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On Ethics and Ethical Development

Liberal and Professional Education—Two Solitudes?

Many have argued that ethical development could be achieved only within the context of a traditional liberal education. This view has created within modern American higher education "two solitudes," coexisting but not commingling— liberal education and professional education. Such a view is outdated and, as philosopher Mortimer Kadish has argued, is dangerous in that it actually works against the very goal of moral and ethical growth, both among those within the academy—students, faculty, and staff—and between the academy and the professions.

Institutions carry, transmit, and reproduce values. This is one of their most essential characteristics and enduring functions. Schools in general, and colleges and universities more particularly, are among those institutions that act as society's repositories and intergenerational translators of ideas, knowledge, values, and ethical positions. The establishment of individual schools has often reflected a specific values orientation, an epistemology, an understanding of what a given community understood was necessary to be related, taught, debated, and sustained. This case is especially true in the history of American colleges and universities and applies whether the roots of a school are to be found in a certain sectarian affiliation and orientation or, as in the case of land-grant universities, the core values reflected the democratic and class mobility goals of the egalitarian impulse of the late nineteenth century. And even as new colleges and universities are being established, and others transformed, values and ethical positions remain critical concerns. While it is true that some declarations of a particular educational philosophy and ethical code may be little more than a clever device to carve out a niche in a crowded marketplace, other learning communities genuinely engage and treat seriously ethically based definitions because they are, in part, what education and universities are all about. The issues being examined and debated

may be broad in their cultural and social significance. They may be more specific to a university's own institutional and community life—like Central Intelligence Agency and corporate recruitment on campus, freedom of speech, experimentation with animals, minority scholarships, or the very nature of the curricula itself. Under any condition, the ethical content of problems in everyday life exists as a central focus for any institution's engagement with the problem of "the good society." The importance of ethical discourse is, as philosopher Abraham Edel has argued," not simply a separate province in which the moral consciousness struggles with itself in a fretful effort to do its duty or conform to law. It is a sober reckoning of policy in the whole domain of practice—goals of life, and the types of character they call for both in personal development and in institutional relations, modes of decision and guidance of conduct, problems of internal conflict, types of interpersonal relations or associations, and ultimate reflections on well-being." (Edel, p. 131)

The Necessity of Ethical Development

If educators understand that ethical and moral development ought to be central to one's college years, then it should also be clear that a genuine education does not mean the teaching of a specific set of ethics or value positions to the exclusion of others. The principle of freedom of association has historically sanctioned the latter, as Amy Gutman has demonstrated in her recent book, *Democratic Education*. But such an orientation has generally meant that indoctrination rather than education was the school's mission and the teacher's responsibility. It will not suffice to provide students only with what philosopher Michael Oakeshott has termed a "serviceable moral and intellectual outfit." (Oakeshott, p. 104) And while some continue to argue for precisely this, it is a position increasingly untenable given the traditions and essence of higher education in democratic societies.

None of this, of course, ought to strike anyone as being at odds or out-of-place with the traditional conception of the liberal arts foundation of college and university education. Indeed, the pursuit of truth is the conceptual and intellectual basis of the entire educational enterprise. But some have argued that the role of ethical discourse and values development has been profoundly compromised in those environments where professional and technical fields are growing and coming to claim a larger role in the definition of university teaching, research, and service. This is the view of some who, like Allan Bloom, see in the mix of the liberal arts with professional degree programs a substantial threat to American higher education. In writing of the impact of the M.B.A. degree, for example, Bloom claims that it has skewered things badly and that it is a "great disaster....The effect of the M.B.A. is to corral a horde of students who want to get into business school and put the blinders on them, to legislate an illiberal, officially approved undergraduate program for them at the outset...Getting into those elite professional schools is an obsessive concern that tethers the mind." (Bloom, p. 370) He and other critics prefer

that liberal arts study and professional education remain at a distance from one another. They believe that professional schools threaten the very integrity of the liberal education experiment.

