

IS IT HARDER TO TEACH ETHICS IN A MULTI-CULTURAL POPULATION?*

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The answer to my title question may seem self-evident: Of course it's hard to teach ethics in a multi-cultural population. That, however, is not my answer. I have been teaching Business Ethics, Engineering Ethics, or Medical Ethics to multi-cultural classes for almost a decade. Though I have been reading about the difficulties of "multi-culturalism" during that time, I have not experienced such difficulties myself. Why not? That's a good question. This paper suggests an answer: worry about multi-culturalism rests on an implicit moral relativism for which empirical evidence is entirely lacking. If you are clear about what you are doing, you can teach ethics in a multi-cultural environment in just the way you would where there is only one culture.

This paper has five parts. In the first, I describe my credentials a bit more. The second and third parts of the paper draw a number of important distinctions, especially that between morality and ethics. The fourth part explains both how I teach ethics and why I can do it even in a multi-cultural class. The last part tries to broaden the analysis to kinds of ethics I don't teach.

I. My Credentials

When I began teaching almost thirty years ago, my classes consisted almost entirely of American students most of whose parents were also American. Except for a few whose ancestors had been brought as slaves to the United States more than a century and half before, almost all my students were of European descent. Though they differed in religion, race, national origin, sex, and sexual orientation, none of that seemed to matter. The American "melting pot" seemed to have done its work.

* Originally published (in Italian) as "E piu arduo insegnare etica in una popolazione pluriculturale?", Humanitas 5 (October 1994): 667-678.

Today, however, my students come from as far away as China, India, and Egypt, as well as from Europe, Latin America, and all over the United States. Some of my students with accents are American citizens, recent immigrants; and some, without accents, are the beneficiaries of excellent language training or natural gift. I regularly have Buddhist, Moslem, Hindu, Jewish, and Christian students in the same class. Some of the Moslems, Jews, and Christians have been openly devout. African-Americans are much more numerous now and often joined by West-Indian students of African descent or native-born Africans from South of the Sahara. Sex (but not sexual orientation) is now likely to be noted in class. Native-born American males of European descent are often a minority. My classes differ not only in "ethnicity" (that is, in the people to whom my student are historically connected) but in "culture" (that is, in upbringing, commitments, dress, and mode of living).

This change in the composition of my classes is the result of specific government policy ("affirmative action"), of changes in the groups who are seeking a technical education, of the huge migrations of the last decade or so, and of my institution's efforts to recruit students abroad to make up for the declining number of "traditional" ones at home. Similar forces seem to be at work in much of the world. My classroom today may well be everyone's tomorrow. What can we learn from my classroom about teaching ethics? Let us begin by considering in more detail what I in fact teach.

II. What is morality?

I must begin with an obvious but important distinction, that between morality and ethics. "Morality", as I use that term, refers to those standards of conduct everyone (every rational person) wants every other to follow even if everyone else's following them would mean he had to do the same. Morality is (by definition) the same for everyone.¹

Does this definition beg any questions? The answer, I think, is that it does not. But it does illuminate some and postpone others. The definition does not, for example,

commit us to any moral theory; it only requires moral theories to generate arguments that could appeal to all rational persons (a requirement which seems to be altogether reasonable). The definition also requires moral arguments to begin with a general standard of conduct; morality is understood as primarily a social system, only secondarily matter for private conscience. And, most important here, the definition does not rule out moral relativism (if "moral relativism" is understood as the view that there is no standard of conduct everyone wants everyone else to follow). What it does, instead, is to suggest ways to collect evidence for, and against, moral relativism. I take advantage of this suggestion the first day of class.

If moral relativism is true, then a class as diverse as mine would seem an unlikely place to find agreement on any standard. My students in fact expect to find no agreement. Yet, once we begin to look for moral standards to agree on, we quickly find a good number. For example, no matter where my students grew up, they agree that they want everyone else to follow the following rules even if it means having to do the same:

1. Don't lie.
2. Don't kill,
3. Don't cheat.
4. Keep your promises.
5. Don't steal.

They also agree on some exceptions (for example, "except in self-defense" for "Don't kill"). There are--as a matter of fact--no disagreements on these matters--or, at least, no disagreements that survive sustained reflection on the rule or exception, including the rationale for it.

