Teaching Professional Ethics to Educators:
Assessing the "Multiple Ethical Languages" Approach

Daniel Vokey
University of British Columbia

In his article "Educational Ethics: Are We on the Right Track?" Jerry Coombs raises critical questions about two standard approaches to teaching professional ethics to educators, then proposes alternative ways in which such courses can help teachers and administrators enhance their capacity for sound practical judgment, that is, make the right decisions when faced with challenging moral situations in their practice.[1] In this essay, I raise critical questions about a third way of designing professional ethics courses that has recently become popular, the "multiple ethical languages" approach, then introduce a theory and practice of improving practical judgment that I believe warrants exploration.

The essay has three sections. In section one, I recap key points from the Coombs article to establish criteria for assessing professional ethics programs, then review how teaching ethical languages has been understood to improve practical judgment. In section two, I examine a text exemplifying the multiple ethical languages approach to show how coaching teachers and administrators in a range of ethical languages is not sufficient to help them improve their decision-making in the complex moral contexts of professional practice. In the third and final section, I propose, taking Robert Nash's reference to "moral discernment"[2] as my cue, that instructors of professional ethics courses should pay greater attention to the intuitive dimension of the theory-practice dialectic through which educational professionals — ourselves not least — might cultivate the conditions for sound practical judgment.

COOMBS ON PROFESSIONAL ETHICS FOR EDUCATORS

Citing research by James Wallace, Coombs reports that there are two kinds of ethical problems that educators and other professionals find particular vexatious: problems of relevance and problems of conflict.

> In a relevance problem, there is reason to think that the case at hand might fall under one of our ethical principles, and reason to think that it might not. In other words, the problem arises precisely because we are unsure whether or how our ethical principles apply to the problematic case. A conflict problem arises when two or more of our ethical principles apply to a case, but they recommend differing ethical judgments of the case or differing courses of action. (*EE*, 556)

With these two kinds of problems in mind, Coombs reviews four texts published between 1988 and 1995, each of which exemplifies one of two standard approaches to teaching professional ethics for educators. The "applying ethical theories" approach starts from the assumption that "acting ethically means acting in accordance with well-justified ethical principles," and so "sets forth an ethical theory or set of ethical principles for educators to follow and instructs them on how these principles are to be applied." The second, or "developing moral reasoning" approach, undertakes to improve the process of deliberation through which teachers

and administrators arrive at moral judgments. In this kind of course, participants are encouraged to develop their *own* ethical theories by formulating general ethical principles that achieve reflective equilibrium with their considered moral intuitions (*EE*, 555–556).

The fundamental problem that Coombs identifies with these two ways of teaching professional ethics is that moral philosophy has yet to provide compelling reasons to prefer one among competing ethical and political theories, each of which highlights different aspects of ethically problematic cases as most important to consider in deciding what to do. I would add that moral philosophy has produced no agreement whether, and if so how, one ethical perspective could *in principle* be identified as superior to alternatives. This leaves instructors of professional ethics courses with a choice between teaching the theoretical perspectives to which they subscribe or leaving it up to participants to choose one or more according to their own lights. Coombs finds neither option satisfactory. He observes that, in the latter case, course participants are likely to embrace those theories and principles that match their pre-existing tacit moral commitments. However, he is sceptical that simply making their commitments explicit in the form of general principles will enable teachers and administrators to improve their ability to solve problems of relevance and of conflict. For one thing, it is not necessary to make tacit commit- ments explicit to use them to identify considerations relevant to ethical decision- making in particular contexts of practice. For another thing, general principles are always open to interpretation because it is not possible "to identify all of the various kinds of actions that will and will not count as instances of acting on that principle" (*EE*, 557). Neither is it possible to determine in advance which principle or principles should take priority in ethical decision-making, for often the same principle is given different weight in different contexts of practice.

