

ETHICS EDUCATION AND THE PRACTICE OF WISDOM

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“Do you believe this is a small thing you try to define? Is it not rather the whole conduct of living, how each one of us may live the most profitable life?” (Plato, Republic I, 143).

INTRODUCTION

My analysis of the current state of ethics education begins with a distinction which, like most distinctions, works as a generalization by ignoring important exceptions.¹ The distinction is that approaches to ethics education in college and graduate school tend to be so concerned with disciplinary knowledge and rigorous analysis—tend, that is, to be so discursive and academic—as to be unconcerned with whether or not the students (or faculty) are living ethical lives; while approaches to ethics education below college, which are mostly programs in values education, are so concerned with shaping students’ ethical beliefs and conduct that they tend to be glaringly un-academic: lacking in historical perspective, philosophical depth and in methods of value inquiry. I will say more about ethics education in these two contexts, and say what I think is positive about them, before I offer an alternative I believe holds more promise.

ACADEMIC APPROACHES TO ETHICS EDUCATION

In higher education it is safe to say that ethics education, which takes place mostly in philosophy departments, in social services programs and in professional schools, is pretty thoroughly academic in both the positive and the negative senses of that word. The predominant approaches to teaching philosophical ethics are the historical and the topical or applied. In the former, ethics is taught as a history of moral and political (and in some cases, aesthetic) ideas and thinkers. This approach

treats ethics as an area of content: a body of historical and theoretical knowledge and of perennially contestable questions, as well as an ongoing program of exegetical and theoretical inquiry. Topical ethics courses typically employ the method of case study to apply ethical theory to controversial current events and issues. Though most of the students in these courses will sooner or later confront at least some of the issues covered in them, the students are sure to be evaluated for the ingenuity of their analysis, rather than for their growing capacity or disposition to make sound ethical judgments in their own lives. A third approach to philosophical ethics education, mostly reserved for graduate programs, is meta-ethics, in which contending theories are studied conceptually and logically, but then the move is made to epistemology and/or to critical theory in order to determine how these theories can be evaluated.

Now and again professors of philosophy raise concerns about the ethical ineffectiveness of ethics courses. Paul F. Camenisch observes that the curricular objectives of philosophical ethics courses are typically limited to cognitive outcomes, especially the capacity for reasoning about moral issues (1986, 496-7). James B. Gould notes that "Too often ... current ethics instruction seems to aim at ... theoretical moral knowledge as an end in itself" (Gould, 2002, 1). Edmund Pincoffs criticizes the notion that "the business of ethics is with 'problems', i.e. situations in which it is difficult to know what one should do," which he labels "quandry ethics" (Pincoff, 1971, 552). Christina Hoff Sommers worries that "students taking college ethics are debating abortion, capital punishment, DNA research, and the ethics of transplant surgery while they learn almost nothing about private decency, honesty, personal responsibility or honor" (Sommers, 1991, cited in Gould, 2002, 1). These observations are underwritten by the American Philosophical Association's "Statement on Teaching Philosophy," which provides that:

Philosophical education involves ... [t]he development of an appreciation and grasp of philosophical methods, issues and traditions ... and ... the cultivation of students' analytical, critical, interpretive and evaluative abilities in thinking about a variety of kinds of problems, historical texts, and issues, both "philosophical" and commonplace (APA, 1998, cited in Gould, 2002, 1).

There is much to recommend philosophical approaches to ethics education. They provide students a foundation in historical, theoretical and meta-theoretical content, and practice in textual analysis, theory construction and criticism and in other intellectual processes. However, these

very strengths become liabilities when philosophical discourse becomes 'merely academic' in the sense of being self-contained; when the *study* of ethics becomes removed from *being* ethical in the sense of being a certain kind of person or living a certain kind of life. As Aristotle repeatedly noted, "[ethical] inquiry does not aim at theoretical knowledge ... for we are inquiring not in order to know what virtue is, but in order to become good ..." (1998, 30). "[O]ur aim is not to know what courage is but to be courageous, not to know what justice is but to be just, in the same way that we want to be healthy rather than to ascertain what health is ..." (1992, 217). A recent article in a philosophy magazine characterized modern philosophy professors as being,

... little devoted to the love of wisdom. In only a merely "academic" way do they aspire to intellectual virtue. Even less often do they exhibit qualities of moral excellence. On the contrary, many philosophers, or what pass as philosophers, are, sadly, better described as petty social climbers, meretricious snobs, and acquisitive consumerists (Fosl, 2009, 81).

However off-the-mark this characterization may be, consider that the virtue-less professor of ethics cannot be called a hypocrite, as her professional responsibilities do not include exhorting students to live well.² As another recent article put it, "An undergraduate signing up for a philosophy course in the hope it can improve their life would probably be told not to expect a refund" (Vernon, 2008a, 32).

Pierre Hadot has observed that philosophical ethics began to thin out in the Middle Ages, when the Greek and Roman philosophical schools had closed, when the "spiritual exercises" they invented had been diverted for use in Christian monasteries, and when philosophical discourse had been reduced to theoretical scaffolding for theology in the Christian universities (Hadot, 1995, 107, 269; Hadot, 2002, 254-60). By the time of Renaissance wisdom literature, the learned philosopher lacking common sense or practical virtue was already a target of rebuke.³ Centuries later, but a century ago now, John Dewey bemoaned philosophy's academic turn and urged that philosophy "recover itself" by "ceas[ing] to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becom[ing] a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men" (and women) (Dewey, 1917, 46). And as recently as last year, Hilary Putnam reminded an APA audience that,

[R]eflection on our ways of living ... has always been a vital function of philosophy.... [T]he ancient questions, 'Am I living

as I am supposed to live?’ ‘Is my life something more than vanity, or worse, mere conformity?’ ‘Am I making the best effort I can to reach ... my unattained but attainable self?’ make all the difference in the world (Putnam, 2008).

