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Further Reflections on Moral Education: A Response to Strike

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Abstract:

While moral discourse is in need of much help, there is a solution which is not dependent on Kenneth Strike's remedy of understanding or building character, as such, and which teaches moral reasoning without promoting particular moral values or character traits. Further, contrary to Strike's claim, moral skepticism is not the main problem with moral debate today, which often features diametrically opposed, absolutely certain, dogmatic assertions by all sides. The author teaches ethics courses, and has found among students from a variety of ages and socio-economic backgrounds that the understanding of certain topics in ethics is necessary and often sufficient for promoting more reflective and responsible behavior, and for promoting discourse that has a greater chance to resolve differences.

I agree with Kenneth Strike's view (Strike, 1993) that public and classroom moral discourse are generally in an avoidably deplorable state. I further agree with him that what he calls moral skepticism is at least in part to blame for this state in some classrooms. (I call it a form of relativism, one that confuses what sorts of things are properly relative or matters of mere subjective preference, with those that are not mere matters of taste or preference.) However, I do not believe that relativism or moral skepticism is quite a problem in the average citizen's discussions about moral issues. On the contrary, vehement, rigid, often simplistic, dogmatic disagreement about moral ideals tends to reign. I likewise disagree with enough of many other particulars in his article that I feel obliged to respond here.

Less Moral Diversity Than Might Be Expected

Even though I have taught students from a variety of backgrounds, I do not see either the

entrenched sorts of relativism nor the unresolvable disagreements in the classroom that characterize the public debate. I teach ethics part time. I taught ethics as part of introductory philosophy courses as a graduate student at the University of Michigan; I have taught it as a whole course at an urban Alabama university (University of Alabama-Birmingham); at a mostly white, rural Alabama community college; and at an almost entirely black, urban Alabama community college. The community colleges serve a large number of lower income students, many of whom are older, than the average University of Michigan student and many of whom work and have families. With the exception of one class one term at Michigan, I have seen little difference in how the course needs to be taught in order to address the ethical views and intuitions, abilities, interests, difficulties, and understanding of the students at any of these schools. The students at the community colleges generally learned faster and better how to have productive ethical discussions than the students at the Universities of Michigan and Alabama. I attribute that to their having had more and richer experiences (economic, marital and parental, social, and often military, sometimes including combat) with which to judge various ethical theories and ideas, and to their being far less concerned about how their, even strenuous, objections to any of my ideas might jeopardize their grades.

The one class at the University of Michigan that began very differently from all my other classes was one in the early 1970s that believed, almost to a person, that honesty "to oneself and others" was the supreme obligation, and that one should always express and follow one's own feelings or desires no matter how hurtful they might be to others, because it was better to be honest about how one felt than to lead people on, be hypocritical, or to do things you really did not want to in order to please others. They accepted all sorts of implausible and seemingly reprehensible "philosophical or theoretical" consequences of their view as unproblematic until I came up with one that would have effected them all directly and personally in a way they thought grossly unfair to them and deplorably wrong. At that time they gave up what they thought was their only ethical principle and were receptive to discussing alternatives, thus becoming like the other students, with many of the same sorts of, often vague, sometimes contradictory, ethical ideas, and with a difficulty articulating their ideas in ways that said what they really intended.

Teaching Moral Reasoning, Not Moral Values

The way I teach the course is to demonstrate techniques that help students (1) better express what they really think and mean to say about ethical ideas, using the kind of moral language that Strike points out exists, (2) examine whether those ideas have merit, and (3) understand how to express or understand objections to any ethical views, either in terms of vagueness, or in terms of unsoundness based on having faulty evidence or using evidence that is irrelevant to the conclusions reached. I try to cover what is necessary for a given group from the following outline, since these are the issues that seem to me to be necessary and sufficient for understanding and pursuing moral discourse effectively. I teach by means of the Socratic method, asking leading questions, and challenging answers I believe incorrect or that I believe they are not certain of. I essentially try to get them to derive for themselves the historical moral ideas and distinctions that are still relevant today. I try to model for them the kind of rationality I want them to acquire; any ethical topic, including my assignments and grading procedures, are fair game for their challenges. As Strike points out, you cannot effectively, or even logically consistently, teach moral reasoning if you do not apply your preaching about rationality to your own practice. Dialogue and demonstration are important.

