



# The Teaching of Ethics in Higher Education: A Review<sup>1</sup>

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The Hastings Center was established a dozen years ago to bring academic people together for the study of the ethical problems arising out of new technologies in medicine, biology, and behavioral science. One of the Center's major activities, the "Teaching of Ethics Project," has released a first small volume of findings. To the credit of Daniel Callahan and Sissela Bok, the Project's co-directors, the weakness of available tools is acknowledged. The report suggests that more emphasis should be given to the teaching of ethics in undergraduate colleges and in certain professional schools.

Among their recommendations:

1. Ethics should be taught more deliberately, but for the purpose of "stimulating the moral imagination" rather than "to seek behavioral change in students." Despite this restriction, a "life of personal moral responsibility" is proposed as the desirable outcome.
2. Such teaching "should respect the pluralistic principles of our society . . . to help students reach their own moral judgments."
3. Ethics deserves a place in the curriculum. "No other serious subject is taught in the curriculum by what has been called the 'pervasive method' and ethics should not be the outcast." [Oh, for such fervent faith in required courses! How much easier this professor's life would be. To let everyone else in the educational system "off the hook" on matters of moral and ethical values seems incredible. A far more responsible conclusion would be based on the contradictory argument that the *pervasive* values of an educational institution will have major impact on students—capable of eclipsing any number of courses on rational ethics.]

President Steven Muller of Johns Hopkins University recently decried the failure of American higher education to provide any sort of worthy value framework to its students—whose moral and ethical plight is increasingly recognized and acknowledged (*U.S. News and World Report*, Nov. 10, 1980.) Muller sees the educational institutions turning out increasingly skilled people who lack knowledgeable concern for their own society. Higher education should be listed along with relativism and pragmatism as an inadequate tool.

The Hastings report is strangely elitist, as if the impact of the universities and the professional schools they represent is a major determinant of the values of society. I'm inclined to see it the other way around. Higher education reflects the society, and unless higher education deals directly with society in a relationship of service, its impact is minimal, producing little more than highly skilled workers.

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<sup>1</sup> Ted Ward. A review of *The Teaching of Ethics in Higher Education*, The Hasting Report, by The Institute of Society, Ethics, and the Life Sciences, Hastings-on-Hudson, NY, 1980. In *Eternity Magazine*. Vol. 32 (6) June 1981: 49

The writers add, “We are . . . suspicious of any move that might point in the direction of moral indoctrination or any ethical party line.” While acknowledging our own tendency to impose our values on others, we Christians see little good in a categorical rejection of moral authority.

The authors fail to acknowledge that their embrace of moral relativism and their claim that society is the source of ethical concepts are, in fact, clearly the direction of a particular sort of “moral indoctrination” and “ethical party line.” The Hastings Report attempts to propose the teaching of a course in “normative, applied, and professional ethics.” Lacking a foundation for the *norms*, the project founders in the shallows.

No denies the hazards a neglect of moral and ethical issues threatens to destroy all that is good in life. The easy answer is to add a course or two in ethics. The tough problem is to deal with a society that is ill-at-ease with any common propositions about moral truth.

So far, the travails of Hastings Center have given birth to one easy answer. We can hope for better.

For a contrasting view of ethical education, reflecting both intellectual integrity and commitment to the development of moral and ethical lifestyle, see *Valuing at Alverno: The Valuing Process in Liberal Education*. Alverno College, 3401 South 39th Street, Milwaukee, WI, 53215