For many years now, philosophy as a way of life has been taken more seriously outside than inside academia, in programs of practical and applied philosophy (Lavery, 2004, 141) including philosophical counseling⁴ (Cohen, 2003; Ellis and Harper, 1975; Marinoff, 1999; Marinoff, 2003; Raabe, 2001), the philosophy café (Phillips, 2001),⁵ Socratic dialogue retreats, Philosophy for Children,⁶ and numerous trade books (Baggini, 2005; De Botton, 2000; Eagleton, 2007; Phillips, 2005; Phillips, 2007; Vernon, 2008a; Vernon, 2008b), radio programs,⁷ web logs⁸ and public symposia introducing non-philosophers to philosophical perspectives on meaningful living. Though mostly conducted outside of schools, these programs are clearly modes of ethics education, and are in fact academic insofar as they make use of historical and theoretical content and philosophical practices like critical reasoning, the study of classical texts, self-scrutiny and public dialogue.

A common criticism raised against these programs is that in making philosophical ethics accessible to non-philosophers (even to children) they forego the nuanced analysis and rigorous argumentation that makes ethics philosophical. Mark Vernon gives the right response to such criticism: that while practical philosophy should avoid banality, simplicity is not the same thing as banality, and communicating clearly is not the same thing as dumbing down (2008a, 33). In fact, insofar as the point of ethical discourse is to explain, justify and exhort oneself and one's fellow-citizens to living well, simplicity of theory and clarity of communication are virtues, as Aristotle advised in both of his books on ethics.⁹ But the underlying point of most criticism of practical philosophy is that philosophical ethics is no longer expected to serve these moral functions.

In social service programs and professional schools, ethics education is undertaken to make students aware of ethical problems and opportunities unique to these lines of work, of the ethical codes these professions have evolved in order to self-regulate (Abbot, 1983, 856), and of relevant statutes making certain kinds of professional misconduct actionable or even criminal. In addition, many professional schools expect their students to cultivate certain ethical perspectives and commitments befitting the profession. The College of Education and Human Services where I work, for instance, declares its mission to include “pre-

paring professionals ... [w]ho are committed to ... the pursuit of social justice; [w]ho promote learning and growth for all, with respect for social, cultural, economic, and individual differences” and “[w]ho understand their role in preparing and supporting individuals and groups to be active and critical participants in an emerging political and social democracy” (CEHS, undated). The scope of professional ethics education is therefore both wider than philosophical ethics—in that it engages students not only in moral reasoning, but also in commitment to ethical conduct and to particular ethical values¹⁰—and also narrower, in that its focus is necessarily limited to work life.

But though the link between ethics education and ethical commitment and behavior is more clearly intended in professional schools than in philosophy departments, the nature and the efficacy of that link are less than clear (see Waithe and Ozar, 1990, 17-19). For one thing, as Abbot demonstrates, the purposes of professional ethics codes are to ensure the professions’ “control of expertise, [corporate] monopoly, and high [social] status,” as much as they are to protect and serve clients (Abbot, 1983, 873)—neither of which is necessarily tied to personal moral growth. Another problem is that themes of client stewardship and public service delivered in professional ethics education are often countermanded by the (barely) hidden curriculum of self-service prevalent in business and other professional schools, as recently critiqued by *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich (Rich, 2009). A third problem, identified by Union Bank of Switzerland (UBS) global business analyst Prabhu Gupta, is that professional ethics has become disassociated from personal values, in both theory and practice.

Most people in the world today don’t see that their values—wherever their values may come from—have anything specific to do with their business practice. They’re just trying to follow good professional ethics. It doesn’t really matter if they’re Muslims or Hindus or Buddhists or Christians or atheists or what. They don’t really think about where those business ... or professional ethics have come from.... And then you’ll find [a] small minority that wrestles with questions of “Is this the right way to make money? Am I making too much money? What is the effect of my business on my clients ... on my suppliers ... on the environment? How do I square the amount of money I’m making with my responsibilities in a world of extreme need?” (Gupta and Tippet, 2006).

Guptara recommends asking ourselves how our religious and moral orientations, our personal and communal ethical practices, and our approaches to work, including professional ethics, can and should relate to each other. Contrary to this approach, professional ethics education typically defines and constructs the meaning of workplace ethics without any relationship to personal values or to holistic accounts of a meaningful life.

VALUES EDUCATION IN THE SCHOOLS

The word ‘ethics’ hardly appears in precollege programs. Instead, we find the words values (meaning moral values), citizenship, and of course, character.¹¹ Camenisch argues that this linguistic difference signifies a difference in the goals of moral education undertaken by different disciplines. He identifies “moral reasoning,” “morally relevant feelings, values and commitments,” and “moral choices and actions” as “three reasonably distinct, if not ultimately separable targets” of moral education, and observes that philosophy courses generally focus on moral reasoning and use the term “ethics,” while programs originating in psychology and education “focus more on the affective dimensions of the moral life” and “use the language of ‘values’” (Camenisch, 1986, 496, 497). Camenisch doesn’t mention the obvious but problematic fact that values education, which aims at shaping people’s moral feelings and behavior, is directed mostly at young children, while ethics education, which limits itself to moral reasoning—and avoids even shaping people’s moral *beliefs*—is directed almost exclusively at adolescents and adults.

Precollege values education is a thriving enterprise. Forty-three states have enacted laws mandating or supporting it,¹² using language like this, from Tennessee:

The course of instruction in all public schools shall ... help each student develop positive values and improve student conduct as students learn to act in harmony with their positive values and learn to become good citizens in their school, community, and society (Tennessee Code Annotated 49-6-1007(a) (2005), cited in Brimi, 2009).

New Jersey, where I live, aligns the goals of values education with curriculum content standards, recommending, for instance, that health education address social and emotional health, character development, and sexual relationships; that social studies promote American values, citizen-

ship and connections among global cultures; and that family and life skills education teach critical thinking, self-management and ethics (there's the word!) (NJCCE, 2007). These kinds of regulations generate and shape—and are in turn generated and shaped by—myriad institutions, advocacy groups, research agendas, conferences, professional journals, grant funding and curriculum sales.