However, I do not believe that unguided (or improperly guided) moral discourse or moral argumentation in the classroom by itself tends to improve moral understanding, since it tends to become a series of unresolved bull sessions that foster or confirm the mistaken view that morality is all a matter of personal opinions about which there is never any point arguing. To help them

gain an understanding of how to most effectively discuss moral issues, I start with relatively unemotional, noncontroversial cases first in order to establish and exemplify principles and problems before we move into more controversial, and generally more compound or complex issues. I believe the following subject matter, presented in this way, helps achieve the sorts of results Strike desires, but without necessity of resorting to character-building or other kinds of psychological exhortation:

1. Nature, use, and importance of logic or reason;
2. Method of analysis of the meaning of words and phrases to make their usage clear and amenable to unambiguous communication and debate;
3. The issue of "Who's to say what is right or wrong?"
4. The meaning of terms such as 'good', 'bad', 'right', 'wrong', 'duty', 'ought', 'obligation', 'motive', 'consequences', 'intentions', etc. Reasons why the distinctions between motive, intention, and act are important.
5. Objectivity of ethics: evidence for, and invalidity of evidence against;
6. The nature of moral responsibility (See Campbell, 1965);
7. Normative ethics: seeking the highest ethical principles and values (See Frankena, 1973):

a) teleological theories: those holding that right actions are those which have the best overall consequences, including specifically 1) egoism, 2) altruism, 3) utilitarianism, and including analysis of what might make something be a "good" or "best" consequence;

b) deontological theories: those holding that something other than the value of consequences is what makes acts right or wrong: 1) Kant's principles, 2) the Golden Rule, 3) various lists of specific rules, laws, or regulations, 4) duties, such as promise keeping, paying debts, obligations to family, etc., 5) principles of reasonable or fair distribution;

8. Issue of why one should be ethical (particularly when it goes against one's own self-interest) (See Taylor, 1972).

Each of these issues can be covered in as much depth as seems appropriate for a given group of students; but as you can see, it is a way of approaching ethics without necessarily getting bogged down in specific controversial issues. Yet, once the above categories are reasonably clear to students, controversial issues (or issues specific to a particular profession) can either be discussed, or if that is inappropriate, at least depicted, in terms and dichotomies that have been made clear.

With all this as prelude, let me consider the specifics of Strike's article.

The Quayle-Brown Debate

First, to the millions who had watched Murphy Brown, the Vice President's attack was about quite specific values. As was the response. The Vice President essentially was castigating the network for allegedly promoting and glorifying sex outside of marriage (non-monogamous sex to boot), unwed motherhood, and single parenthood. The writers' response was that sex outside of marriage does sometimes occur, sometimes resulting in unanticipated pregnancy; that the only alternative to unwed motherhood in such cases was abortion, which Murphy eschewed; that the only alternative sometimes to single parenthood is a bad marriage, which she also eschewed; and that if the government would face reality of life in the United States, they might be able to make it easier for families to stay together or easier for mothers and fathers to rear children to have better and more productive lives. Although the debate outside the show itself

characterized these specific disagreements simply collectively as about "family values", it was not a vague or open-ended discussion with regard to content. But since Dr. Strike was unfamiliar with the scripts, he was unfamiliar with the specific content being referred to or discussed.

Specific Values and Schools

Nevertheless, he is correct that, apart from the Murphy Brown case, discussions about "values" tend to be vague; but that is frequently because specifics about particular values tend to engender confrontational disagreements. School prayer is one particular disagreement, but tolerance of homosexuality and premarital sexuality are others. In fact, tolerance in general is a controversial issue because many people disagree about which sorts of behavior, even apart from sex, it is right to teach children to tolerate. And often, espousing tolerance for certain values or lifestyles or beliefs is considered tantamount to condoning or promoting them. When people want values taught in schools, they tend to mean the values they cherish. Strike himself argues for teaching (inculcating?, promoting?) the character trait of loyalty, but I personally cannot think of loyalty without thinking of the Reagan/Bush notion of what seems to me "blind loyalty" to the fault of going along with what one personally believes wrong, simply because one's boss or one's compatriots have decided that is the course to pursue. Loyalty of that sort seems to me to be abdication or shirking of moral responsibility, at worst, and a backward order of priorities at best. And the example Strike gives about the students who disapprove of stealing but who will not accept responsibility to stop it seems to me to be not dissimilar from Mr. Bush's condemnation of "voodoo economics" as a candidate, and then endorsing it as a Vice President. It is not necessarily that character does not follow feelings, as Strike claims, but that ethical feelings of one kind of (prima facie) obligation can be overridden by other ethical feelings of obligation considered to be more important. In the case of Bush, loyalty was more important than pursuing what he believed to be better economic principles. He believed a bad economic program was wrong but that disloyalty was worse. In the case of the students, non-interference was considered a priority over preventing someone else's theft. The students were also faced by the additional difficulty that since they thought everyone does it, perhaps it is not as wrong as it would be if not everyone did it. It is often a real dilemma about what to do in a bad society, where an otherwise normally right action can be disadvantageous or even suicidal.