I do not, of course, offer this classroom experiment as a definitive disproof of relativism. By my definition, moral relativism would be true if only one rational person anywhere in the world dissented from the above list (and every other). My experiment cannot rule out that possibility. The results I get in class are nonetheless sufficiently unexpected to make moral relativism look pretty unattractive for the rest of the

semester. Indeed, it is strong empirical evidence against a claim for which there is more sentiment than evidence. "Don't kill", "don't lie", "don't cheat", and the like are, it seems, so basic to social life that every culture must have them.

Of course, my students do sometimes disagree about how to interpret a particular standard, for example, about whether "Don't lie" prohibits misleading someone with a "half truth". But I do not think these disagreements have ever broken along cultural lines (though I would not be surprised to find a tendency for members of certain cultures to prefer one interpretation rather than another). Other disagreements do break along cultural lines. For example: my religious students seem to think piety a virtue, indeed, a moral virtue (a disposition they want everyone else to have even if their having it would mean having to have it too). My non-religious students do not think piety a virtue. Indeed, many regard it as a character fault, if not exactly a vice. My approach leaves them with a conclusion neither side much likes, that piety is neither a moral virtue nor a moral vice but, for now at least, merely a candidate for one status or the other.

The defeat of moral relativism does not wipe out all disagreement or mean that, even in principle, everyone will want to want all the standards that some others, or even most others, want. Morality is family of standards among many. Some standards certainly are relative even if morality is not.

Moral standards are not all of one kind. Distinguishing three basic kinds--rules, principles, and ideals--helps avoid certain misunderstandings.

A rule requires (or forbids) a course of action. "Don't kill" and "Keep your promises" are moral rules. Rules have exceptions. For example, "except in self-defense" is an exception to "Don't kill". To fail to do what a rule requires (or to do what a rule forbids) is wrong, unless justified under some exception. Rules lay down relatively rigid standards of conduct; and even when justified, doing what a rule forbids may leave behind liability to make good the harm one caused. There seem to be very few moral rules, a dozen or two at most.² There are many more principles and ideals.

Principles do not concern conduct directly. They merely require certain

considerations to have a certain weight in deliberations. They state reasons. For example, "Help the needy" does not require us to give charity whenever we can but to give the needs of the needy significant weight when we are making allocations. Principles are primarily standards of deliberation.

Ideals do something more complex. Like rules, they are concerned with conduct; but, like principles, they do not require any particular conduct. Instead, they present the conduct in question as a state of affairs good to try for or approach but not bad to ignore or fall short of. The injunction, "Be a hero", is commonly thought to state a moral ideal. Moral ideals are morally important insofar as they give others a reason to help, reward, or at least praise those who try to realize a particular ideal.

Other standards, for example, the virtues can be defined in terms of one or more of these three standards. The virtue of honesty might, for example, be understood as a disposition to follow the moral rules "Don't lie", "Don't cheat", and "Don't steal" together with a strong commitment to the principle "Don't deceive".

I do not teach morality as such in my classes. I do not because I do not care whether my students are moral or not, nor because I do not know how, but because my students come to me relatively well-informed on moral matters. The most I can hope to do in my class for morality is to improve my students' moral judgment a bit.³ This I do not by teaching morality as such but by teaching ethics.

III. What is Ethics?

People often use the term "ethics" as a synonym for morality. That usage, while certainly respectable, has the effect of making "ethics" a word without a distinctive use. Most philosophers do not waste "ethics" in this way. They use the term to refer to a field of study, that is, to the attempt to understand morality as a rational undertaking. While I have no objection to philosophers using "ethics" that way, I prefer to use "moral theory" for that instead, saving "ethics" for yet another use.

