

The Moral Formation of University Students

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1. Why try to affect our students' ethics?

Morality and ethics are terms that refer to the study and the pursuit of the *good* and the *right*, of our moral or ethical *values*, of what we *ought* to be and do. Morality and ethics are about values such as justice, integrity, honesty, fairness, compassion and loyalty. In ethics we confront dilemmas and hard cases; we examine personal character and corporate culture; we look for principles and rules that will guide our decision and action.

It has sometimes been argued (and not just by ethics professors) that moral education is the most important goal of teachers and schools. The most brilliantly-educated intellect can become a great hazard to both self and society if it is unguided by some kind of commitment to the right and the good. A passionate spirituality can result in either a dangerous fanaticism or social apathy if it is morally-blind. Nevertheless, my purpose is not to advocate the *superiority* of ethical study, and still less its *sufficiency*. The point is its *necessity* within an account of our central educational goals.

Moral formation is inextricably bound up with both intellectual and spiritual formation. Moral agency requires skills in critical thinking and practical judgment. It requires knowledge and understanding of its arena of application in our life, thought and work. If moral influence and persuasion matter, the agent will also need to be reasonably articulate and know something of the processes of personal and social change. As for spirituality, most morality has been (and still is) embedded in religious conviction and practice of one kind or another. Moral motivation and ethical guidance, it can be argued, are rooted in God, religion---or some functional substitute.

Why must we pay serious attention to the moral formation of our university students? Let me suggest four basic reasons.

1.1 First, as a recent (1994) Hastings Center Report on "Values on Campus" says: "Throughout most of its history, American higher education has understood its social mission to include instruction in fundamental ethical values" (p. 3). Well into the 20th century, most college seniors were required to take a capstone course in moral philosophy, often taught by the college president, intended to send morally-sensitive graduates out into the world. But today, the Report continues, "If education in values is not altogether passé, what remains tends to be a rather tattered, patchwork affair." From Plato's Academy to the early 20th century colleges and universities, morality and ethics have been a major part of advanced learning. The first reason for taking ethics seriously at North Park, then, is that it is a central part of our historic vocation as members of the university community.

1.2 The second reason for taking ethics and moral formation seriously is that North Park is a Christian institution. Even more compelling than our sense of academic tradition, our Christian identity, insofar as it is authentic, drives us toward compassion and justice in all areas of life and learning. Ours is not a gnostic Gospel for personal enlightenment alone; we confess that God is good and that Jesus is Lord of the whole of life. Christian education must be moral education.

1.3 Third, we are preparing students for life and work in nothing less than an ethical wilderness. It is hardly necessary to review the pain, suffering, and injustice that surround us and cry out for compassionate and wise ethical response. Business, health care, education, entertainment, journalism, and politics---all of these domains present our graduates with critical and difficult ethical challenges. To put it charitably, we are missing a great opportunity if we do not prepare our graduates for such a wilderness experience; to put it more bluntly, we are irresponsible if we fail our students in this way.

1.4 Fourth, all of our teaching and learning, in every field, is already laden with values, whether we are conscious of them or not. We are teaching moral values by the way we relate to students and colleagues, by the issues and problems we select for attention, by the readings and exercises we assign. We may be teaching apathy; we may be teaching that autonomy is the highest value; we may be

endorsing power rather than service; we may be teaching compassion and integrity. But we are all teaching morality and ethics. How much better, then, if we seriously examine what it is that we want to be teaching.

It is easy enough to say that our purpose at North Park is to graduate students prepared to sensitively recognize and creatively resolve moral dilemmas, with conscious adherence to high moral principle, and with a virtuous, maturing moral character, and a robust sense of life's purpose! That might be a succinct statement of this part of our educational mission. The difficulties lie in large part in (1) understanding where our students are coming from ethically, (2) determining where we wish to take them, and (3) figuring out how to get them there.

With regard to the first set of difficulties: When ethical dilemmas arise in our North Park community, both inside and outside of the classroom, our diversity quickly becomes apparent. Moral apathy, a "don't care" attitude, is characteristic of some of our students---moral passion is characteristic of others. Some are thorough-going moral relativists---others are narrow moral absolutists. For some, moral authority lies in the church, the Bible, religion or family tradition---for others it lies in the autonomous self. Many have not thought much about whether their moral identity fits into any of these simple categories. All of us are extremely busy and easily distracted from moral self-scrutiny.

2. What result are we trying to achieve?

Moving from the "why" to the "what," I want to argue that we have three basic goals in the moral formation of North Park students. It is our mission to graduate students from NPU with (1) a sensitive ethical conscience, (2) a maturing moral character, and (3) a capacity to make wise, principled moral decisions.