Moral "Cognition"

Strike wrote, "First, moral behavior is the result of a complex interaction of habituation, cognition, and feeling. While I do not think that we understand very clearly how these factors interact, I suspect that in most cases cognition is a poor third in its motive power. What is most significant is character, and character is largely the product of training. Moral argument is likely to be persuasive only to those already possessed of good character." What I have found from my diverse classes, however, is that cognition is extremely important. I have not seen that much difference in character among my students, but I have seen (1) a great deal of difference in what they initially believe is right or wrong concerning compound or derivative moral issues, and (2) a strong motivation and ability to forego a behavior once they become convinced something they had thought was right is wrong; or, in cases of guilt without sin, to begin to do something they had previously erroneously thought was wrong and selfish and had not allowed themselves to do. I would argue that most people who do wrong things really do believe what they are doing is right, even though they may believe there are some problems or regrettable elements about what they are doing. If I am correct then, getting students to see (or to see for themselves) that certain "conventional" professional, social, or business principles are wrong or inadequate would make a great difference in the kinds of practices people do. I have seen students change their behavior

because of ideas that were discussed in class that they had simply never before thought of, or put into perspective. I have seen well-educated, highly respected adults do the same thing after discussions about the notion of personal responsibility put some of their own sorts of inactions in a light that had not occurred to them before.

I make a distinction between very basic, I think largely (but not entirely) universal, moral ideas, and moral ideas that are more complex or derivative in a sense. People tend to have notions of fairness and desert and justice, though they may disagree about what makes something fair, just, or someone deserving; they tend to understand inconsistency is problematic; they tend to understand that unnecessary suffering is not a good thing; and that inflicting suffering is wrong unless it has some actual justification; they understand some particular cases of rights and obligations may override doing the most good, but that sometimes meeting a (prima facie) obligation might cause so much harm that the obligation should not be met. Many fiction and film plots play on the conflicts between duty and rules on the one hand, and the harmful consequences that would result from following them. There are all sorts of cases that you can present people in enough detail that you tend to get similar views. The task, then, I believe, is to get people to see how these "basic" ethical beliefs rationally relate to more complex issues. (I see the problem as being not totally unlike how one does math or physics, where intuitions about complex cases does not serve well, but where the consistent, systematic, logical application of more "basic" intuitions can help achieve breakthroughs and understanding.) And the point is to teach the process, not give all the answers; and not to have to build character, especially over prima facie or derivative character traits that may be controversial or in some cases wrong themselves.

Ethics Courses and Moral Cognition

Strike is correct that many professional ethics courses do not change behavior appropriately; but that is often because they are no more than training programs for what is currently socially acceptable in a given field, not bona fide ethics courses. They may teach people what the accepted means are for doing what is in fact not a justifiable end. If a supposed ethics course never really teaches (or helps students construct) how to reasonably decide what is right and wrong and also never talks seriously and rationally about the many different kinds of situations that one is likely to face in business or in some profession, and what might be the most reasonable and ethical ways to deal with those situations, students simply will not have the knowledge to be able to make decisions that Strike might think demonstrates character.

