

ACADEME — THE  
INSTITUTIONS AND  
THE INDIVIDUALS:  
AN INTRODUCTION TO  
A DISCUSSION OF  
MORALS IN HIGHER  
EDUCATION

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*Give up money, give up fame, give up science, give up the earth itself and all it contains, rather than do an immoral act. And never suppose that in any possible situation, or under any circumstances, it is best for you to do a dishonorable thing, however slightly so it may appear to you.*

—Thomas Jefferson

OVER A DECADE AGO Justice Blackmun said, “We have been and are in the midst of a wave of moral and ethical confusion. The balance has been missing. . . . We have retreated to discussions of situation ethics and of the ‘new’ morality, and we have rationalized and compromised and made excuses. And, of course, we continue to flounder.”<sup>1</sup> More recently Barbara Tuchman observed—after recalling current events of cheating in the stock market, influence peddling, bureaucratic coverups, and corruption of elected officials—that public morality is mirrored in private morality and that the extent of public immorality becoming obvious to the average citizen is the ultimate disruption. Said she, “When I speak of disruption, I mean a period when we’ve lost belief in certain kinds of moral understanding of good and bad. . . . [People] don’t know how to behave, they don’t

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know what's right and what's wrong."<sup>2</sup> The public has responded in much the same way. To the Gallup Poll question, "On the whole, would you say that you are satisfied or dissatisfied with the honesty and standards of behavior in this country today?" in 1986 two out of three answered that they were dissatisfied. (In 1973, 77 percent had been dissatisfied.<sup>3</sup>) This is merely a sample of many voices which have declared unease over the moral condition of contemporary society. Interestingly, this is not a phenomenon unique to the United States. Soviet literary journals, for example, have been flooded with articles decrying the moral degradation extant in the Soviet Union.

Universities have not excused themselves from this concern but have helped bring attention to it. In 1980 Steven Muller, president of Johns Hopkins University, conceded that "the biggest failing in higher education today is that we fall short in exposing students to values."<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey R. Holland, then president of Brigham Young University, in an address to the National Press Club in 1984, called the relegating of "moral and civic values of education to the back seat of the bus" a "notion" that has put our "nation at risk." A. Bartlett Giamatti, then president of Yale University, told the class of 1989 as freshmen that "a liberal education is training in how to discern those essential human values that make us free; it is training in how to express, in speech and writing, our commitment to those values in order to keep us free."<sup>5</sup> And Harold T. Shapiro, at his inaugural address in 1988 as president of Princeton University, appealed to American higher education to be more mindful of the moral and spiritual needs of college students. "We are better at research than at the public discourse required to transmit ideas and values," he said.<sup>6</sup>

Concern about the moral state of society runs from the fear of an obvious moral collapse to the welcome of personal freedom from constraints. In the middle, viewpoints of thoughtful commentators extend from a perceived decline in personal and social morality to an observation that we are a changing society with different needs and values from those of the past. In the first instance, some would argue that there is a set of values we can all agree upon which needs to be taught, promoted, or inculcated. These would probably include integrity, freedom, equality, and, perhaps, in America, pluralism and diversity. The set may also include both the value of tradition and the

values of tradition and change—with the acknowledgment that they may conflict with each other. (Conflict between several of the above-mentioned values is often perceived; for example, freedom and equality have long been seen as unharmonious.) In the instance of the value of change, observers would not necessarily argue with any given value at any given time, but, in addition to pointing out the contradictions, would question how strongly the traditional values would be held when they come into conflict with something else—like tradition against progress, ambition against community, or careerism against professionalism.

Bruce Hafen argues in his essay that we have lowered our moral standards to meet the demands of reality and that we need to seek a balance between aspiration and reality. The extension of the “demands of reality” position is a pervasive situational ethic—seen not only in social relations and business, but in public life and religion as well. Adjustment is made to fit the occasion. In fact, it is often argued that society suffers from a surfeit of morality—with none being affected by it more than students—and that the proclaimed morality is often a superficial, unrealistic, or even hypocritical set of values—a morality which is always better for someone else than for oneself, one which deals with the surface of problems rather than the source.