Values education has taken two quite divergent paths, though one of them—what I will call ‘values transmission’—is more like a super highway, compared to the little footpath I will call ‘value inquiry.’ By ‘values transmission’ I mean that the values to be educated are not up for questioning or critique—by educators, let alone by students. One important sub-category of this approach is behaviorist programs like D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Education), the “Just Say No” campaign, and similar programs that target other high-risk behaviors like sexual activity, bullying, suicide and gang involvement. In classifying these programs as behaviorist I have in mind three characteristics, the first of which is that they are explicitly aimed at behavior modification. As Hunter Brimi observes, in these programs, “behavior [is] depicted as simply right or wrong,” and “[r]ather than allowing students to engage in ... moral reasoning ..., they [are] expected to do what they [are] told: resist drugs, abstain from sex, or adhere to whatever behavior [is] deemed correct and appropriate” (Brimi, 2009, 128). Second, behaviorist programs employ all manner of stimulus-response conditioning to motivate right behavior and the avoidance of risky behavior, including slogans, buttons, T-shirts, national award competitions, motivational speeches, student pledges, graphic films, shock statistics, demonstrations by police officers, and pep-rally school assemblies. Third, these programs are heavy on content, e.g. how alcohol affects the nervous system, which methods of contraception prevent pregnancy and STDs, and the sad statistics of teenage tragedies.

The most common values-transmission approach, character education, is also and by far the most widely-researched and the most heavily financed approach to values education today. Character education is behaviorist in all three senses: behavior modification is one of its aims, it employs motivational strategies and it delivers a large amount of relevant content. What distinguishes character education from strictly behaviorist approaches is that it aims to modify other aspects of character than just behavior, including moral belief and feeling (Lickona, 1998, 78, cited in Brimi 2009, 129). It is widely recognized that character education is essentially a virtue ethics approach in the tradition of Aristotle (Brimi,

2009, 128). This approach embeds strictly behavioral aims like ‘don’t take drugs,’ ‘do vote,’ and ‘do practice safe sex,’ in much thicker aims such as becoming responsible, caring, honest, fair, respectful, and developing a strong work ethic (Lickona, Schaps and Lewis, 2007, 1). Although this focus on human virtues seems *philosophically* partisan in not giving equal time to the other two major ethical theories (utilitarianism and deontology) that offer alternative conceptions of the ethical life, an important advantage of character education is that it is able to avoid *religious* and *cultural* partisanship by advocating virtues with broad cross-cultural appeal and literary sources from around the world and dating back thousands of years.¹³

A more important advantage is that in situating desirable behavior in a more holistic notion of personhood (someone who thinks and feels about what she is doing), character education is meant to be less manipulative than strictly behaviorist approaches. This is born out in the way character education literature describes educational ends and means for each of the “cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects of moral life” (Lickona, Schaps and Lewis, 2007, 1). *Cognitively*, the virtuous person doesn’t just know what’s expected but has an educated understanding of the virtues. This requires the study of relevant literature, history and philosophy, as well as practice in conceptual analysis, group discussion and personal reflection. *Emotionally*, the virtuous person cares genuinely about values and about others. This requires practice in “developing empathy skills, forming caring relationships, ... communicating feelings, [and] active listening” (Lickona, Schaps and Lewis, 2007, 1). Learning to *behave* virtuously requires opportunities to exercise practical wisdom: to actually practice virtues in concrete situations that call, e.g., for collaborative work, dividing labor, reaching consensus, resolving conflict and creative problem solving (Lickona, Schaps and Lewis, 2007, 2). The most conducive context for such practice is a safe, just, caring and supportive community—which is what classrooms and schools are meant to be, in the literature of character education (Lickona, Schaps and Lewis, 2007, 2-3).

I have categorized character education as a values-transmission approach because despite its commitment to moral reasoning, character education programs give little if any recognition to the fact that children’s experience is fraught with moral ambiguity, that a coherent and unified notion of “core” virtues is achieved by downplaying value pluralism within and among cultural groups, the fact that meanings and practices associated with traditional virtues change over time, and that deeper understanding may complicate rather than reinforce value commit-

ment.¹⁴ Nor do these programs provide opportunity for students to express doubt or criticism of the proffered virtues, or to practice open-ended ethical inquiry. The virtues that constitute good character come pretty much pre-defined in the curriculum materials; the only thinking expected from children is thinking about how best to implement them; the “moral feeling” expected is appreciation of just these virtues, uncomplicated by doubt. This failure to recognize the complexity and ambiguity of children’s ethical experience is surely an adultist fallacy.

Character education is further shaped as a values-transmission approach by its commitment to rigorous empirical evaluation. The eleventh of the Character Education Partnership’s Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education reads:

Effective character education must include an effort to assess progress using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Three broad kinds of outcomes merit attention:

(a) The character of the school: To what extent is the school becoming a more caring community? ...

(b) The school staff’s growth as character educators: To what extent have adult staff—teaching faculty, administrators, and support personnel—developed understandings of what they can do to foster character development? ...

(c) Student character: To what extent do students manifest understanding of, commitment to, and action upon the core ethical values? ...

The most common kinds of data used to measure the success of character education programs are school surveys (Brown and Stillson, 2008) and statistics like “office referrals, suspensions, detentions, and expulsions” (Brimi, 2009, 129). Taking such indicators as evidence of moral growth is scientifically problematic, but is considered a cost-effective alternative to the more sophisticated research that would be necessary to generate scientifically-sound diagnostics of psychological constructs associated with the virtues—which, in any case, would be philosophically and politically fraught. Of course, there is a broad constituency of educators, parents and politicians who are not troubled by the fact that tracking compliance with conventional values is the most convenient method of assessing character education.