Having discussed the limitations of the two standard approaches he finds in the literature, Coombs presents his own ideas about how courses in professional ethics for educators might help them reach satisfactory decisions in challenging ethical situations. He draws an analogy to legal studies to argue that the best resources for reasoning about problems of relevance are particular cases of practical judgment that are widely recognized to model the proper application of the ethical principle in question. He proposes that, when uncertain about whether or not the principle applies to a particular situation, one should "consider the extent to which the present case is similar to and different from the settled cases with regard to morally relevant features, and attempt to determine whether or not one has essentially the same reasons for applying the principle in the present case as in the settled cases" (*EE*, 567). With regard to problems of conflict, Coombs argues that one should attempt to preserve as much as possible of the values underlying the competing principles on a case-by-case basis rather than try to establish a hierarchy of principles to be applied independently of context (*EE*, 566).[3]

At the end of his article, Coombs introduces an Aristotelian *aretaic* tradition of ethical instruction in which teachers "tend to be less concerned with developing deliberative abilities and more concerned with developing such things as relevant

virtues, sensitivities, and powers of moral perception" (*EE*, 568–569). He underlines the importance of these objectives by observing that, "without moral perception and sensitivity, moral reasoning cannot get started." To professional ethics instructors who adopt these objectives, Coombs recommends that course participants be given opportunities both to increase the "depth and richness" of the ethical concepts they bring with them to class and to develop new ones. Coombs further recommends that sensitivity to the ethical dimensions of educational practice be enhanced by inviting teachers and administrators to consider how, in cases drawn from their own actual experience, their personal moral commitments are properly adapted to the particular forms of authority and responsibility that accompany their professional roles.

The chief difficulty I find with these recommendations is that they do not address Coombs's own concern about ethical pluralism — in particular, the unresolved tension among the incompatible priorities in ethical decision-making that rival ethical theories provide. He does not explain how, without presupposing the validity of one among rival ethical perspectives, participants in professional ethics courses would assess the reasons for — or otherwise judge the appropriateness of — either the new moral concepts to which they are introduced or the new applications of their current conceptual repertoire. Analysing case studies from a range of perspectives might present teachers and administrators with *opportunities* to enrich and expand their moral vocabulary. However, if such discussion is to foster learning rather than simply an exchange of viewpoints, there must be some way to identify *which* ways of analysing and responding to particular moral challenges are correct and which are not. Improving ethical decision-making through case study analysis would thus appear to presuppose that participants will possess and exercise the very capacity for sound practical judgment that courses in professional ethics undertake to improve.[4] Is there an alternative?

There is one variation on the "developing moral reasoning" approach to ethical instruction that receives qualified approval from Coombs, and that is Ken Strike's goal of helping educational professionals become competent speakers of a public moral language.[5] A public moral language is heuristically defined as "the language that members of a pluralistic society with different moralities can agree to use to discuss public issues" (*EE*, 564). Coombs agrees with Strike that to learn a moral language is to learn "a set of concepts and argument strategies" that provide "a shared way of thinking through ethical issues." Strike uses the game of tennis to illustrate how acquiring a language is acquiring perceptual and appraisal categories: One comes to make sense of what is happening on the court and to appreciate brilliant play by learning the proper application of such concepts as "ace," "volley," and "base line return." As Strike puts it, "The vocabulary constitutes the game. Learning to play requires learning to talk in a certain way. So it is also with ethics."[6]

What is the connection between Strike's proposal and the problem of ethical pluralism? Strike recommends that educational professionals learn to use a public moral language in arriving at and defending ethical decisions precisely because a shared set of moral concepts would enable communication across the differences that exist within a morally pluralistic society. He argues that, to fulfill this function,

a public language should (1) "have sufficient richness and sophistication to allow us to discuss educational issues cogently," (2) "be a language the vast majority of competent moral speakers in a society can speak conscientiously, despite disagreements about fundamental convictions," and (3) be widely shared. According to Strike, a public language meeting these three conditions would be composed of the following three "sublanguages": a language of *rights* that attends to due process, equal opportunity, fairness, and justice; a language of *caring* that celebrates kindness, compassion, and nurturance; and a language of rational integrity that enshrines respect for evidence, argument, and the pursuit of truth.[7] By becoming competent speakers of this "tri-part public moral language", teachers and administrators would learn a comprehensive set of criteria for making ethical decision-making in educational practice.

