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Teaching for Ethical Reasoning

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Abstract

This article argues for the importance of teaching for ethical reasoning. Much of our teaching is in vain if it is not applied to life in an ethical manner. The article reviews lapses in ethical reasoning and the great costs they have had for society. It proposes that ethical reasoning can be taught across the curriculum. It presents an eight-step model of ethical reasoning that can be applied to ethical challenges and illustrates its application. The eight steps range from recognizing there even is a situation to which to respond, to acting. It is argued that ethical behavior requires the completion of all eight steps. It further points to a source of frustration in the teaching and application of ethics: ethical drift. Finally it draws conclusions.

Keywords: ethical reasoning, ethical drift, bystander intervention

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The beginning of the end, it is generally agreed, was in 1962 ("Centralia, Pennsylvania: Truth is Stranger than Fiction," 2009). Someone burned trash in the pit of an abandoned strip mine in Centralia, Pennsylvania, USA. It was illegal; it was unethical; but people do this kind of thing all the time. An exposed vein of coal caught fire. The fire was doused with water and town officials thought the fire was extinguished. But it wasn't, and the fire erupted again, unexpectedly, in the same pit just a few days later. More water was applied and town officials thought that was the end of it. But again, it wasn't.

The fire spread underground. People debated long and hard as to what to do about it. As they debated, life went on. People attended to the problems that confronted them in their daily lives—making ends meet, raising their kids, marrying and divorcing—meanwhile relegating the fire to the backs of their minds. Every once in a while, though, the fire or its byproducts would emerge from the ground. Toxic gases would start to come up out of the ground. A basement would become very hot and eventually people would realize that the fire had reached under their basement. Roads would start to buckle from the heat. Half-hearted efforts would be made to extinguish the fire, but the longer people waited, the more the fire spread, and the more expensive it would be to extinguish it. The government started to pay people to relocate. They had little other choice.

Today, Centralia, Pennsylvania, is a ghost town. All but the steadfast few have abandoned the town. The town no longer appears on some maps. Relatively few people even remember the fire that still burns under the ruins of Centralia. Among those who do are the residents of Ashland, Pennsylvania, because the fire is making its way in their direction. They fear they are next.

The Need to Teach for Ethical Reasoning

The story of Centralia is a precautionary tale for our society as a whole. We need to teach for ethical reasoning (Sternberg, 2010)! The whole mess in Centralia started with one clearly unethical act. Local, state, and government officials had a chance to do something about it, but they failed adequately to recognize the looming crisis. And so the

crisis spread underground, erupting here and there, until it became unmanageable. The financial costs were staggering. But what about the ethics of making only a half-hearted attempt to control a fire that eventually would destroy the entire town, including the homes both of innocent victims and of those who did nothing?

One can argue that lapses such as occurred in Centralia are exceptions, scarcely the rule. The financial collapse of 2008 appears to have been partly a result of pure greed on the part of certain banks and bankers. At the time this is being written, at least one well-known investment bank is under criminal as well as civil investigation. In 2010, coal miners died in a mine shaft that had been cited numerous times for inadequate ventilation, and a record-breaking oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico occurred at least in part because of improper safeguards against such spills.

Such problems are nothing new. A. H. Robins went bankrupt in 1985. The company could not afford settlements for the more than 300,000 lawsuits filed against them as a result of their production and marketing of an unsafe intrauterine device for birth control, the Dalkon Shield. In 2001, Enron collapsed after *Fortune* magazine had named it America's most innovative company for six years in a row. It was a house of cards, built on phony books and fraudulent shell companies. Worldcom's bankruptcy came a year later, in 2002. It had incorrectly accounted for $3.8 billion in operating expenses. More recently, we have seen the end of Bear Stearns, Lehman Brothers, Merrill Lynch, and numerous other financial enterprises. Few people reached the depths of Bernard Madoff, the epitome of unethical behavior on Wall Street, who sits in a prison cell.

As a university administrator, I, like other administrators, have discovered that students' ethical skills often are not up to the level of their ability-test scores. Colleges run the full gamut of unethical behavior on the part of students: drunken rampages, cheating on tests, lying about reasons for papers turned in late, attacks by students on other students, questionable behavior on the athletic field. Faculty members, of course, are not immune either: Few academic administrators probably leave their jobs without having had to deal with at least some cases of academic or other misconduct on the part of faculty.