The need and the capacity of young people to grapple with moral ambiguity and pluralism, to honestly confront their own moral doubts, to criticize conventional norms and to engage in constructive, open-ended ethical inquiry, are directly addressed by inquiry approaches to values

education. One such approach is the values clarification program developed in the 1960s (Raths, Harmin and Simon, 1966; Simon, Howe and Kirschenbaum, 1995). This program guides students in personal inquiry to discover and construct their own values, and to achieve integrity or coherence among their own beliefs, values and actions. The method is open-ended discussion, typically around hypothetical situations presented by the teacher, who strictly avoids advocating her own moral views, or those of the dominant culture. In the words of the program's originators:

We need to listen to young people as we have never listened before. We need to ask them about their ideas, about their purposes, about their beliefs, and we need to begin a dialogue with each of them [C]hildren should be free to state their own interests, their own purposes and aspirations, their own beliefs and attitudes, and many other possible indicators of values (Raths, Harmin and Simon, 1978, viii).

Although values clarification emphasizes the process of value determination over the content of the particular values chosen and clarified by the students, the program's process is more therapeutic than intellectual. Children are expected to choose their value commitments from among alternatives, and to espouse their choices publicly, but not to construct arguments in support of them, or to defend them against peer criticism, which is discouraged. This lack of intellectual rigor has been rightly criticized; but one thing values clarification gets right is its student-centeredness. If the approach seems too individualistic, consider the lack in values-transmission programs of any meaningful personal response. Asking students to "think for themselves" about questions of value dignifies them as moral agents and illuminates the fact that careful inquiry into questions of value must be, to some extent, private and personal.

A quite different inquiry approach to values education is what I would call the critical thinking approach, in which students are taught methods of critical reasoning as the means of reaching moral judgments that are sound, especially in the logical sense. Many of these programs derive from analytic philosophy, with its penchant for defining and tracing out the logical relationships among philosophical concepts. The close attention these programs give to concepts like person, mind, friendship, rights, community and justice, is a welcome supplement to the comparatively flat content of most values transmission programs. These programs are also informed by developmental psychology, especially the work of Lawrence Kohlberg, in which children's moral development is under-

stood as one aspect of their cognitive development, which is marked by increased sophistication through predictable stages (see Kohlberg, Levine and Hewer, 1983). However, moral education programs informed by cognitive stage theories offer nothing for young children, who are taken to be incapable of moral reasoning.¹⁵ More troubling, like the college-level philosophy courses they are often patterned on, many of these programs focus exclusively on moral dilemmas, ethical puzzles and other cognitive operations, neglecting emotional, inter-personal and behavioral aspects of moral growth. They take the product of ethical reasoning to be sound rational propositions that are not necessarily even beliefs, once again substituting ethical life with discourse *about* ethics.

The program I work with, Philosophy for Children, is in some ways a critical thinking approach to values education, but with some important differences. First, the program emphasizes creative and caring, or value-oriented thinking in addition to critical thinking as tools for philosophical inquiry (see Lipman, 2003, chs. 11-13). Second, the aim this program sets for the children's inquiry is not rational propositions, but "ethical, social, political, and aesthetic judgments ... applied directly to life situations" (2003, 279). These judgments are meant to be *rational*—based on sound arguments and good evidence—but are also meant to be *reasonable*: informed by multiple and diverse perspectives and made accountable to a community of peers (Gregory, 2008). To facilitate these social aspects of inquiry, Philosophy for Children operationalizes the pragmatist notion of the *community of inquiry* as a protocol for classroom dialogue (Fisher, 2008; Gregory, 2008; Kennedy, 2004) which also employs many characteristics of social learning theory recommended by Mead, Vygotsky, Bruner and others. (Reznitskaya, 2005; Reznitskaya, Anderson, Dong, Li, Kim and Kim, 2008). This protocol is student-centered—each inquiry begins with children's questions and ends with their judgments—but its emphasis on peer critique and collaboration avoids the entrenched individualism of values clarification. The program's commitment to following the inquiry where it leads and to inquiry as a self-corrective process combines a liberal open-endedness with a conservative methodological rigor. Philosophy for Children gives analytical attention to philosophical concepts, and goes further, to help children recognize these concepts as they arise in other school subjects and in their own experience—which we call developing "a philosophical ear" (Gregory, 2008, 1). The program also attempts to reconstruct significant aspects of the history of philosophy in its novels for children, in order to provide them a range of theoretical alternatives to important philosophical issues.

There is much to admire in precollege values education programs, but I believe the four most important things many of them get right, that are mostly missing in college-level ethics education are, first, that they educate the whole person, including emotional and behavioral dispositions, as well as content knowledge and thinking skills; second, they find opportunities to address values throughout the curriculum and throughout the school community; third, many of them provide children with opportunities to exercise ethical judgment, at least in the course of their school experience; and fourth, some programs are student-centered in expecting students to construct their own value-oriented beliefs and commitments. In short, unlike academic ethics, many of these school programs directly address what Alfred North Whitehead in 1929 called “the art of life:”

Education is the guidance of the individual towards a comprehension of the art of life; and by the art of life I mean the most complete achievement of varied activity expressing the potentialities of that living creature in the face of its actual environment.... Each individual embodies an adventure of existence. The art of life is the guidance of this adventure (39).

PRECOLLEGE ETHICS: WHAT CAN IT BE?

As I hope to have shown, each of the approaches to ethics education I have described has its good points—though of course what we consider good about them depends on what we think ethics education is *for*. What, then, *is* the purpose of teaching ethics to teenagers and young children? Is it to make sure they follow a certain code of conduct? Is it to make them conversant with influential ethical theories? Is it to make them clever solvers of ethical puzzles? Is it to put them on the path to becoming professional ethicists? I suggest those purposes are all secondary. Consider the other school subjects, to which we don’t ordinarily apply the term “precollege,” such as science, literature, mathematics and history. The purpose of teaching these subjects is that we believe they offer both content and ways of thinking that will make life better—more practicable and more meaningful—for young people, almost immediately and throughout their lives, and whether or not they make their way to college. Becoming literate and numerate, and becoming disciplined in science, history and literature, makes us more aware of the potential meanings of our experiences, and enables us to think and act in ways that will make our experiences *more* meaningful.