I am very sympathetic to the project of identifying and extending common ground among speakers of different moral languages rooted in particular religious, philosophical, political, and/or cultural traditions. However, as Strike himself recognizes, gaining competence in using a public moral language *requires*, rather than substitutes for, the exercise of sound practical judgment informed by intellectual virtues such as wisdom and moral virtues such as "sensitivity to context and individual need." For one thing, educational professionals need practical judgment to integrate the distinct perspectives afforded by the sublanguages of rights, caring, and rational integrity. Strike uses the example of assigning grades to show how each language points up different dimensions of an issue in a way that may yield conflicting recommendations. How can a commitment to impartiality be properly balanced with sensitivity to differences in individual abilities and circumstances? Strike also acknowledges that teachers and administrators need practical judgment to balance fidelity to the core values of their primary moral communities with commitment to the moral standards internal to the public moral language they speak as professionals. Strike observes that, "often the motivation to follow the precepts of the public ethic comes from attachments and values formed in primary moral communities and then transferred to the public domain," concluding that a public moral language should not be seen "either a competitor with or replacement for these various forms of moral speech."[8]

In sum, even we agree that it is both possible and desirable for educational professionals to learn a public moral language, we are still left with the question of how they might cultivate the wisdom and sensitivity that sound ethical decision-making requires. This brings us to consider: Can an answer to this question be found within the multiple ethical languages approach?

SHAPIRO AND STEFKOVICH'S "MULTIPLE PARADIGM"
COURSES IN PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

To represent the multiple ethical languages approach to designing professional ethics courses for educators, I have selected the recent and relatively sophisticated version presented by Joan Shapiro and Jacqueline Stefkovich in their book *Ethical Leadership and Decision-Making in Education: Applying Theoretical Perspectives to Complex Dilemmas*.[9] (They refer to multiple ethical *paradigms* rather than

languages, but in this context the two terms are essentially synonymous.) The courses they describe have three main components. First, there are lectures on and discussions of assigned readings that introduce four distinct ethical "paradigms" in order to raise the widest possible range of questions during the ethical decision-making process. The *ethic of justice* asks questions

> related to the rule of law and the more abstract concepts of fairness, equity, and justice. These may include, but are certainly not limited to, questions related to issues of equity and equality; the fairness of rules, laws, and policies; whether laws are absolute, and if exceptions are to be made, under what circumstances; and the rights of individuals versus the greater good of the community. (*EL*, 13)

The *ethic of critique* starts from critical social theory's and other sociological analyses of how unequal relationships of power and privilege are maintained among different social groups. In the process of becoming familiar with this perspective, participants learn the use of such concepts as oppression, power, privilege, authority, voice, language, and empowerment. "This ethic asks…the hard questions regarding social class, race, gender, and other areas of difference, such as 'Who makes the laws? Who benefits from the law, rule, or policy? Who has the power? Who are the silenced voices?'" (*EL*, 15).

The *ethic of care*, represented by the work of such authors as Carol Gilligan, Nel Noddings, and Jane Roland Martin, emphasizes building and maintaining relationships and requires course participants to consider "multiple voices in the decision-making process." This in turn entails an appreciation of diversity, manifest in part by a commitment to learning how to listen to, understand, and respond to others. The questions corresponding to this perspective include "Who will benefit from what I decide? Who will be hurt by my actions? What are the long-term effects of a decision I make today? And if I am helped by someone now, what should I do in the future about giving back to this individual or to society in general?" (*EL*, 17).

Shapiro and Stefkovich understand the ethics of justice, critique, and care as complementary perspectives on the ethical issues faced by administrators and other leaders in schools. At the same time, they believe that a fourth paradigm, the *ethic of the profession*, is needed to raise questions and concerns that might be overlooked by the other three. The *ethic of the profession* insists that every decision on moral matters made by a teacher or administrator must take their professional roles and responsibilities into account. What does this entail?

This question brings us to the second main component of courses designed according to this version of the multiple ethical languages approach. Shapiro and Stefkovich maintain that, although educational professionals must consult their associations' codes of ethics and other legal frameworks when making ethical decisions, these are usually too general to serve to identify "the right thing to do" in particular situations. To fill this gap, Shapiro and Stefkovich encourage participants in their courses to formulate their own, more substantial personal-professional codes of ethics by reflecting upon "what they perceive to be right or wrong and good or bad, who they are as professionals and as human beings, how they make decisions, and why they make the decisions they do" (*EL*, 21). These codes incorporate both

the moral commitments at which participants have arrived through their own personal and professional experience *and* the moral standards of the professional and social communities in which they work. Furthermore, according to Shapiro and Stefkovich, those applying these codes in ethical decision-making in educational contexts should be guided by one over-riding principle in order to honor the professional's responsibility to their clients: *Do what is in the best interests of the students "taking into account the fact that they may represent highly diverse populations"* (*EL*, 25).

