

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Feb '14

*Philosophy is Everybody's Business*

Nº 753

The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who in a moral crisis maintain their neutrality. —Dante Alighieri



---

## TEACHING THE VIRTUES: A Blueprint for Moral Education

**Christina Hoff Sommers**

This article, originated as a speech to the  
American Philosophical Association.

Some time ago, I published an article titled “Ethics Without Virtue,” in which I criticized the way ethics is being taught in American colleges. I pointed out that there is an overemphasis on social policy questions, with little or no attention being paid to private morality. I noted that students taking college ethics are debating abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, DNA research and the ethics of transplant surgery, while they learn almost nothing about private decency, honesty, personal responsibility or honor. Topics such as hypocrisy, self-deception, cruelty or selfishness rarely come up. I argued that the current style of ethics teaching, which concentrates so much on social policy, is giving students the wrong ideas about ethics. Social morality is only half of the moral life; the other half is private morality. I urged that we attend to both.

A colleague of mine did not like what I said. She told me that in her classroom, she would continue to focus on issues of social injustice. She taught about women's oppression, corruption in big business, multinational corporations and their transgressions in the Third World—that sort of thing. She said to me, "You are not going to have moral people until you have moral institutions. You will not have moral citizens until you have a moral government." She made it clear that I was wasting time and even doing harm by promoting bourgeois virtues instead of awakening the social conscience of my students.

At the end of the semester, she came into my office carrying a stack of exams and looking very upset.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"They cheated on their social justice take-home finals. They plagiarized!" More than half of the students in her ethics class had copied long passages from the secondary literature. "What are you going to do?" I asked her. She gave me a self-mocking smile and said, "I'd like to borrow a copy of the article you wrote on ethics without virtue."

There have been major cheating scandals at many of our best universities. A recent survey reported in the Boston Globe says that 75 percent of all high school students admit to cheating; for college students, the figure is 50 percent. A U.S. News and World Report survey asked college-age students if they would steal from an employer. Thirty-four percent said they would. Of people 45 and over, 6 percent responded in the affirmative.

Part of the problem is that so many students come to college dogmatically committed to a moral relativism that offers them no grounds to think that cheating is just wrong. I sometimes play a macabre game with first-year students, trying to find some act they will condemn as morally wrong: Torturing a child. Starving someone to death. Humiliating an invalid in a nursing home. The reply is often: "Torture, starvation and humiliation may be bad for you or me, but who are we to say they are bad for someone else?"

Not all students are dogmatic relativists, nor are they all cheaters and liars. Even so, it is impossible to deny that there is a great deal of moral drift. Students' ability to arrive at reasonable moral judgments is severely, even bizarrely, affected. A Harvard University professor annually offers a large history class on the Second World War and the rise of the Nazis. Some years back, he was stunned to learn from his teaching assistant that the majority of students did not believe that anyone was really to blame for the Holocaust. In the students' minds, the Holocaust was like a natural

cataclysm: It was inevitable and unavoidable. The professor refers to his students' attitude about the past as "no-fault history."

First, a bit of history. Let me remind you how ethics was once taught in American colleges. In the 19th Century, the ethics course was a high point of college life. It was taken in the senior year and was usually taught by the president of the college, who would uninhibitedly urge the students to become morally better and stronger. The senior ethics course was in fact the culmination of the students' college experience. But as the social sciences began to flourish in the early 20th Century, ethics courses gradually lost prominence until they became just one of several electives offered by philosophy departments. By the mid-1960s, enrollment in courses on moral philosophy reached an all-time low and, as one historian of higher education put it, "college ethics was in deep trouble."

At the end of the '60s, there was a rapid turnaround. To the surprise of many a department chair, applied ethics courses suddenly proved to be very popular. Philosophy departments began to attract unprecedented numbers of students to courses in medical ethics, business ethics, ethics for everyday life, ethics for lawyers, for social workers, for nurses, for journalists. More recently, the dubious behavior of some politicians and financiers has added to public concern over ethical standards which in turn has contributed to the feeling that college ethics is needed. Today American colleges and universities are offering thousands of well attended courses in applied ethics.

