WHO TEACHES US WHAT’S RIGHT?
CAN VIRTUE BE TAUGHT IN A CLASSROOM SETTING?

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Introduction

Today, ethics courses are taught at most Universities. Ethics is defined as the study of morals – what is right and what is wrong. When we examine ethics courses on a deeper level we are forced to ask: what are these courses really teaching us? Are these courses just about memorizing theory? Or do they actually train us to be moral individuals? Better yet, can a college course actually teach individuals to behave morally? These are the questions that this research project set out to investigate.

Methods

The foundation of this project rests on meta-analysis

Works Reviewed:
• Plato: The Meno
• Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics
• Immanuel Kant: A Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals
• Gordon Marino: Before Teaching Ethics, Stop Kidding Yourself

Each text was surveyed for information related to the development and acquisition of moral behavior.

Hypothesis

I hypothesized that while ethical theory can be taught in a classroom; morality itself cannot because:
• Morality is something that develops over time
• Our understanding of right and wrong is very contextual
• It depends on the environment in which we are raised
• It depends on the experiences that we have

I would like to thank Dr. Pete Amato and the Drexel Philosophy Program for allowing me to be a part of such a project. As a philosophy major, it means a lot to work on a project which is attempting to improve the very program in which I am a student.

Literature Review

“The soul has learned all, nothing prevents a man who has recalled one single thing - a process men call ‘learning’ – from discovering everything else; for searching and learning are entirely recollection” – The Meno

Plato’s Doctrine of Recollection states that learning doesn’t need a teacher, just a guide. All knowledge – including moral knowledge – is within us, we just need a guide to help us pull it out.

“Good habits formed at youth make all the difference… we act rightly because we have acted rightly. We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then, is not an act but a habit” – Nicomachean Ethics

Aristotle proposes that ethical behavior is a practice – a habit we form by doing and not something we can be taught. Our parents and the environment in which we are raised affect the development of good habits.

“For any action to be morally good, it is not enough that it should conform to the moral law—it must also be done for the sake of the moral law... the motive must do the right thing because it’s right” – Metaphysics of Morals

Unlike Plato and Aristotle, Kant believes that there is more to morality than behaving well. One must be motivated well too. This means that they must understand why what they are doing is the right thing to do.

“Unless our ethics students learn to examine themselves and what they really value, their command of ethics is not likely to bring them any closer to being willing and able to do the right thing” – Before Teaching Ethics, Stop Kidding Yourself.

Marino is an ethics professor at St. Olaf’s University. He, like Kant, believes that motives play a role in ethical actions. Humans have the tendency to rationalize bad decisions. This self-deception, according to Marino, is the greatest impediment to individual morality; we must be taught to overcome this in order to be virtuous.

Conclusion

My research has shown me that it is possible to teach ethics in the classroom; with the caveat that ‘teaching’ must be viewed in accordance with Plato’s Doctrine of Recollection. Ethics professors must serve as guides or mentors to their students. Such a course must have the goal of increasing the morality of the students. With this goal in mind the course must focus on personal development over ethical theory. Students should be guided towards understanding ‘why’ as opposed to ‘what’. That is: not what the right thing to do is; but rather, why it is the right thing to do.

Future Work

The course described above is a far cry from Philosophy 251 – the current Introductory Ethics course at Drexel. Dr. Amato and I have been working on implementing a new ethics course, Philosophy 151. Philosophy 151 will be much more like the course described above. It will attempt to teach students about what ethics is and about what it means to be ethical; as opposed to teaching them ethical theory.

As the project continues, work will include: reviewing potential textbooks for the new course, searching for different material such as film, short stories, and essays, and drafting a potential syllabus.

Our goal is to eventually have Philosophy 151 introduced to the CoAS curriculum at Drexel.

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