This view would divide the college and university further, and relinquish any hope for comprehensiveness and cohesion. Higher education would become the site of "two solitudes," to appropriate novelist Hugh MacLennan's famous phrase to describe the coexistence but lack of commingling between the French and English in modern Canada. The two solitudes are desired by those who see professional education as a threat to moral development and traditional education goals and aspirations. While excessive specialization carries with it the possibility of banality, the mutual learning and potential for discourse that can and should be the result of mixing traditional liberal arts study and professional education goes right to the heart of the purposes of the university. Such an institution is committed to pursue truth, not just some truths, to examine critically the moral dimensions and consequences of positions, not just some positions, to nurture the acquisition of knowledge, not just some knowledge—all within the context of the society we have become. To do less is itself an ethical dodge. The "multiplicity of subjects taught confers an enormous benefit" to the university, as Nikolaus Lobkowicz, former president of the University of Munich, has written: "It permits the university to combine professional training and cultural enlightenment. The basic reason that the same institution should offer sciences, both natural and social, and humanities is that we have no need of scientists who are technocratic barbarians, nor do we need humanists who have no appreciation for the significance of science." (Lobkowicz, p. 33) And as philosopher Mortimer Kadish has argued, it is in treating seriously the nature of ethical discourse in professional education that moral and ethical development can truly best be explored and examined. For Kadish, as well as others, an education that is fundamentally concerned with questions of virtue does not negate an education for other things as well.

A Pedagogy of Unity through Ethics

In a set of truly remarkable essays entitled *Toward an Ethic of Higher Education*, Kadish explores this theme in concrete and detailed ways. The "professional" is more than a man or woman "in" a profession, Kadish argues. Professionals also exist as citizens engaged in the civic culture, among the other critical roles one may play in life. To "disassociate work and self" itself constitutes an educational failure. Professional schools ought to model students within a liberal arts tradition. In this way it will help them to "distinguish the relevant from the irrelevant, and knowledge for ignorance. They [the students] are the heirs and preservers of perspectives of liberal attitudes in the performance of specific functions in society." (op. cit. p. 114) Moral development must be fully integrated with the very functioning of the professional school. This approach rejects particularist notions of professional education and substitutes instead a

view that such an education is "more than a way of knowing the job to be done and more than a context for making sense of it; it projects a complex of obligations, rights, privileges, and preferences, all of which must be dealt with if the individual is to be a professional." (op. cit., p. 115) In this way and others the professional school both educates and "constructs" the profession.

A pedagogy that reflects this orientation is one that works throughout all aspects of the life of the professional school and specifically rejects the idea that a course in medical, business, or architectural ethics, for example, will suffice. *"One does not 'teach'* Such courses tend to lead to a concentration and a reliance upon a "code of ethics" *virtue the way one teaches* mentality. Comforting as this may be, it is *principles."* wrong and constitutes an ethical lapse that runs counter to the virtues of education. Further, it runs toward the tendency of "ghettoizing" ethics and moral development within the curriculum. "Referring to the code," Kadish maintains, "enables them [professionals] to go about their life easier. Referring to the code enables them to go about their business without worrying about difficult decisions. So law schools, business schools, medical schools, and the rest pressed to 'teach' ethics, as they increasingly are, are pressed to get their students to accept conditions that will make their practices socially acceptable and hence more likely to flourish...Professional schools choosing to serve that perfectly reasonable end alone necessarily instruct in escaping the exercise of ethical judgement—an escape often associated with the interesting ethical judgement that ethical judgements are to be avoided by anyone who knows what's good for him." (pp. 167–68) Moreover, "one does not 'teach' virtue the way one teaches principles; the capacity to distinguish the better from the worse follows from experience taken in a certain light rather as the writing of poetry or fiction does. Nobody makes poets by teaching scanning; people become poets by being what they are and assimilating into their sensitivities a wide range of largely unpredictable experience. Then they write. And they write in a context of criticism and other writings on which they have reflected. They cannot, literally, be taught 'creative writing.' Similarly for ethics, liberal education does not teach creative ethics; it bears on a creative ethic because of what it does with other purposes in mind." (p. 170) The very best creative writing programs approach their craft in this manner. The successful teaching of writing stresses connections to reading, criticism, analysis, and the broadening and appreciation of experience.