I, too, have been teaching applied ethics courses for several years. Yet my enthusiasm tapered off when I saw how the students reacted. I was especially disturbed by comments students made again and again on the course evaluation forms: "I learned there was no such thing as right or wrong, just good or bad arguments." Or: "I learned there is no such thing as morality." I asked myself what it was about these classes that was fostering this sort of moral agnosticism and skepticism. Perhaps the students themselves were part of the problem. Perhaps it was their high school experience that led them to become moral agnostics. Even so, I felt that my classes were doing nothing to change them.

The course I had been giving was altogether typical. At the beginning of the semester we studied a bit of moral theory, going over the strengths and weaknesses of Kantianism, utilitarianism, social contract theory and relativism. We then took up topical moral issues such as abortion, censorship, capital punishment, world hunger and affirmative action. Naturally, I felt it my job to present careful and well-argued positions on all sides of these popular issues. But this atmosphere of argument and counter

argument was reinforcing the idea that “all” moral questions have at least two sides, i.e., that all of ethics is controversial.

Perhaps this reaction is to be expected in any ethics course primarily devoted to issues on which it is natural to have a wide range of disagreement.

In a course specifically devoted to dilemmas and hard cases, it is almost impossible not to give the student the impression that ethics itself has no solid foundation.

The relevant distinction here is between a “basic” ethics and “dilemma” ethics. It is basic ethics that G. J. Warnock has in mind when he warns his fellow moral philosophers not to be bullied out of holding fast to the “plain moral facts.” Because the typical course in applied ethics concentrates on problems and dilemmas, the students may easily lose sight of the fact that some things are clearly right and some are clearly wrong, that some ethical truths are not subject to serious debate.

I recently said something to this effect during a television interview in Boston, and the skeptical interviewer immediately asked me to name some uncontroversial ethical truths. After stammering for a moment, I found myself rattling off several that I hold to be uncontroversial:

It is wrong to mistreat a child, to humiliate someone, to torment an animal. To think only of yourself, to steal, to lie, to break promises. And on the positive side: It is right to be respectful of others, to be charitable and generous.

Reflecting again on that extemporaneous response, I am aware that not everyone will agree that all of these are plain moral facts. But teachers of ethics are free to give their own list or to pare down mine. In teaching ethics, one thing should be made central and prominent: Right and wrong do exist. This should be laid down as uncontroversial lest one leave an altogether false impression that everything is up for grabs.

It will, I think, be granted that the average student today does not come to college steeped in a religious or ethical tradition in which he or she has uncritical confidence. In the atmosphere of a course dealing with hard and controversial cases, the contemporary student may easily find the very idea of a stable moral tradition to be an archaic illusion. I am suggesting that we may have some responsibility here for providing the student with what the philosopher Henry Sidgwick called “moral common sense.” More generally, I am suggesting that we should assess some of the courses we teach for their edificatory effect. Our responsibility as

teachers goes beyond purveying information about the leading ethical theories and developing dialectical skills. I have come to see that dilemma ethics is especially lacking in edificatory force and indeed that it may even be a significant factor in encouraging a superficial moral relativism or agnosticism.

I shall not really argue the case for seeing the responsibility of the teacher of ethics in traditional terms. It would seem to me that the burden of argument is on those who would maintain that modern teachers of ethics should abjure the teacher's traditional concern with edification. More over, it seems to me that the hands-off posture is not really as neutral as it professes to be. (Author Samuel Blumenfeld is even firmer on this point. He says, "You have to be dead to be value-neutral.") One could also make a case that the new attitude of disowning responsibility probably contributes to the student's belief in the false and debilitating doctrine that there are no "plain moral facts" after all. In tacitly or explicitly promoting that doctrine, the teacher contributes to the student's lack of confidence in a moral life that could be grounded in some thing more than personal disposition or political fashion. I am convinced that we could be doing a far better job of moral education.

If one accepts the idea that moral edification is not an improper desideratum in the teaching of ethics, then the question arises: What sort of course in ethics is effective? What ethical teachings are naturally edificatory? My own experience leads me to recommend a course on the philosophy of virtue. Here, Aristotle is the best place to begin. Philosophers as diverse as Plato, Augustine, Kant and even Mill wrote about vice and virtue. And there is an impressive contemporary literature on the subject. But the locus classicus is Aristotle.