The same is true of ethics. The ethical dimension of our experiences constitutes part of their meaning, and as the pragmatists taught us, that meaning is unfinished. As we become more sensitive to this ethical dimension we discern ethical problems and opportunities unique to the concrete situations in which we find ourselves, and the ways in which we respond will help determine the ethical outcome of those situations, meaning both the ethical qualities that we and others experience and the ethical capacities we take with us into future experiences. By ‘ethical qualities’ I mean that mercy, justice, solidarity, care, fidelity and other ethical ideals—as well as anti-ideals like cruelty, avarice, pettiness, and guile—are not just concepts, or propositions with truth values, but felt qualities of experience that can be evaluated on that basis.¹⁶ Their value is of the nature of the beautiful/ugly, as well as of the true/false and the right/wrong.¹⁷

I suggest that precollege ethics education ought to begin with the recognition that children’s experience already has this ethical dimension. Even young children come upon ethical problems and opportunities every day: in the school bus, the lunchroom, the playground, the classroom, the street, and the home. And children often feel the distinct ethical qualities of these situations more keenly than we adults do. Indeed, sometimes it is the indignation or the joyful exuberance of the children we live and work with that alerts us to what’s at stake ethically in the situations we share with them. This is something children have to teach us. What we have to teach them is that the more they become aware of the unfinished, potential, qualitative ethical meaning of their experiences, and learn to inquire into that meaning intelligently, the more they will be able to respond to their own ethical problems and opportunities in ways they (and we) will find satisfying, appropriate and worthwhile. As Dewey argued, trying to respond well to what is problematic in our immediate experience is the only way we can learn to do so more skillfully in the future. In 1938 he wrote:

We always live at the time we live and not at some other time, and only by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience are we prepared for doing the same thing in the future. This is the only preparation which in the long run amounts to anything (Dewey, 1938; 1967, 49).

The idea that education should aim directly at living well and only indirectly at academic and professional advancement has been a value judgment made by philosophers of education for centuries. Socrates

famously critiqued education that focused on materialistic and mundane objectives to the detriment of wisdom,¹⁸ by which he meant the cultivation of personal and collective wellbeing. He called for education that helps us figure out how to regulate our desires and actions in ways that will bring meaning and purpose to our lives. Whitehead recalled this ancient educational objective in 1929:

Now wisdom is the way in which knowledge is held. It concerns the handling of knowledge, its selection for the determination of relevant issues, its employment to add value to our immediate experience.... You cannot be wise without some basis of knowledge, but you may easily acquire knowledge and remain bare of wisdom (Whitehead, 1929, 1967, 30).

Education that focuses exclusively on the knowledge and skills necessary for socio-economic success¹⁹ not only precludes education for wisdom, but is detrimental to it, by reinforcing cultural, political and especially economic forces that tend to shape students into alienated individuals aggressively competing with others in the pursuit of unexamined, market-manipulated desires. Ironically, this is equally true of academic philosophy, including the study of ethics.

ETHICS EDUCATION AND THE PRACTICE OF WISDOM

In considering the ends and the means of ethics education there is much to learn from the wisdom traditions of the early Greek and Roman philosophers. I will mention five characteristics that were common among their schools, that I believe should inform ethics education both at the college and the precollege levels. The first and most important characteristic, from which the others derive, is that in these schools philosophy was nothing less than the disciplined study and practice of living well. Wisdom or *sophia*, the yearning for which distinguished philosophers from others, was a certain kind of life: a life worth living.²⁰ The early wisdom traditions were whole ways of life that included habits of diet and exercise, the discipline of desire, the cultivation of worthy passions, meaningful friendships, helpful attitudes toward death, and other aspects of caring for the self, the community, the stranger and the natural world. In the words of Hadot:

Throughout antiquity, wisdom was considered a mode of being: a state in which a person is, in a way which is radically different from that of other people—a state in which he is a

kind of superman. If philosophy is that activity by means of which philosophers train themselves for wisdom, such an exercise must necessarily consist not merely in speaking and discursing in a certain way, but also in being, acting, and seeing the world in a specific way. If then, philosophy is not merely discourse but a choice of life, an existential option, and a lived exercise, this is because it is the desire for wisdom (Hadot, 2002, 230).

The lesson I take from this is that the aim of ethics education ought to be the self-corrective study of how we ought to live, combined with the self-corrective practices such a life requires.

The second characteristic I would call attention to is the limited role that knowledge and discursive thinking were thought to have in relation to the life worth living, in these traditions. As Martha Nussbaum remarked of the Hellenistic schools: “They practiced philosophy not as a detached intellectual technique dedicated to the display of cleverness but as an immersed and worldly art of grappling with human misery” (Nussbaum, 1994, 3). On the one hand, these schools practiced a variety of intellectual exercises,²¹ which, to be sure, produced knowledge in the form of aphorisms, parables, meditations, dramas, and theoretical treatises, which constitute the classic wisdom literature. On the other hand, these ancients agreed that wisdom is not a doctrine or truth, but a way of life that *includes* theoretical discourse as a means of explaining, justifying and correcting its many other practices. Indeed, for the ancients, “discourse was philosophical only if it was transformed into a way of life” (Hadot, 2002, 173). These schools distinguished between knowledge as a kind of moral awareness or perspective—a way of seeing the world—from scholastic knowledge: command of the literature and fluency with concepts and theories. As Seneca put it, some who are learned “turn love of wisdom (*philosophia*) into love of words (*philologia*)” (Hadot, 2002, 174). Moreover, sages in many wisdom traditions have recognized that knowledge and discursive prowess can be employed for hubristic and partisan ends that are detrimental to the ethical life.²²

Further, in spite of the recent attention given to wisdom by contemporary psychologists (Goldberg, 2006; Hammond, 2007; Sternberg, 2003), wisdom is not simply a matter of excellent thinking or prudent judgment. The wise person is certainly one who judges well, especially with the kind of moral know-how illustrated in the trial of Socrates and the judgment of Solomon. But the capacity to solve intricate ethical dilemmas is only one aspect of wisdom, and even that capacity cannot be

reduced to “successful intelligence”²³ but derives from such psychological and moral qualities as modesty, equanimity and compassion, which, in turn, are cultivated as much by certain habits of living as by theoretical discourse. Also, the moral know-how demonstrated in dramatic situations like Socrates’ trial is not different in kind from that exercised in the ordinary circumstances of everyday life, such as treating strangers with respect and children with dignity, working diligently, and eating mindfully.