"Ethics", as I use it, refers to those special morally permissible standards of

conduct every member of a group wants every other member of that group to follow even if that would mean having to do the same. Ethics (like morality) applies to members of a group simply because they are members of that group. Each profession is a group in this sense. Medical ethics is for physicians (and no one else); engineering ethics for engineers (and no one else); and so on. Institutions can also create groups. Business ethics is for people in business (and no one else); research ethics for people in (scientific) research (and no one else); and so on. (I shall hereafter generally use "profession" to cover business as well as the professions.)

Ethics resembles law in being "special", that is, in applying to people in a group because they are in that group rather than because they are rational persons as such. Ethics is therefore relative. It nonetheless resembles morality. Ethics applies to people only insofar as they want everyone else to be subject to its standards so much that they would be willing to have the standard apply to themselves as well. Ethics differs from law insofar as law, but not ethics, applies to members of a group whether they want it to or not.

Ethics is both a higher standard and a moral standard. Ethics is a higher standard because ethics demands more than morality. Ethics is a moral standard, not just a standard consistent with morality, because members of the relevant group must have reasons to set themselves a higher standard, reasons beyond what law or market would impose whatever the group in question did. Such reasons must turn maintenance of that higher standard into a cooperative practice, that is, an undertaking the benefits of which depend in part at least on others doing their share of carrying the burden of maintaining the special standards. Ethics is "special morality".

The higher standard that constitutes a group's ethics is generally formulated in a code of ethics, in formal interpretations of it, and in the less formal practices by which members of a group pass on the special ways they do things to each new generation. For example, American engineers are supposed to put the public health, safety, and welfare ahead of that of their client or employer, while lawyers are supposed to put the legal interests of their client ahead of both the public's interest and the interest of their

employer (if the employer is not the client). There standards are not now what they were fifty years ago and may well change again tomorrow. They do not follow from general moral standards (though they must be consistent with them). So, except for those lucky enough to have a mother or father in the appropriate profession, my students are not likely to learn much about their profession's ethics except at a professional school or while practicing the profession. Professional ethics is as much a part of the special knowledge distinguishing members of a profession from everyone else as any other skill distinctive of that profession. Teaching business, medical, or engineering ethics is part of teaching business, medicine, or engineering.

IV. What can teaching ethics accomplish?

Teaching medical, business, or engineering ethics can achieve at least four desirable outcomes: 1) increase the ethical sensitivity of students; 2) increase their knowledge of relevant standards of conduct; 3) improve their ethical judgment; and 4) improve their ethical will-power (that is, their ability to act ethically when they want to). How can teaching ethics accomplish all of this--indeed, any of this?

Teaching ethics can increase student sensitivity simply by making students aware, for example, that, as engineers, they will have to resolve certain ethical problems. Just being exposed to a few examples of a particular problem, having them identified and explained, should make it more likely than otherwise that the students will see a problem of that sort when it arises on the job. Why teaching ethics might have that effect is not hard to understand. The mechanism is precisely the same as for learning to see technical problems. Practice sharpens perception.

How can teaching medical, business, or engineering ethics increase student knowledge of relevant standards? Again, the answer is much the same as for any technical standard. A student who, for example, reads a code of medical ethics is more likely to know what is in it than a student who does not read it. A student who has to answer questions about the code is more likely to recall the relevant provisions than one

who has not. And so on.

How can teaching medical, business, or engineering ethics improve ethical judgment? Ethical judgment, like technical judgment, tends to improve with use. If I allow a student to make ethical judgments, explain them, and compare them with those other students make, she is more likely to judge well than if she gets no such experience. The classroom provides a safe place to make mistakes and learn from them--ethical mistakes as well as purely technical ones.

But how can teaching medical, business, or engineering ethics increase a student's ethical will-power? Surely the classroom is not the place for that. Think again. For example, isn't an engineer who knows that he shares a particular standard of conduct with other engineers more likely to follow it than one who believes himself alone in being committed to a certain standard? One benefit of discussing ethics in the classroom is that the discussion shows students how much consensus there is (among would-be members of their profession and so, by extension, to actual members). There is power in numbers. That is one source of will-power.