Students find a great deal of plausibility in Aristotle's theory of moral education, as well as personal relevance in what he says about courage, generosity, temperance and other virtues. I have found that an exposure to Aristotle makes an immediate inroad on dogmatic relativism, indeed the tendency to discuss morality as relative to taste or social fashion rapidly diminishes and may vanish altogether. Most students find the idea of developing virtuous character traits naturally appealing.

Once the student becomes engaged with the problem of what kind of person to be, and how to become that kind of person, the problems of ethics become concrete and practical and, for many a student, moral development is thereafter looked on as a natural and even inescapable undertaking. I have not come across students who have taken a course in the philosophy of virtue saying that they have learned there is no such thing as morality. The writings of

Aristotle and of other philosophers of virtue are full of argument and controversy, but students who read them with care are not tempted to say they learned “There is no right or wrong, only good or bad arguments.”

At the elementary and secondary level, students may be too young to study the philosophy of virtue, but they certainly are capable of reading stories and biographies about great men and women. Unfortunately today’s primary school teachers many of whom are heavily influenced by what they were taught in trendy schools of education, make little use of the time-honored techniques of telling a story to young children and driving home “the moral of the story.” What are they doing?


One favored method of moral education that has been popular for the past 20 years is called “values clarification,” which maintains the principle that the teacher should never directly tell students about right and wrong, instead the students must be left to discover values” on their own. One favored values clarification technique is to ask children about their likes and dislikes—to help them become acquainted with their personal preferences. The teacher asks the students: “How do you feel about homemade birthday presents? Do you like wall-to-wall carpeting? What is your favorite color? Which flavor of ice cream do you prefer? How do you feel about hit-and-run drivers? What are your feelings on the abortion question?” The reaction to these questions—from wall-to wall carpeting to hit-and-run drivers—is elicited from the student in the same tone of voice, as if one’s personal preferences in both instances are all that matter.

One of my favorite anecdotes concerns a teacher in Massachusetts who had attended numerous values clarification workshops and was assiduously applying their techniques in her class. The day came when her class of 6th-graders announced that they valued cheating and wanted to be free to do it on their tests. The teacher was very uncomfortable. Her solution? She told the children that since it was her class and since she was opposed to cheating, they were not free to cheat. “I personally value honesty; although you may choose to be dishonest, I shall insist that we be honest on our tests here. In other areas of your life, you may have more freedom to be dishonest.”

Now this fine and sincere teacher was doing her best not to indoctrinate her students. But what she was telling them is that cheating is not wrong if you can get away with it. Good values are “what one values.” She valued the norm of not cheating That made this value binding on her and gave her the moral authority to enforce it in her classroom, others, including the students, were free to choose other values “in other areas.” The teacher thought

she had no right to intrude by giving the students moral direction. Of course, the price for her failure to do her job of inculcating moral principles is going to be paid by her bewildered students. They are being denied a structured way to develop values. Their teacher is not about to give it to them lest she interfere with their freedom to work out their own value systems.

This Massachusetts teacher values honesty, but her educational theory does not allow her the freedom to take a strong stand on honesty as a moral principle. Her training has led her to treat her “preference” for honesty as she treats her preference for vanilla over chocolate-flavored ice cream. It is not hard to see how this doctrine is an egoistic variant of ethical relativism. For most ethical relativists, public opinion is the final court of ethical appeal; for the proponent of values clarification, the locus of moral authority is to be found in the individual’s private tastes and preferences.

How sad that so many teachers feel intellectually and “morally” unable to justify their own belief that cheating is wrong. It is obvious that our schools must have clear behavior codes and high expectations for their students. Civility, honesty and considerate behavior must be recognized, encouraged and rewarded. That means that moral education must have as its explicit aim the moral betterment of the student. If that be indoctrination, so be it. How can we hope to equip students to face the challenge of moral responsibility in their lives if we studiously avoid telling them what is right and what is wrong? 



**Christina Hoff Sommers** is former philosophy professor in Ethics at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, Sommers is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research. She is also a member of the Board of Advisors of the non-partisan Foundation for Individual Rights in Education. She has spoken and participated in debates at over one hundred college campuses and served on the national advisory board of the Independent Women’s Forum.

---



---

## THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Is published weekly for its members by the

**CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS**

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Ken Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.  
Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.