2.1 Shaping a *sensitive ethical conscience* means consciousness-raising and sensitizing; it means nurturing moral awareness and caring. We do not want our students to graduate from North Park blind or oblivious to injustice, cruelty, and other moral/ethical lapses---whether in ourselves or in others. We want our students to develop eyes to see and ears to hear---and we want them not only to see but to care. A sensitive ethical conscience will recognize the presence or the threat of evil---and it will recognize opportunities for the right and the good. It will recognize the values that explicitly or implicitly are guiding individuals, communities, and institutions, and it will ask critical questions about whether these values are appropriate or desirable. A sensitive ethical conscience is the first goal of moral formation at NPU.

2.2 Shaping a *maturing moral character* means focusing on, and strengthening, our ongoing habits and traits of character, our attitudes, inclinations, and dispositions. Our character is who we *are* over time---not just what we *do* in a given situation. A maturing moral character asks "what kind of a person am I?"---and "what am I becoming?" "what traits do I wish to be characteristic of my life and of its impact on others?" A maturing moral character looks beyond the self to ask "what is the character of our communities and institutions?"---what is the character of our corporate cultures?"

But what character do we shape? what is its content? to what extent do we remain neutral in dealing with character choices? to what extent do we promote a normative model of character? what would that normative account of virtue look like?

Plato's four cardinal virtues of justice, prudence (practical wisdom), courage (fortitude), and temperance (self-control) remain a great starting point for our discussions. St. Paul's famous triad of faith, hope, and love are well worth examination. To approach the character issue in a contemporary context: What are the virtues of character that make for an exemplary graduate in your field? What would the companion vices be?

As a Christian university, North Park might (should?) give a central place to Jesus' account of character in the Beatitudes. It is the poor in spirit, those who mourn and are meek, those who hunger for righteousness and justice, the merciful, the pure of heart, the peacemakers, and those ready to be persecuted for righteousness/justice---it is people with precisely this character who will be the salt of the earth (retarding its decay) and the light of the world (illuminating it and providing conditions for life and growth). In short, the Beatitudes shape a character that is first of all open, receptive, humble, and gentle-

--and then courageously active for a peace based on justice, mercy and integrity. Not a bad account of the moral character we might try to shape in our graduates.

2.3 Shaping a *capacity to make wise, principled moral decisions* means preparing students to identify, correlate, and justify moral principles and rules of action. It means learning how to recognize and analyze cases (dilemmas, quandaries), developing imagination and decision-making skills for their principled resolution.

What are the cases, problems, and dilemmas to be placed on our agenda? We can begin by reflecting on issues of possible illegal behavior, so long as we recall that morality and the law are overlapping but not synonymous. Then we can look for situations that raise questions of conscience. One of the best tests is to ask if someone is likely to be harmed---if the answer is affirmative, we may have an ethical dilemma. On a deeper level, we examine the values that are embedded in mission statements, institutional arrangements, and social practices.

In responding to such cases and issues, it is valuable to consider the well-known general principles proposed by the philosophers. For example, Immanuel Kant's "categorical imperative" argues that a moral principle must be universalizable---can I will that this principle be a universal moral law observed by everyone? John Stuart Mill's utilitarian principle insists that what is morally right is what results in "the greatest good for the greatest number." While these principles have theoretical and practical weaknesses, North Park graduates will be the wiser for having explored their meaning and application.

As a Christian university, North Park might (should?) give a central place to the "golden Rule"---"do unto others as you would have them do unto you," especially since Jesus said that this summarizes the message of the Law and the Prophets. Of equal status is the Great Commandment to "love God and love your neighbor as yourself." If we wish more detail, the Ten Commandments provide an elaboration of the meaning of love and justice in relation to the protection of life, relationships, work and property, and communication.

3. How can we shape students' ethics?

Moral identity is a product of our socialization and of our personal choices. As Christians we also believe that our identity is affected by God's work in us. Praying for our students can contribute to their moral formation. Undoubtedly student experiences before and outside the university are normally the major sources of their moral identity. Nevertheless, university students can be and are affected---morally and spiritually as well as intellectually--- by their professors. As important as *what* we teach our students is *how* we teach; as important as *what we do* is *who we are* in their experience.

3.1 How do we shape a *sensitive ethical conscience*? First, we shape a conscience by manifesting and demonstrating it as a role *model*. If we pass over the moral dimensions of our subject matter, if we show no concern for people, for truth, for justice, for compassion---that will be a negative lesson we teach. Calling attention to ethical values issues and expressing our conscience and concern, on the other hand, will help raise the awareness and sensitivity of our students. It is *exposure* to ethical issues, combined with concern and analysis, that has greatest effect.