How is this done? The third main component of the courses Shapiro and Stefkovich recommend is analysis and discussion of case studies, which are intended to enable participants do three things: (1) to see how the four perspectives bring different considerations to bear in decision-making in particular educational contexts; (2) to test and refine their individual codes of ethics through comparison with their moral intuitions in particular cases; and (3) to come to appreciate how their classmates see, feel, and think differently about moral matters according to their particular points of view. Shapiro and Stefkovich believe that, in combination with the other two course components, practice in working through the complex ethical issues they face from each of these different ethical perspectives will improve the ability of teachers and administrators to resolve them in a satisfactory way.

There are obvious similarities between this "multiple paradigm" approach to professional ethics for educators and the coaching of teachers and administrators in the tri-part public moral language that Strike and Coombs recommend. The additional "paradigms" or languages that Shapiro and Stefkovich include represent two improvements (in my eyes, at least) to Strike's proposals. First, the *ethic of critique* invites educators to uncover the histories of conflict through which certain ethical languages have come to dominate public moral discourse. I think this is important because I believe that to suggest without qualification that a widely shared public moral language exists either in Canada or the United States is to ignore the legacy and ongoing effects of colonization. Second, introducing the *ethic of the profession* foregrounds the contractual and other responsibilities to students that all educational professionals have a duty to fulfill.

My approval of these points notwithstanding, I find that the benefits the authors anticipate will result from teaching multiple ethical paradigms and corresponding languages goes well beyond what can be supported by the reasoning and evidence they provide. For one thing, they appear to assume that complex traditions of ethical thought can be translated into lists of questions without misrepresenting their internal tensions and disagreements, which I find implausible. Most significantly, they provide no grounds for believing that simply raising a wide variety of questions will help educational professionals generate more satisfactory answers in "real-life, complex dilemmas." I think we have reason to doubt what they again appear to assume: that the different concerns represented by the ethics of justice, critique, care, and the profession will be always and only complementary.

In this connection, I find it highly significant that none of the many case studies that Shapiro and Stefkovich include in their book illustrate how adopting four

distinct ethical perspectives enables educators to evaluate possible courses of action as morally better and worse. Rather, the authors' own observations suggest that their approach to professional ethics is likely to create as many ethical dilemmas as it resolves — for individuals no less than for groups. The section describing how course participants can develop individual codes of ethics surfaces no less than five kinds of possible conflict among their moral commitments. There were potential clashes between

1. personal and professional codes of ethics held by one individual;

2. two different professional codes of ethics held by one individual;

3. two or more professional codes of ethics held by different individuals;

4. the personal and professional codes of ethics of an individual teacher or administrator, on the one hand, and the moral beliefs of the majority of the members of the community surrounding the school, on the other; and

5. the moral beliefs held by different members of that larger community.

If the experiences that Shapiro and Stefkovich report are any indication, learning the key concepts and questions of the ethics of justice, critique, care, and the profession is likely to help teachers and administrators appreciate the range both of considerations relevant to an ethical decision and of moral perspectives within a group. However, it is unlikely to promote consensus among educational professionals on the right thing to do, or even the right way to decide. The challenge of ethical pluralism and the specter of ethical relativism remain (*EL*, 105–106).

THE ETHICS OF TRANSCENDENT VIRTUE

I have argued here that if individual reflection or group discussion is to improve ethical decision-making, there must be some way to identify morally better and worse ways of responding to particular moral challenges. A comparison with the conditions of progress in scientific inquiry suggests that enhancing practical judgment requires something in moral life that fulfills a function analogous to experimentation. We have seen that one common test of the theories and the general principles advanced in ethics is their ability to achieve reflective equilibrium with considered moral intuitions. Accordingly, even if such intuitions are understood, not as infallible, but as open to correction in light of further experience and reflection, the possibility of progress in ethical inquiry depends in significant part upon the reliability of the intuitions to which we appeal. On this view, if our courses are to help teachers and administrators make better ethical decisions, we must understand moral intuition well enough to know how it might become more trustworthy rather than less.

I find support for this conclusion in the work of Robert Nash. After a thirty-four-year engagement with the theory and practice of professional ethics, his "greatest hope as an ethics educator" is that at least some of his students will achieve what, following James M. Gustafson, he describes as *moral discernment*:

The final discernment is an informed intuition; it is not the conclusion of a formally logical argument, a strict deduction from a single moral principle, or an absolutely certain result

> from the exercises of human "reason" alone. There is a final moment of perception that sees the parts in relation to a whole, expresses sensibilities as well as reasoning, and is made in the condition of human finitude. In complex circumstances it is not without risk.[10]

Moral discernment may be heuristically defined as precisely what is called for when professionals are faced with problems of relevance and of conflict. But how can it be improved?