Teaching Ethical Reasoning

Ethical Reasoning can be Taught

Schools should teach ethical reasoning; they should not necessarily teach ethics. There is a difference. Ethics is a set of principles for what constitutes right and wrong behavior. These principles are generally taught in the home or through religious training in a special school or through learning in the course of one's life. It would be challenging to teach ethics in a secular school, because different religious and other groups have somewhat different ideas about what is right and wrong. There are, however, core values that are common to almost all these religions and ethical systems that schools do teach and reinforce, for example, reciprocity (the golden rule), honesty, sincerity, compassion in the face of human suffering.

Ethical reasoning is how to think about issues of right or wrong. Processes of reasoning can be taught, and the school is an appropriate place to teach these processes. The reason is that, although parents and religious schools may teach ethics, they do not always teach ethical reasoning, or at least, do so with great success. They may see their job as teaching right and wrong, but not how to reason with ethical principles. Moreover, they may not do as good a job of it as we would hope for.

Is there any evidence that ethical reasoning can be taught with success? There have been successful endeavors with students of various ages. Paul (Paul & Elder, 2005), of the Foundation for Critical Thinking, has shown how principles of critical thinking can be applied specifically to ethical reasoning in young people. DeHaan and his colleagues at Emory University have shown that it is possible successfully to teach ethical reasoning to high school students (DeHaan & Narayan, 2007). Myser (1995) of the University of Newcastle has shown ways specifically of teaching ethics to medical students. Weber (1993) of Marquette University found that teaching ethical awareness and reasoning to business-school students can improve from courses aimed at these topics, although the improvements are often short-term. But Poneman ("First Center to Study Accounting Ethics Opens," 2010) and Jordan (2007) both found that as leaders ascend the hierarchy in

their businesses, their tendency to define situations in ethical terms actually seems to decrease.

How does one actually teach ethical reasoning? In my view, the way you teach ethical reasoning is through the case-study method, which is the principal method I now use in my course on leadership. Ideally, ethics is taught not just in a course on ethics but in any course in which ethics might potentially apply. Otherwise, there is the risk that what the students learn will be inert—that students will not see how to apply it outside the one course on ethics. Students need to learn how to reason about and apply ethical principles by being confronted with ethical problems in a variety of domains. They also need to be inoculated against the pressures to behave unethically, such as occurs when there is retaliation for whistle-blowing.

Problems for Teaching Ethical Reasoning

A famous, perhaps now classical, problem for teaching ethical reasoning is the following:

A train is going out of control and hurtling down the tracks toward four people who are strangers. You are unable to call out to the people or get them off the tracks. However, it is in your power to press a button that will divert the train. But there is a problem, namely, that there is a person on the tracks onto which you would divert the train. This person will be killed if you divert the train. Thus you can touch the controls and divert the train, resulting in the death of one person, or you can not touch the controls, and four people will die. What should you do?

Consider other more realistic problems:

1. A university in New York City has run out of room. It is confined on all sides in a crowded city and cannot fulfill its expanding academic mission with the real estate currently available to it. Its solution in the past was to buy up as much neighboring land as it could. But it has run out of willing sellers. The university now is attempting to use the law of eminent domain to take over land by having the city kick out landowners. In order to do so, it has claimed that some of the areas into which it wishes to move are blighted. Landowners of these adjacent properties point out that the university has no right to their land and that

if the adjacent areas are blighted, it is because the university itself has failed properly to maintain properties it has bought and thus as been a major contributor to the blight. What should be done?

2. Your friend is the CEO of a powerful company in your town. You follow the local news and know that there have been some rumblings about his performance because as CEO, he has just awarded a large no-bid contract to manage the construction of a new research center owned by the company. In other words, the winning contractor did not have to compete against any other companies for the contract. At a dinner party, you ask your friend the CEO how his vacation was, and he mentions that it was really nice. He and his family went on a weeklong free skiing vacation at the mountain house of Mr. X. You realize that Mr. X is none other than the owner of the company that received the contract to manage construction of the new building. What should you do?

3. Doctors sometimes write notes on pads furnished them by pharmaceutical companies with pens also furnished by such companies. Some doctors also may accept free meals, club memberships, subsidized travel, and research funds from such companies. With regard to gifts and subsidies from pharmaceutical companies to doctors, what kinds of guidelines do you think ought to be in place, and why? Is there an ethical failure here, and if so, is it in the pharmaceutical companies, the doctors, or both?