What then is the place of knowledge and thinking in ethics education? The lessons I take from ancient philosophy are, first, that ethics education should avoid approaches that treat ethics solely as a body of knowledge or a kind of theoretical discourse. Rather, students should study ethical theory and wisdom literature as resources for ‘existential options.’ They should be taught to employ ethical theory and moral reasoning as tools of ethical inquiry culminating in existential ethical judgments.²⁴ Also, the practice of ethical theory and reasoning should be conducted in ways that cultivate not only intellectual powers like precision, subtlety, and coherence, but broader intellectual and social virtues associated with reasonableness as part of an ethical way of life, including humility, curiosity and the spirit of collaboration.²⁵ Likewise, the practice of ethical reasoning should avoid the cultivation of glibness, pride, contentiousness, and other vices that might be associated, for example, with certain kinds of staged competitions of ethical argumentation.

The third characteristic I would call attention to is the practice in the ancient philosophical schools of what Hadot refers to as ‘spiritual exercises.’

The notion of spiritual exercises ... means practices which could be physical, as in dietary regimes, or discursive, as in dialogue and meditation, or intuitive, as in contemplation, but which were all intended to effect a modification and a transformation in the subject who practiced them (Hadot, 2002, 6).

In the ancient schools intellectual exercises were practiced in conjunction with contemplative practices including meditation, examination of one’s conscience, confession of one’s faults to others, fraternal correction, imaginative contemplation of the cosmos, practicing present-moment awareness and reflection on death (Hadot, 1995, 59, 85, 88, 90, 179, 242; Hadot, 2002, 123-4, 201); and with the discipline of one’s bodily appetites, physical form and somatic habits, and the performance of dutiful actions (Hadot, 1995, 84). Some of these exercises were motivational and even behavioristic, though each was meant to be conducted within

parameters set by self-corrective moral inquiry. These spiritual exercises indicate the therapeutic function²⁶ of ancient philosophy, and point to the need for ethics education to include contemplative and somatic exercises²⁷ as practical methods—technologies or therapies—for realizing ethical ideals like quieting the ego, facing suffering with equanimity and taking compassionate action.

The fourth characteristic of ancient philosophy I would call attention to is the establishment of the philosophical community, which was not incidental, but integral to wisdom practice:

All the schools ... develop procedures and strategies that are aimed not only at individual efficacy, but also at the creation of a therapeutic community, a society set over against the existing society, with different norms and different priorities. In some cases this is achieved by literal physical separation; in some cases, through the imagination (Nussbaum, 1994, 40).

[A]ncient philosophy was always a philosophy practiced in a group, whether in the case of the Pythagorean communities, Platonic love, Epicurean friendship, or Stoic spiritual direction. Ancient philosophy required a common effort, community of research, mutual assistance, and spiritual support²⁸ (Hadot, 1995, 274).

Communal study made possible the practice of collaborative research and other forms of discursive rationality,²⁹ while sharing meals and living in common³⁰ made possible the practices of mutual concern, care, correction, edification and example, and the cultivation of philosophical friendship, “the spiritual exercise *par excellence*” (Hadot, 1995, 89)—an end as well as a means of these practices. As I have noted, Philosophy for Children and many programs of character education already engage students in collaborative inquiry, goal-setting, problem-solving and decision-making, making the classroom and the school sites of ethical interaction. These programs call on parents, teachers and administrators to become, not just moral exemplars for children, but also fellow inquirers, negotiators, and participants in ethical community.

The fifth characteristic of ancient philosophy is implicated in the other four, and is, to my mind, the one most regrettably lost in philosophy’s academic turn: the primary aim of all of their intellectual, contemplative and somatic practices was self-transformation. As Aristotle admonished:

For if living well and finely ... consists in oneself and one's own actions having a particular quality, the good would be more common and more divine – more common because it would be possible for more people to share it, and more divine because happiness would then be in store for those who made themselves and their actions of a particular quality (1992, 207).

In ancient Greece, as in ancient China and India, the true philosopher was a person who engaged in moral self-work, and was as likely to be a fisherman or butcher as to be a scholar. In contrast, “people who developed an apparently philosophical discourse without trying to live their lives in accordance with their discourse, and without their discourse emanating from their life experience, were called ‘Sophists’” (Hadot, 2002, 173-4). The centrality of self-questioning and self-transformation to the practice of philosophy gave rise to the medical analogy—describing philosophy as a set of therapeutic or curative practices for various diseases or afflictions of the soul—ubiquitous in classical and Renaissance philosophical literature,³¹ and explains the range of discursive techniques found there:

Medical philosophy's task requires delving deep into the patient's psychology and, ultimately, challenging it and changing it.... Thus medical philosophy, while committed ... to marks of good reasoning such as clarity, consistency, rigor, and breadth of scope, will often need to search for techniques that are more complicated and indirect, more psychologically engaging, than those of conventional deductive or dialectical argument. It must find ways to delve into the pupil's inner world, using gripping examples, techniques of narrative, appeals to memory and imagination—all in the service of bringing the pupil's whole life into the investigative process (Nussbaum, 1994, 35).