I think it no coincidence that Nash borrows the notion of moral discernment from an author of a text in theological ethics, because it is in religious and spiritual traditions that I have found ways of thinking about and cultivating an innate human capacity for moral apprehension. Of course, there are significant differences among the various accounts both of moral intuition and of the practices, religious and secular, through which our capacity to discern moral truth might be improved. Even so, a recurring theme in such accounts is that apprehending what is and is not morally correct arises when habitually self-centered ways of thinking, feeling, and acting are unlearned. How (if at all), or under what conditions, would it be both possible and desirable to integrate such teachings into courses on professional ethics?

There is no space for a comprehensive answer to this question here. I can only report that, in the professional ethics courses for educators that I have taught, participants have reacted positively when I have introduced the link between sound moral intuition and practices of personal transformation under the label of "the ethics of transcendent virtue". Simply providing teachers and administrator with excerpts from a variety of traditional and contemporary spiritual teachings has enabled them to talk about a dimension of their practice — they all report relying upon intuition to some degree — that hitherto had been ignored in their graduate programs. For example, participants have been inspired to share their own practices of cultivating moral perception by the Tao Te Ching (in this case, verse one from *A New English Version* by Stephen Mitchell):

> The tao that can be told
> is not the eternal Tao.
> The name that can be named
> is not the eternal Name.
> The unnamable is the eternally real.
> Naming is the origin
> of all particular things.
> Free from desire, you realize the mystery.
> Caught in desire, you see only the manifestations.
> Yet mystery and manifestations
> arise from the same source.
> This source is called darkness.
> Darkness within darkness.
> The gateway to all understanding.[11]

CONCLUSION

The contemporary approaches to professional ethics for educators that I have reviewed require course participants to exercise moral discernment to identify morally better and worse ways of responding to real or hypothetical moral challenges. It may be for this reason that Coombs ends his article with the statement that "perhaps the most important thing we can realistically hope to accomplish is that

students become disposed to regard the development of moral sensitivity along with deliberative and dialogical competence as important foci of their continuing professional development." The tentative conclusion I am exploring in my own courses is that we should pay greater attention to the role of intuition in the theory-practice dialectic through which educational professionals — ourselves not least — might cultivate the capacity for sound practical judgment.

1. Jerrold Coombs, "Educational Ethics: Are We on the Right Track?" *Educational Theory* 48, no. 4 (1998): 555–69. This work will be cited as *EE* in the text for all subsequent references.

2. Robert J. Nash, *"Real World" Ethics: Frameworks for Educators and Human Service Professionals,* 2d ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002).

3. Similar advice is offered by Rushworth Kidder, *How Good People Make Tough Choices: Resolving the Dilemmas of Ethical Living* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 167.

4. According to Coombs, participants in professional ethics courses can acquire competence in an ethical language when their reasoning about real-life ethical issues in discussions with colleagues is guided by a proficient speaker of the ethical language in question, who "knows what good moral reasoning requires." To avoid an infinite regress, this point raises essentially the same question in a different form: Through what process did such course instructors gain their proficiency and learn what good moral reasoning entails (*EE,* 565)?

5. Kenneth Strike, "Professional Ethics and the Education of Professionals," *Educational Horizons* 74, no. 1 (1995).

6. Ibid., 33.

7. Ibid., 31.

8. Ibid., 32, 34–35.

9. Joan Shapiro and Jacqueline Stefkovich, *Ethical Leadership and Decision-Making in Education: Applying Theoretical Perspectives to Complex Dilemmas* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2001). This work will be cited as *EL* in the text for all subsequent references. Kidder, *How Good People Make Tough Choices,* is another example, although he refers to three "resolution principles" associated with long-standing moral traditions rather than moral languages. It is some testimony to the popularity of this approach that the British Columbia School Superintendents' Association invited Kidder to conduct seminars for administrators based upon his conception of "ethical fitness."

10. James M. Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, vol. 1, *Theology and Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 338; cited in Nash, *"Real World" Ethics*, 168.

11. Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching: A New English Version*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Harper, 1988).