4. Mr. Smith, a close friend of yours with whom you have worked closely in your company for 40 years, is clearly dying. There is no hope. On his deathbed, he tells you that he has been burdened for many years by the fact that, between the ages of 35 and 42, he had a mistress whom he saw frequently and subsidized financially. He asks you to tell his wife what he has told you and to tell her that he begs her forgiveness.

Mr. Smith has now died. What should you do about his request?

Other examples are given in Table 1 (See Appendix).

If students are not explicitly given a chance to confront ethical dilemmas, how are they going to learn to solve them? In my own instruction, I care less about the conclusions students come to than I do about their reasoning processes in coming to those conclusions.

There are no easy answers to any of these problems, but that is the point: Teaching ethical reasoning is not about teaching what one should do in particular circumstances—perhaps that is the role of religious training. Teaching ethical reasoning is about teaching students how wisely to make very difficult decisions involving ethical considerations where the answers are anything but clear cut.

A Model of Ethical Reasoning and its Translation into Behavior

Not all ethical problems are as difficult as these. Yet people act unethically in many situations. Why? Sometimes, it is because ethics mean little or nothing to them. But more often, it is because it is hard to translate theory into practice. Consider an example.

In 1970, Bibb Latané and John Darley opened up a new field of research on bystander intervention. They showed that, contrary to expectations, bystanders intervene when someone is in trouble only in very limited circumstances. For example, if they think that someone else might intervene, the bystanders tend to stay out of the situation. Latané and Darley even showed that divinity students who were about to lecture on the parable of *The Good Samaritan* were no more likely than other bystanders to help a person in distress who was in need of—a good Samaritan! Drawing in part upon their model of bystander intervention, I have constructed a model of ethical behavior that would seem to apply to a variety of ethical problems. The model specifies the specific skills students need to reason and then behave ethically. The skills are taught by active learning—by having student solve ethical-reasoning problems, employing the skills they need.

The basic premise of the model is that ethical behavior is far harder to display than one would expect simply on the basis of what we learn from our parents, from school, and from our religious training (Sternberg, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c). To intervene, individuals must go through a series of steps, and unless all of the steps are completed, they are not likely to behave in an ethical way, regardless of the amount of training they have received in ethics, and regardless of their levels of other types of skills. Consider the skills in the model and how they apply in an ethical dilemma—whether a student, John, should turn in a

fellow student, Bill, whom he saw cheating on an examination:

1. Recognize that there is an event to which to react.

John has to observe the cheating and decide that it is a situation in which he potentially can do something.

2. Define the event as having an ethical dimension.

John has to define the cheating as unethical. Many students do so; but some others see it as a utilitarian matter—it's ok if Bill get away with it.

3. Decide that the ethical dimension is significant.

John has to decide that Bill's cheating on the examination is a big enough deal that it is worth paying attention to. Some students may see it as an ethical issue, but not as a significant one.

4. Take personal responsibility for generating an ethical solution to the problem.

There are ethical problems that are serious but that are not necessarily your ethical problems. John may decide that there is an ethical problem here, even a big one, but that it is none of his or her business. For example, John may look at it as the teacher's responsibility, not his, to turn in Bill.

5. Figure out what abstract ethical rule(s) might apply to the problem.

What rule applies? If there is no honor code, is there a rule by which John should turn in Bill? Perhaps John believes, on the contrary, that the rule is to mind his own business, or to avoid cheating himself, but not to turn in Bill.

6. Decide how these abstract ethical rules actually apply to the problem so as to suggest a concrete solution.

Perhaps John believes that one should turn in cheaters, but cannot apply the rule in this situation, realizing that he could not prove that Bill cheated.

7. Prepare to counteract contextual forces that might lead one not to act in an ethical manner.

John may be reluctant to turn in Bill because he believes that other students, including but not limited to Bill, will shun him or retaliate against him for being a "snitch."

8. Act.

In the end, the question becomes one not of how one thinks, but of what one does. It can be very difficult to go from thought to action. But the ultimate test of ethical reasoning is not just in how one thinks, but also in how one acts. John may believe he should turn in Bill but just not get up the guts actually to do so.

The model applies not only to judging others but to evaluating one's own ethical reasoning. When confronted with a situation having a potential ethical dimension, students can learn literally to go through the steps of the model and ask how they apply to a given situation.