The transformation of the self from a confused, restless, egotistical, alienated, compulsive individual, to a self-possessed, temperate, compassionate, interdependent, equanimous person was the purpose of ancient philosophy and the meaning of the well-lived life. Of course, in this regard, few if any are actually wise, but only lovers, seekers and laborers after wisdom—philosophers in the etymological sense. This yearning toward wisdom derives from recognizing one's own mal-contentedness and moral disorientation.³² Such bitter-sweet self-knowledge, characterized since Socrates' time as “irony,” since the beginning of wisdom is to recognize one's distance from it, should be the first aim of ethics educa-

tion. Without realizing that our resentments and jealousies, our stinginess and inordinate cravings are actually forms of suffering, and without the intimation that there are better, freer, happier ways to live, there is no way to begin the kind of radical self-questioning that awakens the ironic insight into our lack of moral insight, or to ignite the desire for self-transformation. Without dictating the contours of each student's path of moral growth, schools at every level can provide multiple opportunities for individual and communal self-questioning, self-reckoning, ethical inquiry and moral self-correction.

In summary, ethics education informed by the ancient wisdom schools would involve self-confrontation, would offer methods of rigorous, collaborative, open-ended inquiry into possible modes of existential self-transform and would include experimentation with practical, therapeutic exercises likely to affect such transformation. This approach would avoid the Scylla of empty academic discourse and the Charybdis of manipulative behavioral and emotional conditioning. Furthermore, this approach would make ethical education a lifelong pursuit, the most humbling aspect of which would be that it would require parents and educators, if we cannot be moral sages, at least to have begun this work on our own selves.³³ I conclude with an exhortation from one of those ancient wisdom seekers, Epicurus, who wrote, in the third century B.C.E.:

Let no one be slow to seek wisdom when he is young, nor weary in the search thereof when he has grown old, for no age is too early or too late for the health of the soul. And to say that the season for studying philosophy has not yet come or that it has passed and gone is like saying that the season for happiness is not yet, or that it is now no more. Therefore, both old and young ought to seek wisdom (Epicurus, undated).

NOTES

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Precollege Ethics Symposium sponsored by the Squire Foundation at the Eighteenth Annual Meeting of the Association for Practical and Professional Ethics, Hilton Hotel, Cincinnati, Ohio, March 6, 2009. I thank Joanne Matkowski, Michael Pritchard and the reviewers of *Teaching Ethics* for their editorial and substantive comments on earlier versions of this essay.

² Of course, there are professors who do just that, implicitly and explicitly. See, e.g. Gould, J. B.: 2002, "Better Hearts: Teaching Applied Virtue Ethics." *Teaching Philosophy* 25, 1-25, Whitman, J. P.: 1998, "Exploring Moral Character in a Philosophy Class." *Teaching Philosophy* 21, 171-182.

³ In 1532 Guimame Budé complained: "It is a deplorable commonplace to observe men who are deeply learned and technically 'wise' with barely a trace of philosophy in this more richly ethical sense. Who has not experienced the rude lack of humanity, the meanness and parsimony of such men[?] They are said to be learned, and no doubt they are; but the generality of men do not consider them honest or provident." *De Philologia*, paraphrased in Rice, E. F.: 1973, *The Renaissance idea of wisdom*. Greenwood Press, Westport, Conn., 151-52.

⁴ This practice has generated two academic journals: the *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* and the *International Journal of Philosophical Practice*.

⁵ The most prominent American organization sponsoring philosophy cafés is the Society for Philosophical Inquiry directed by Christopher Phillips: www.philosopher.org/en/Socrates_Cafe.html, accessed 02/15/09.

⁶ See www.montclair.edu/iapc, accessed 02/14/09.

⁷ See, e.g. Jack Russell Weinstein's philosophical radio program "Why?" from the University of North Dakota, airing on Prairie Public Radio: www.whyradioshow.org, accessed 02/14/09.

⁸ See, e.g. www.maverickphilosopher.typepad.com/maverick_philosopher and www.markevernon.com/friendshiponline/dotclear, both accessed 02/15/09.

⁹ Nussbaum quotes from the *Eudemian Ethics* at 1214-16 and the *Nicomachean Ethics* at 1094-5 to explain Aristotle's position that ethical argumentation, under the medical analogy, must be as clear and consistent as possible, without becoming too abstract to address human ethical experience (1994, 71-73).

¹⁰ In this regard, Waithe and Ozar note that unlike philosophical or theological ethics courses, which do not purport to instill particular values in students, "When a [professional] school ... certifies that a student has satisfactorily completed certain coursework, it is certifying that the student meets the standards of educational preparation for professional practice. Consequently, the public served by that practitioner can assume the practitioner will act ... in accord with the relevant bodies of knowledge and values of the profession." Waithe, M. E. and Ozar, D. T.: 1990, "The Ethics of Teaching Ethics." *The Hastings Center Report* 20, 17-21.

¹¹ I speak here of U.S. public schooling, recognizing that many private schools address these matters with religious education.

¹² "Character Education Legislation," web page of the Character Education Partnership, <http://www.character.org/charactereducationlegislation>, accessed 02/09/09.

¹³ Character Education guru Thomas Lickona even argues that certain human virtues are "objectively good" and do not change over time. Lickona, T.: 1998, "Character Education: Seven Crucial Issues." *Action in Teacher Education* 20, 77-84.

¹⁴ Pritchard cautions that while multicultural moral education may help students "acquire greater acceptance of and respect for those whose beliefs and

practices differ from their own, ... there are limits to this. Deep differences in values might be discovered—as well as intractability. This, too, has to be factored into moral education.” Pritchard, M. S.: 1995, “Moral Diversity and Moral Education.” *Analytic Teaching* 15, 11-18.

¹⁵ Pritchard notes that “stage theories imply that children live in a quite different moral world than adults[,] encourage a condescending attitude toward children’s moral thinking and discourage genuine moral dialogue between children and adults. Pritchard, M. S.: 1991, “On Becoming a Moral Agent: From Aristotle to Harry Stottlemeier.” *Thinking: The Journal of Philosophy for Children* 9, 16-24.

