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Learning to Think Ethically: Moral Development for University Students

Kevin Twain Lowery

We live across the street from a primary school (K–3). Sometimes I watch the children enjoying recess on the playground, and I remember those days when life was simple and carefree. I also reminisce about our children at that age, and I feel an overwhelming sense of relief that they reached adulthood safely. Although I swell with pride because of who they are today, I am also humbled knowing that other good people played a key role in shaping their thought and values.

Adult life is significantly more complicated than childhood. For children the responsibilities are fewer, and the rules are much simpler. For instance, we learn early on that we should always tell the truth, yet somewhere along the way we discover that being honest doesn't mean that we should freely share everything we know or think. We all know the embarrassment that's caused when a young child blurts out something that should be kept secret. We eventually learn that it is sometimes best to leave some things unsaid. There is wisdom in tempering honesty with discretion. In life's small epiphanies like this, we realize that knowing the right thing to do is more difficult than what we had originally thought.

I believe that adult life is more complex today than it was when I was a young adult. I remember people in my parents' generation saying the same thing, and I believe it is just as true today as it was then. As time marches on, knowledge keeps increasing and new technologies continue to emerge. Consequently, the need to use them responsibly grows as well. Hopefully our wisdom can keep up with our responsibility, and a key place for meeting that challenge is the university classroom.

Yes, some of the caricatures of moral philosophy are true. We do talk about runaway trolleys and whether the lifeguard should save the drowning baby or the five drowning adults. Of course, the likelihood that any of us would ever find ourselves in such situations are quite infinitesimal, yet there are other ethical dilemmas that some of us may have to face. For instance, if we had lived in Nazi Germany, would we have lied to save our Jewish neighbors from the Gestapo and their certain death? I should hope so. Let's bring the matter closer still. Should I lie to spare the feelings of my close friend who has been struggling greatly with depression and suicide? Perhaps the answer is not so clear now.

You may be surprised to learn that discussing ethical dilemmas is not how students learn about ethics. The dilemmas are just handy ways to challenge their preconceptions, because the first step in developing the moral reasoning of students is to reveal limitations in the ways they already think about ethics. Although most of us do move past the simple ethical rules that we learn in childhood, we still try to keep moral reasoning manageable by framing it in terms of principles, goals, virtues, rights, natural law, etc. Moral dilemmas help us see that although all of these approaches have their merits, none is perfect.

The next step is to explore all of the facets of ethics and the factors that contribute to it. We start by discussing the general nature of ethics. This includes concepts such as choosing the right vs. pursuing the good, the universal vs. the contextual, values and the way we establish and prioritize them, the nature of and relationship between moral motive and moral action, weighing the short-term vs. the long-term, weighing the individual vs. the group, the concepts of duty and moral obligation, and defining and balancing love and justice. After that foundation has been laid, we are ready to learn and critique the major ethical theories that have been advanced throughout history: Divine command ethics, Kantian ethics, utilitarianism, social contract theory,

libertarianism, theories of conscience, virtue ethics, natural law ethics, ethical egoism, consequentialism, and moral nihilism.

Are we finished? Not yet! We still have to consider the sociological roots of morality, psychological theories of moral development, and the relationship between ethics and religion. Now we get to move on to Christian ethics! How do Christians “do” ethics? By drawing from the four sources of knowledge recognized by Wesleyans and Christians of other theological traditions—Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience. Here is where biblical studies and hermeneutics enter the increasingly complex picture. If there’s time, we might even look at the history of Christian ethics, but we will definitely save some time to take all we’ve learned and apply it to some ethical issues that our society and world are facing today. Whew!

Do the students feel overwhelmed? Perhaps a little at first, but we have at least a semester to think through everything together. Quite often, the greatest moral development takes place outside the classroom in casual conversations with professors and peers. We make those outside conversations with students a priority at Olivet. The students that want to grow find the opportunity to do so. Most of a garden’s growth occurs when the gardener is not there, yet the growth could not take place without the hard work of the gardener. Some of us cultivate the soil, some sow the seed, some water and tend to the plants, and others reap the harvest, but God gives the increase.

A university is a wonderful place to learn to think, especially about ethics. Here students (and faculty!) have the opportunity to reflect on what is most important in life, and they can begin to more fully understand how their lives impact others. Away from many of the pressures and responsibilities of adult life, they have the time and resources for contemplating life’s big questions.

Is your head spinning yet? It is? Good! My intention is not to impress you, but to demonstrate just how serious I am in preparing my students for lives of service to God and humanity. When students come for a university-level education, they are going to get just that. To offer them anything less just wouldn't be ethical, would it?