Effective teaching of ethical reasoning involves presenting case studies, but it is important that students as well generate their own case studies from their own experience, and then apply the steps of the model to their own problems. They need to be actively involved in seeing how the steps of the model apply to their own individual problems.

Ethical Drift

Even if students understand the steps involved in ethical reasoning, they must be prepared to face another challenge, ethical drift (Sternberg, in press). In *Lifeboat*, a film by Alfred Hitchcock, several marooned individuals who have survived the wrecks of their two ships drift in the middle of the ocean. Their meager supplies soon begin to run out, and as they do, the drifting of their lifeboat becomes a metaphor for the drifting of their ethical standards. Within less time than one might have imagined, they and their audience find the survivors acting in ways none of them ever would have thought possible.

Ethical drift is the gradual ebbing of standards that can occur in an individual, a group, or an organization as a result of the interaction of environmental pressures with those subjected to these pressures (Sternberg, in press). It often occurs insidiously and even without the conscious awareness of those being subjected to it. Just as a boat adrift in the midst of the ocean can travel long distances without any visible change in its location, so can ethical drift occur without people even realizing that they have changed (usually for the worse) their ethical standards.

If one is adrift at sea, eventually one can see one has drifted because the constellations, which are fixed in position, seem to have moved because one has oneself moved. But it can take a while before one realizes that the constellations seem to be in a different place, and by the time they seem to be in a different place, one may have forgotten where they originally seemed to be. Similarly, when ethical drift occurs, one typically realizes it only after a great while and by then, one may have lost one's original bearings.

The biggest challenge of ethical drift is that, because it typically is insidious, people are not even aware it is happening. They may believe that they are adhering to the same ethical standards they had before. Or, by the time they realize that their standards have changed, it may be too late. that they are adhering to the same ethical standards they had before. Or, by the time they realize that their standards have changed, it may be too late. We often assume that people who act unethically simply decide to behave in a way that they or anyone else can see is clearly wrong. Frequently, however, they have experienced ethical drift, whereby their frame of reference has changed so gradually that they are not even aware that they are behaving unethically. Others may be appalled by their actions—except those who have drifted along with them.

Students, for example, may begin by lifting a few words from materials gathered from the Internet, and gradually progress to sentences, paragraph, and then major parts of, or even, whole papers. The process is much more insidious than when a student merely decides to "buy" a paper from a paper-writing mill. The students may not be aware the process even has taken place, although of course they should have been.

I once talked to an individual who had gone from working in one organization (a university) to another (a consulting company). He described to me in some detail the unethical practices of the firm. I asked him why he did not leave. He replied that the down-drift in ethics had occurred over a long period of time, or at the very least, he had become aware of it only over an extended period of time. Had he realized it at once, he would have left, but the process had been so slow he had not even been aware it was taking place. At that point, he felt he

would have trouble finding another job, and had himself become somewhat ethically compromised.

Such drift can happen in many contexts, of course. The quality of intimate relationships can decline, as can the quality of life in a particular home or town. What is potentially different about ethical drift is how it eats away at the individual's humanity and leaves the person caught in a situation that can be not only ethically, but also, potentially legally compromising.

Ethical drift is provoked by at least four environmental forces. First, it typically occurs when there is intense competition for resources, as on the lifeboat. Second, people start to feel that they are in a zero-sum game, often with relatively meager rewards, again as characterized the lifeboat. Third, people perceive, or think they perceive, others acting in ways that are ethically compromised, as Hitchcock's characters saw each other acting in more and more ethically challenged ways. Sometimes, when individuals or organizations compete, team members actually may encourage an individual to act in ethically compromised ways. Finally, people may see no other viable way out of the quandary. They feel they cannot just leave the situation (as, for example, where exit from the lifeboat meant almost certain death).

When we teach students ethical reasoning and behavior, we need to make them aware of the challenges of ethical drift. People who experience it often started out acting according to ethical principles and may not realize that they have drifted into behavior that no longer upholds the ethical standards they originally set for themselves. For example, students may start off setting high standards for themselves in writing papers, but after observing others lift material from the Internet without attribution, may start doing so themselves, with the amounts of material lifted increasing from one assignment to the next. Or a scientist may start "cleaning" data and proceed to "massaging" and then to "falsifying" it. Or a college administrator may exchange a home renovation for a vendor contract at his college, thinking that's what others do so why shouldn't he?