Telling stories (including personal vignettes), using literature, film, and music when appropriate, discussing events in the news, including case discussions in courses---these are ways of raising ethical awareness. Helping students to identify the ethical issues, dilemmas, quandaries, and problem cases which arise in your teaching area or academic field will sensitize the conscience. Exploring the deeper points of contact between moral values and your teaching area---where values are "embedded" in the field will enrich the student's moral perspective.

3.2 How do we shape a *maturing moral character*? First, the professor *models* desirable character to the student. If one's behavior demonstrates virtue, if self-revelation is accompanied by self-criticism, many students will be affected. Most of us can recall mentors and role models who affected us in just this way. Second, character is shaped by *community*. The approval or disapproval we receive from our chosen communities reinforces trends in the development of our character. We must talk about our own significant friendships and communities, and urge reflection on students' communities with their

stories, purposes, and virtues. We can encourage participation and commitment to friends and communities and, to some degree, provide or point to opportunities for such community.

Third, virtuous character is formed by *habitation*---by providing repeated opportunities for students to exhibit virtue, and then expressing approval (or disapproval). This is where service learning projects can play an important role. Fourth, while it may finally be less influential than the preceding strategies, *instruction* about the importance of personal character and corporate culture can be important. Noting the personal, political, cultural, and historical impacts of character will help some students to make wise character choices. Reading biographical accounts of leaders in our field of study can be a part of such instruction in moral character.

3.3 How can we shape a *capacity to make wise, principled moral decisions*?

There are two ways to get at moral principles and rules. First, they can be drawn from our foundational commitments, for example, from Scripture, from family, or from a cultural or philosophical tradition. Second, we can confront ethical cases or topics and then "back up" to look for principles and rules that will help us resolve such quandaries now and in future.

Probably the most successful way to shape the capacity to make ethical decisions is through case studies. Professors can put various cases before their students for discussion and analysis. It is important not to limit case discussions to the most spectacular and unusual possibilities---but to include cases more typically encountered in life and work. Having students submit personal cases (anonymously perhaps) can be a good tactic to keep the discussion rooted in reality. Having recognized a case as an ethical dilemma, students need to be taught to (1) clarify the relevant facts (technological, legal, financial, personnel, etc.), (2) clarify the relevant ethical principles at stake, (3) clarify the options for action---and the probable and possible outcomes of each, and (4) clarify one's role and responsibility---the reasons for one's involvement (since this may be challenged).

In order to proceed from analysis to resolution, students must learn to (1) engage in research and consultation to see if there are important precedents or opinions that will help in the decision, (2) exercise their creativity and imagination to find or create win-win solutions if possible, (3) carry out wise deliberation leading to the best choice among the options, and (4) act with courage and follow through with responsibility, both short- and long-term.

Since by definition, ethical dilemmas are difficult and sometimes contentious, students need to learn how to formulate articulate, persuasive, defensible moral arguments. Some rule for ethical arguments: (1) be clear about the position being advocated, (2) offer valid, convincing reasons for acceptance of the position, (3) indicate a careful, accurate grasp of the relevant facts, (4) be prepared to explain the grounding or justification of your ethical position, (5) be prepared to counter competing ethical claims and arguments, (6) show respect for all parties to the discussion, (7) show concern for all affected by the proposed position, and (8) indicate that you accept appropriate responsibility for the consequences of your position if it is adopted.

Without a morally-sensitive conscience and a maturing ethical character it is unlikely that wise, principled decision-making will occur with any regularity. Character is basic. But character is not enough; we must also practice case analysis and resolution and develop skill in applying moral principles.

4. Moral Formation in and for a Pluralistic World

North Park University is in a difficult but strategic position when it comes to the moral formation of its students. While our faculty is Christian, we represent a broad spectrum of the diversity of moral conviction in the Church. This can be, however, a strength rather than a weakness. Provided that each of us individually seeks a deep, rich, and faithful understanding of our own Christian moral identity, and provided that we somehow model the overarching unity in the "body of Christ" by learning from and respecting others of different conviction, our students will encounter the best that the Gospel has to offer our difficult moral climate.

Our students represent the whole range of moral maturity levels and a broad range of moral convictions. It is not appropriate to engage in any sort of indoctrination of our students, Christian or otherwise. It is

enough for our students to be exposed to a Christian ethic---along with other philosophical and religious options. If the richness and helpfulness of this perspective does not win them to its allegiance there is no further strategy that would be faithful either to the Christian calling or the academic vocation. We will be successful, in any event, if we can raise our students' moral awareness and sensitivity, if we can prod them toward more thoughtful, mature moral character, and if we can help them learn to make wise, principled decisions in the face of ethical dilemmas.