the clarity with which we see it.

CONCLUSION

Ethical practice requires a deep understanding of the meaning and purposes of “education,” since it is only in the context of that meaning and purpose that one can be ethical, that is, can act intentionally in conformity with that meaning and purpose. The formation of ethical professionals, on this view, is not restricted to a course in something called “professional ethics” (nor do I mean to imply that Vokey thinks otherwise); it is something that must be woven into the very fabric of all teacher preparation and professional development. Professional development must focus on the relation between skills and moral purpose; to do otherwise is to fail at once at being either professional or ethical.

1. Jerrold Coombs, “Educational Ethics: Are We on the Right Track?” *Educational Theory* 48, no. 4 (1998): 555–569.

2. Aristotle, *The Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1985).

3. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (1916; repr., New York: The Free Press, 1944).

4. Thomas F. Green, “The Conscience of Leadership,” in *Leadership: Examining the Elusive*, ed. Linda T. Sheive and Marian Schoenheit (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1987), 105–115.