In this way, then, a professional school pedagogy might be the most effective way in which to express the need to cultivate a competence in life that is informed and defined by virtuous citizenship. In the final analysis, education strives to bring unity, continuity, substance, and meaning—in the midst of ambiguity—to a person's life and the various roles each person will play as an individual and as a member of a number of communities, large and small. Citizenship is, in large part, contextual, and a professional pedagogy equips one to be in and of context yet not wholly defined by it.

The Values Context of Metropolitan Universities

With few exceptions, metropolitan universities have both their roots and present governance and support located squarely within the public higher education sector. They are, again with few exceptions, institutions that have been in transition from previous institutional arrangements. Some have their origins in branch campuses or community colleges of larger state universities. A few once existed as private schools, which have been incorporated into larger public systems. Others have evolved into fully comprehensive institutions from origins that reflected a "normal school" past. And still others are relatively new institutions created to meet the needs of rapidly growing and emerging metropolitan regions. Such institutions attempt to meet the changing needs and expectations of the types of diverse population that define most American metropolitan areas. This means that the student population served may be more mature and nontraditional and have larger numbers of minorities than most traditional liberal arts colleges will likely serve. Many students in the metropolitan university will be part-time learners, and nearly all will have rich, textured and diverse life experiences from which to draw upon. For a large number of these students, professional competency and professional credentialization will be important considerations in their educational development and maturation. Service to the regions in which they are located, together with an applied research agenda that seeks to address the complex problems of metropolitan communities, will also shape these institutions and the context for moral and ethical development. Finally, all must confront the reality of metropolitan America in these times. This means that problems associated with urban economic restructuring, social isolation, racism and sexism, urban/suburban fiscal and political confrontation, and the growing fragmentation of civic culture must be operative both as context and subject of ethical discourse. Such institutions must themselves be the focus of ethical debate and dialogue, for they are concrete statements about "the good society" and civic virtue. By bridging the liberal arts tradition and the younger, though no less important, professional education tradition, metropolitan universities become the forum of the urban American experience.

Concluding Comments

Mortimer Kadish's formulations, while broadly applicable, are especially sensitive and relevant to the problems of ethical development, the definition of virtue, and the construction of the professions, which must be central concerns for the metropolitan university. Given their missions, such institutions are engaged in a number of struggles, not the least being that of articulating a conception of civic culture and collective and individual virtue informed by the life ecology of metropolitan regions. This is as true for those who study, research, and teach in the liberal arts as the professions. And if Kadish is correct, as I clearly believe him to be, then it will be in the unity that can be forged between liberal studies and

professional education that the necessary process can best be realized. For in the end, as Kadish tells us, the "issue is not survival and the minimal amenities, but the manner of life in surviving." (p. 187) What could be a more powerful, purposeful, and compelling rationale for the metropolitan university than this as a conception of its obligation to the national culture?

Suggested Readings

Bloom, A. *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students.* New York: Simon and Shuster, 1987, pp. 372–73.

Edel, A. *Aristotle.* New York: Dell, 1967, p. 131, as quoted in Kadish, pp. 157–58.

Gutman, A. *Democratic Education.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987.

Kadish, M. *Toward an Ethic of Higher Education.* Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1991.

Lobkowicz, N. "Man, Pursuit of Truth, and the University." In *The Western University on Trial,* edited by J. W. Chapman. Berkeley, Ca.: University of California Press, 1983, p. 33.

Oakeshott, M. "The Idea of the University." In *Michael Oakeshott on Education: The Voice of Liberal Learning,* edited by T. Fuller. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989.

Smith, P. *Killing the Spirit: Higher Education in America.* New York: Viking Press, 1990.