

Teaching ethics and Character

One approach to teaching ethics is to ask an individual what problems they see as ethical, and take the reasoning from there. Or one can coax a group to steer towards some ethical insight. One drawback with initiating a group discussion is that the possibly essential concerns of some individuals will be swept aside as the discussion goes off at a tangent. In ethics, it is child's play to confuse individuals, or let a group get itself tied up in knots.

The classical philosophical approach, which goes back to Plato, is an educational and a critical one. The teacher is an interrogator. There is much virtue in this approach, but to be effective it requires a lot of time, which is to say countless sessions over the course possibly of years. It is arguably the correct approach to training moral philosophers. But it is wholly inappropriate for the instruction of people whose philosophical leaning is slight, and whose intellectual lives are in any case overloaded.

Hence, somewhat in defiance of the conventions of philosophy, I wish here to present my own findings: that is to say, a model for understanding and tackling ethical issues in a wider context. It will be necessary to cover all the major issues, and show how they are interrelated. My starting point is also the thread running through all my reflections. It is that the virtue of pursuing the study of ethics lies in coming to recognise when ethical reflection, or morality, is inappropriate, i.e. when concern about ethically right or wrong action may itself be the cause of vexation, misunderstandings, harm and hurt.

The two most insistent questions in ethics are *why be moral?* and *what is right and wrong?* Another issue is the nature of moral relativity. Others are the usefulness or otherwise of the concept of evil, the nature of the virtues and vices, and the relationship of individual morality to the well-being of the wider community.

Instead of pursuing directly the sceptical question of *Why should I be moral?* we might ask how we choose to bring up our children, and why. If being moral involves all sorts of costs, such as the burden of a bad conscience in the case of wrongdoing, and of palpable harm to the actor that may arise from choosing the right course of action, then we might deem it best, in the interests of the child which, we suppose, we have at heart, to bring the child up to be an opportunist. Of course, the consequences of this might run counter to our own interests, but not necessarily. So let us put aside this objection, and consider whether it would be possible and perhaps desirable to instruct the child in opportunism, in preference to ethics. It might be practically difficult in the case of a young child, since young children are, when attentive, notoriously rigid in their adherence to rules. Another difficulty is that opportunism is a matter of degree. The child, soon to become a young adult, will need to develop some modest virtues: for example, be able to be hard-working on occasion, display a modicum of courage rather than cowardice, know how to be supportive of others at least some of the time, and so on. Perhaps some virtues can be neglected, if circumstances are so favourable that they need not be exercised. Thrift, for example, will not be as much in demand in an affluent setting as generosity, although here, too, a sense of balance is never amiss.

But, these qualifications accepted, would we want to bring the child up to be free of moral qualms? Would it even be upbringing in such a case, rather than just letting the child run riot? And would it be to the child's later advantage to be free of moral qualms?

We do not know the circumstances and the trials that, later, the child will encounter as an adult. We seek to develop such virtues as the child has aptitude for, and check those weaknesses which might well prove fatal, on the assumption (if we ever reflect on this) that life will in the fullness of time reward those virtues. That is, we act on a presumption, a generalisation.

Now later circumstances need not match our expectations. Courage may become costly, openness make for vulnerability, truthfulness may be persecuted, generosity exploited, and so on. This is in part a problem with the virtues. In adverse circumstances, any virtue can become a vice. Courage becomes foolhardiness, truthfulness needs to be moderated with sensitivity, and so on. The key capability here is a sense of judgement, and it is good judgement perhaps above all else that marks out the mature from the immature. (Although the opportunist too, when successful, is a master of judgement.)

But the manner in which circumstances may vitiate our virtues might have nothing to do with avoiding excess. Courage means taking risks, and the cautiously courageous person may still fall foul of the peril. But then it is too late. You do not spring over your own shadow. You are what you are. That is what character is about.

So, to return to the question *Why be moral?* the answer in general terms is one of constitution. You act as you do because of the sort of person you are.

Now, with time, you might make yourself into another person, a better or a worse or simply a different person. And in given circumstances you might reflect and decide not to act in character. That might be the right decision (though this begs the question of right and wrong). The brave may have a bad day, and behave cowardly. Or the brave may desert courage for other, more timely virtues.

As is in the nature of habits, the disposition of courage (and of attentiveness, magnanimity, prudence, sobriety, etc.) allows of exceptions. A habit is what you usually do, not necessarily what you always do. It is what you do when there is no great temptation, or reason, to depart from the habit. But departures are conceivable and sometimes desirable. It is on the occasion of such a departure that, depending on the nature of the case, reflections of an ethical nature may come into play.

Put in more general terms, we see that ethical reflection and ethical dilemmas takes place against a background of ordinary behaviour. This ordinary behaviour might itself be called in question, which represents the attempt to resolve the dilemmas at a more fundamental level.

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