If one looks at people who have committed serious transgressions, often, one finds, they started out just like anyone else. Consider, for example, two notorious employees of banks. Jerome Kerviel at the Societe General and Kweku Adoboli at UBS, from what the records

show, started off as honest but aggressive traders. They made bets that went wrong. They tried to recoup the money they lost, at first, through legal activity, then through activity that went beyond the bounds of legality and ethicality. In the end, their behavior became egregious and they were caught. They were in an intense competition for resources; they experienced it as a zero-sum game—they are either making money or losing it; they were acting in banking cultures that encouraged aggressive risk-taking and even going beyond the bounds so long as the actors did not get caught; they finally saw no way out of their quandary except to recoup their losses illegally, although of course they could have turned themselves in, perhaps losing their jobs but not exposing themselves to possible prison terms. Perhaps the most critical element was the organizational culture of ethical drift—that it is all right to shave a little here, a little there, so long as appearances are maintained and the ends are alleged (falsely) to justify the means.

What can one do to discourage ethical drift in one's colleagues, one's students, or even oneself? First, an organization needs to recognize and warn its members of the phenomenon of ethical drift. Second, there needs to be a culture of no tolerance for ethical drift. Third, actors need to be warned to be vigilant for ethical drift in themselves and others. Fourth, mechanisms must exist to identify ethical drift when it occurs (such as curbs on illegal trading, in the case of the banks, or services such as Turnitin—which detects plagiarism--in the case of colleges and universities). Finally, those who are caught drifting beyond the permissible bounds must be quickly, visibly, and appropriately punished. For example, at Oklahoma State University, the university where I teach and where I am an administrator, students are taught from Day 1 that ethical practice and leadership are the core of our land-grant mission. For those who take another path, we use a grade of "F!" to indicate dishonesty, as distinguished from a grade merely of "F" for a failure.

Ultimately, the greatest protection against ethical drift is wisdom—recognizing that, in the end, people benefit most when they act for the common good. Wisdom is the ultimate lifeboat (Sternberg, 2005; Sternberg, Jarvin, & Grigorenko, 2009).

Conclusion

Figuratively speaking, we are all living in Centralia. But should we do anything to stop the fire, and if so, what? Is it worth the cost? Or should we just deal with the consequences of the fire as they erupt, as we have been doing? Deciding what to do is one of the most challenging ethical problems of all (Sternberg, 2011a, 2011b). And if we do nothing, what will happen to our metaphorical Ashland—the next generation for whom we bear responsibility as we do for our own? We need to take responsibility for teaching students to reason ethically. Otherwise, we risk the fire burning further out of control, with catastrophic results for our nation and the world.

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Appendix: Sample Items for Measuring Ethical Reasoning

You are running for president of your student organization, of which you are currently treasurer. At the elections meeting, paper ballots are handed out and you hand yours in. You notice that one of your friends is there. You happen to know that he has not paid his dues for the past year and thus is ineligible to vote, but you don't think much of it at the time. After the meeting, your friend mentions to you that he voted for you and thinks you will do a great job. The next day, the results are announced. To your dismay, you win by one vote. You now recall that your friend, who was ineligible to vote, said he voted for you. What should you do?

You are a waiter at a school festival, which is raising money for a local charity. You serve food to a man you don't know; he pays you, and you give him change. An hour later, the man comes up to you and says that you shortchanged him. He says that you gave him change for a $5 bill when in fact he had given you a $20 bill. He demands the correct change, which is $15 more than you had given him. What should you do?

Your friend's father is the mayor of the town. You follow the local news and know that there have been some rumblings about his performance because as mayor, he has just awarded a large no-bid contract for repaving roads in the town. In other words, the winning contractor did not have to compete against any other companies for the contract. You ask your friend how his vacation was, and he mentions that it was really nice. He and his family went on a weeklong free skiing vacation at the mountain house of Mr. X. You realize that Mr. X is none other than the owner of the company that received the contract to repave the town roads. What should you do?

You take a part-time job in a fairly fancy and quite expensive local restaurant. Your job is a lowly one—washing dishes. After working in the restaurant for just a day, you are thoroughly disgusted. You have seen that the kitchen is very dirty and has an infestation of cockroaches. You mention this to a fellow worker and he gives you a wink and a nod. Then he walks away. What should you do?

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