¹⁶ I learned this from John Dewey, especially his Dewey, J.: 1939; 1972, *Theory of Valuation*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

¹⁷ See Gregory, M.: 2006, “Pragmatist Value Inquiry.” *Contemporary Pragmatism* 3, 107-128.

¹⁸ As Hadot remarked, “Sophists had claimed to train young people for political life, but Plato wanted to accomplish this by providing them with a knowledge ... inseparable from the love of the good and from the inner transformation of the person. Plato wanted to train not only skillful statesmen, but also human beings.” Hadot, P.: 2002, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

¹⁹ As Robert Sternberg observes, this is the intended aim for many parents and educators: “Education is seen more as an access route ... toward obtaining ... the best possible credentials for individual socioeconomic advancement. Education is seen not so much as a means of helping society but of helping one obtain the best that society has to offer socially, economically, and culturally.” Sternberg, R. J.: 1999. “Schools should nurture wisdom,” in B. Z. Presseisen, (ed.), *Teaching for Intelligence*, Skylight Training and Publishing, Arlington Heights, IL, pp. 55-82.

²⁰ Early in his *Eudemian Ethics* Aristotle argues: “Having then ... established that everybody able to live according to his own purposive choice should set before him some object of noble living to aim at ... on which he will keep his eyes fixed in all his conduct (since clearly it is a mark of much folly not to have one’s life regulated with regard to some End), it is therefore most necessary first to decide within oneself, neither hastily nor carelessly, in which of the things that belong to us the good life consists, and what are the indispensable conditions for men’s possessing it” (1992, 203).

²¹ Hadot’s catalogue of these includes listening (*akroasis*) to philosophical discourse by the school heads, reading (*anagnosis*) their essays, lesson notes and discussion transcriptions collected in the schools’ libraries, applying their teachings in personal research (*zetesis*) and investigation (*skepsis*), memorizing (*mneme*) and meditating (*melete*) on the schools’ dogmas, keeping a contemplative diary (*hypomnemata*), and of course pedagogical dialogue between a philosophical master and student. Hadot, P.: 1995, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*. Trans. M. Chase. (A. I. Davidson, ed.) Blackwell Publishing, Malden, MA; and Hadot, P.: 2002, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

²² In this regard, Pankaj Mishra observes that “The Buddha’s early effort to accommodate dissent, and acknowledge the plurality of human discourse and practice, later saved Buddhism from the sectarian wars that characterize the history of Christianity and Islam; and the Buddha’s emphasis on practice

rather than theory kept his teachings relatively free of the taint of dogma and fundamentalism. The Mahayana and Theravada movements are separated by a difference in emphasis They have never experienced the violent conflicts that have marked relations between Catholics and Protestants and between Shia and Sunni Muslims" (Mishra 2004, 284-5).

²³ Sternberg, for instance, defines wisdom as "the value-laden application of tacit knowledge not only for one's own benefit (as can be the case with successful intelligence) but also for the benefit of others, in order to attain a common good." Sternberg, R. J.: 2003, *Wisdom, Intelligence, and Creativity Synthesized*. Cambridge University Press, New York., xviii.

²⁴ See Sharp, A. M.: 1987, "Pedagogical Practice and Philosophy: The Case for Ethical Inquiry." *Analytic Teaching* 7, 4-7.

²⁵ See Sharp, A. M.: 2007, "The Classroom Community of Inquiry as Ritual: How We Can Cultivate Wisdom." *Critical and Creative Thinking* 15, 3-14.

²⁶ "Philosophy thus appears, in the first place, as a therapeutic of the passions Each school had its own therapeutic method, but all of them linked their therapeutics to a profound transformation of the individual's mode of seeing and being. The object of spiritual exercises is precisely to bring about this transformation." Hadot, P.: 1995, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*. Trans. M. Chase. (A. I. Davidson, ed.) Blackwell Publishing, Malden, MA., 83. See also Nussbaum, 1994, ch. 1 "Therapeutic Arguments," pp. 13-47.

²⁷ The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society recommends a number of such practices under the categories of stillness, activist, generative, movement, ritual, creative and relational practices. <http://www.contemplativemind.org/practices/tree.html>, accessed 02/09/09.

²⁸ Elsewhere Hadot explains that, "There can never be a philosophy or philosophers outside a group, a community—in a word, a philosophical 'school' [which] corresponds, above all, to the choice of a certain way of life" Hadot, P.: 2002, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

²⁹ "Life in the Academy implied constant intellectual and spiritual exchange not only in dialogue, but also in scientific research. This community of philosophers was also a community of scholars, who practiced mathematics, astronomy, and political reflection. Even more than the Platonic school, the Aristotelian school was a community of scholars.... It meant leading the life of a scholar and a contemplative, and undertaking research, often collective, on every aspect of human and cosmic reality...." Hadot 2002, 178-9.

³⁰ "In general, a distinction was made between the auditors—those who simply attended the school—and the group of true disciples, called 'familiar,' 'friends,' or 'companions.' ... The same custom of taking meals in common at regular intervals held sway in the Academy, the Lyceum, and Epicurus' school" Hadot 2002, 99-100.

³¹ Analyzing this medical analogy is the work of Nussbaum's 1994 book *The Therapy of Desire*. She explains: "Throughout the late fifth and early fourth centuries, ... Greek thinkers and writers were finding it increasingly easy to think of the ethical / political argument as similar to medicine and to look to it for 'healing' when confronted with seemingly intractable psychological afflict-

tions. The analogy becomes more and more detailed, more closely linked with specifically philosophical uses of logos" (1994, 52).

³² Hadot explains that, "Doing philosophy ... meant questioning ourselves, because we have the feeling that we are not what we ought to be.... In turn, this feeling comes from the fact that, in the person of Socrates, we have encountered a personality which, by its mere presence, obliges those who approach it to question themselves" (2002, 29).

³³ Nussbaum observes that in the practice of medical philosophy, "The teacher and the pupil are involved in the very same activity, each as an independent rational being; it is only that the teacher has done it longer and can therefore offer a kind of experienced guidance" (1994, 74).

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