There are, of course, disagreements as well. I do not gloss over these--indeed, much of my course is devoted to the study of disagreements. I try, however, to maintain a balance. I want my students to understand that there is a settled area where they can probably depend on others to support them as well as an unsettled area where they may be, more or less, on their own. I also want them to understand that the area of settlement can expand or contract, that they can help the process by reasoned argument, and that part of being serious about ethics (and morality) is participating in such arguments. I don't want them to come away from my course thinking ethics is some sort of divine fiat they can only obey or violate.

Note that nothing I have said implies that I am converting devils into angels, sinners into saints, or even bad people into good. All I claim to be doing is making it somewhat more likely that my students will notice an ethical problem, will know what standards to apply, will have experience with such problems to draw on, and will have some idea of what kind of support they can expect from those around them. I am, in

short, claiming to make it somewhat more likely than it would otherwise be that my students will act ethically. That is all I mean by "teaching ethics" to them.⁴

V. Extending the analysis

I have so far been talking about professional (and business) ethics. But, as I have used "ethics", there is no need to restrict the term in that way. In principle, many other groups might have their own ethics, for example, a tribe ("Hopi ethics"), a religion ("Catholic ethics"), or even a nation ("Italian ethics"); and, if they do have their own, then they can be taught in just the way I teach medical, engineering, or business ethics.

Of course, whether any group has its own ethics is, in part, an empirical question: does every rational person of the group in question want this or that standard to apply to everyone else even if that would mean it would apply to him too? Answering that question will require both formulating the standard in question and doing some research to see how much agreement there really is (hopefully, research more extensive than the interviews I perform in class).

Such empirical research will, however, not be enough to establish the claim that a certain tribe, religion, or nation has its own ethics. There are also two moral questions to be answered. The first is whether the standard in question demands more than morality does. If it does not, then the standard is an ordinary moral standard, one everyone in the group accepts only because everyone accepts it, whether in the group or not. But, even if the standard in question is peculiar to the group, it may only be an ethos, ethic, or "ethics". Showing that a group has its own ethics is, requires answering a second question, whether the standard in question is consistent with ordinary morality. "Torturer's ethics", "Nazi ethics", and the like can only be written with scare quotes. Ethics is only relatively relative.

Showing that a tribe, religion, or nation has its own ethics does not settle whether they should be taught--or, if they should be taught--whether they should be taught in a classroom. The ethics of some tribes, religions, or nations may, like those of some

professions, be morally permissible without being wise. Perhaps the tribe, religion, or nation would be better off adopting an international standard in place of its local one (much as Sweden benefited from switching to the standard European rule of driving on the right). What ethics requires is not necessarily what ethics should require (though, while it does require it, it is something one should do). Similar practical considerations may affect whether one should teach the ethics of one's tribe, religion, or nation in the classroom. There is, for example, no point in taking up class time if most students already know the standards--or if students are unlikely to learn them in a classroom. There are many barriers to teaching ethics, even if a multi-culturalism is not.

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NOTES

1. For a defense of this definition, see Michael Davis, "The Moral Legislature: Morality without an Archimedean Point", Ethics 102 (January 1992): 303-308.
2. For someone who has argued that there are precisely ten, see Bernard Gert, Morality: A New Justification of the Moral Rules (Oxford University Press: New York, 1988). While I think Gert has gotten a bit carried away on this point, I do think this is one of the few books a morality worth the time it takes to read. Of special value for teachers is a) his defense of the moral rules (one by one) and b) his explanation of how to use them in making practical decisions.
3. For those who doubt that I can even claim to do this much for "moral education", I recommend a dip into recent empirical research, for example, Moshe M. Blatt and Lawrence Kohlberg, "The Effects of Classroom Moral Discussion Upon Children's Level of Moral Judgment," Journal of Moral Education 4 (1975): 129-161, or T.R. Martin, "Do Courses in Ethics Improve Ethical Judgment of Students?", Business and Society (Winter/Spring 1981-82): 17-26.
4. For more, see my "Who Should Teach Workplace Ethics?", Teaching Philosophy 13 (March 1990): 21-36.