To me, character is just a word to describe the kinds of beliefs one really tends to live by, not something prior to those beliefs; but that is a whole issue in itself. Strike gives some examples of the supposed primacy of character over beliefs or feelings, but they do not convince me. For example, the fact that student teachers today may try to promote self esteem instead of diligence in order to foster greater student learning does not show them to have incorrectly failed to understand the importance of character, but possibly to have failed (1) to understand the importance of diligence for those things where diligent effort and practice make a difference, and (2) to understand in some cases the causal direction of the relationship between success and self-esteem. Further, many teachers seem unable to distinguish between giving hollow praise and meaningful praise. And there are cases where some encouragement and praise or nurture of confidence may actually promote diligence. Diligence and self-esteem are not mutually exclusive, nor is the relationship of either to learning necessarily straightforward and direct. People can just as diligently do their algebra incorrectly as correctly. As Bernice Wolfson was fond of saying: "Practice does not make perfect; it just makes permanent."

There are a number of standard arguments for moral relativism or moral skepticism which Strike leaves out. A good ethics course should address those. Some of the reasons based on

Kantian distinctions that Strike considers are probably more esoteric than the sorts of reasons relativists generally tend to offer. I do agree with him though that students need to see that ethics is not just a matter of personal tastes over which there is no point to dispute, and that such ethical relativism or skepticism needs to be dispelled in whatever form it tends to arise. As Tom Green has pointed out, however, relativism tends to be an affliction primarily of the educated (or at least the college educated). One has to learn a lot before one starts to feel one knows nothing of any real substance; and then one has to ignore the certainty of the beliefs required to argue the truth of uncertainty. And one has to be in a particular frame of mind, or arguing what they think is "philosophy" to really be able to sustain an argument for relativism. A student for example may see no contradiction in arguing for both moral relativism and his objectively deserving a higher grade than the teacher "feels" is right to give him.

And while I agree that moral learning (whether character or belief) occurs as one interacts with others (inside and outside of schools), I do not believe that such learning is what we might consider the most efficiently or effectively "educational", any more than we would say one has received an education in physics by all the myriad of interactions one has with objects with which one has come into contact. Since, we are not all Newtons or Einsteins or Mills or Aristotles, a bit more direction tends to be helpful in ethics and in physics, if we really want to be at all proficient. And I think that direction can be given without getting involved in advocating or fostering specific compound (in the sense of derivative) controversial values. What we can do is help students learn how to rationally and knowledgeably utilize "non-derivative" intuitions and ideas to analyze more complex issues, help them understand the rationales and problems with some standard proposed ethical principles, and help them develop the ability to clearly articulate their own positions and be able to understand the positions of others as specifically and clearly as possible. Strike is correct that rich, complex moral vocabularies still exist and have purpose. He is right that the liberal arts can be an enriching and foundational part of any professional background and that the study of psychology just by itself gives an impoverished view of the variety and richness of human (moral) experience, at this point in time. Further, he is right about the importance of rational dialogue, and about the need to show students that rational disagreement need not be a form of intolerance. I think there are ways of doing that, though that itself is a complex topic just from a pedagogical standpoint. And he is right teachers need to be able to support and justify in a rational manner themselves the behaviors they require of students and the ideas they are trying to teach if they want students to be more likely to appreciate and try to emulate rational behavior and rational discussion. After all, as one cartoon once pointed out, a school cannot exactly foster mature, independent, rational thinkers who believe what they are told to believe.

Although I agree that "...moral issues can be resolved by rational discussion", I strenuously disagree that "...moral decisions are legitimated by achieving consensus as the result of such moral discussions." However strong a consensus Hitler might have achieved, it would not have legitimized what the Nazis did. But that also is an issue that should appear in a good ethics course, not one that needs to be settled here.

Unreasonable Relativism As a Reaction to Unreasonable Moral Debate

Finally, I believe that skepticism and "values speak" do not just contribute to our inability to resolve moral differences, but they also in part arise from our obvious public inability to resolve moral differences. Relativism and "values-speak" are attempts to characterize, understand, and explain the many unresolved, seemingly unresolvable, moral controversies between (otherwise) intelligent, supposedly educated people(s). Strike and I would hold, I believe, that they merely abandon the effort at resolving complex moral differences rather than accurately shedding light on them. However, I would argue there has been much progress made

in the history of moral philosophy, and if that progress could be shared with students in ways it would be meaningful to them, there would be far fewer unresolved moral issues, and certainly far fewer unresolved acrimonious ones. Unfortunately even many philosophers cannot teach ethics in a way that is very meaningful to students. Nevertheless, the divisive, unresolved discussions of ethical issues that take place in the government, media, and public forums should not be seen as the only possible kinds of such discussions.

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