Supporting this argument is the fact that, in real life, operational morality is too often not the same one which is proclaimed. The observable performance bears little relation to what has been asserted as the guiding morality—in business, the professions, politics, or education. Thus, there is a moral dualism—one for public assertion which we openly discuss and internally ascribe to, and another which governs performance and external relations. How one behaves within the company is on a different plane from what is permissible to achieve corporate goals. What is unacceptable in our political candidates we may ignore in others with whom we agree in pursuing approval of common political goals. What the faculty demand of students in punctuality, originality, and understanding is not always returned in promptness, innovation, and clarity.

A continued concern for raising moral standards and an ongoing search for moral leadership essential to raising the standards is necessary. A lack of moral leadership is apparent not only in the university

but in the government, the media, and elsewhere. Some institutions are even the sources of negative influences on society. Style becomes more important than substance, performance more respected than achievement. As James Billington argues, we become more concerned with the “aesthetics of power than with the content of policy.”

We separate freedom from responsibility. A central concept of the nature of mankind is that individuals ought to be free. Freedom implies the right to make choices unencumbered by anyone else. That does not mean that the choices made are unfettered by consequences or conditions. While respecting one’s freedom to make choices, we are not obligated to relieve him or her of the burden of resulting consequences—nor must we alter the conditions which impinge upon the circumstance. Thus, any institution which is concerned with the moral imperatives must teach responsibility, for responsibility is the other side of morality. Someone must bear the responsibility for the consequences of choice. If we allow the choice to be made freely, then the responsibility must be assumed freely. To do otherwise is to denigrate the freedom of choice, for we alter the conditions in which the choice is made, therefore tipping the scale in favor of a choice without, or with reduced, consequences.

Must we agree on absolute moral imperatives to agree that there are some moral choices which are preferable to others? Can we assume that every opportunity for choice is a unique circumstance? We have moved into a societal condition where situation ethics reigns, where each choice “depends.” Admittedly, situation ethics was introduced into a particular value structure of Christianity which, while decrying moral imperatives, insists that one value is superior to all the rest. Therefore, all further choices must be made in light of an omniscient standard. The most serious problem with that approach is that by introducing a sliding scale we introduce sliding scales. If everything can be adjusted we begin to adjust moral judgments for personal convenience. There are no longer standards for behavior; everything is negotiable. James Billington refers to this as relativism on norms, where equal value is ascribed to all norms. As the proclivity of man is toward comfort and convenience, we end up with decisions which produce the most gratification now.

One of my teachers, William Ebenstein, once said that that which

is most moral is that which looks farthest into the future. In somewhat the same sense we end up paying for our moral credibility in the future. The more serious the breach the longer the payback period; witness Vietnam, where the wounds of the war continue to hurt.

If we deny moral imperatives we create excuses for our situational choices. Karl Menninger's book of several years ago, *Whatever Became of Sin?*<sup>7</sup> capsulizes the condition in which we find ourselves in the attitude that little or nothing is ever wrong. Sin is a judgment of moral insufficiency. If there is no outright moral error then there are only variants of approbation. Meg Greenfield wrote in her column, "We don't seem to have a word anymore for 'wrong' in the moral sense, as in, for example, 'theft' is 'wrong.'" We have developed alternatives to right and wrong which avoid moral judgment, she says, such as "right and stupid, right and necessarily unconstitutional, right and sick, right and only to be expected, and right and complex."<sup>8</sup> Often, in many instances, we don't even know what is right.

In the university we are put at a disadvantage because we debate in the abstract; we become a devil's advocate for pedagogical purposes; we can dismiss consequences for purposes of exploring processes. What we teach and learn heuristically must relate to a real world where there are real choices, real actions, and real results.

I do not doubt that we teach broadly the ethical consequences of choice—in the social sciences, the humanities, the professions. Why doesn't it stick? Is the object of the instruction too deeply ingrained in other standards of behavior? Do we not teach it enough? Is it rejected as inapplicable? Is it countered too often by obverse contentions? Does our performance belie our arguments? Probably some of all of that exists. The aggregate undermines our efforts.

Terrance Sandalow affirms that the university's only choice is to act morally in its relationships with its students. Again, in a Gallup Poll ranking of twenty-four professions on our perception of their honesty and ethical standards, college teachers tied for fourth, one of only six professions which rated above 50 percent.<sup>9</sup> Landrum Bolling once observed that the most influential people in a person's life have two qualities: they demand excellence and they care about the individual. It may be that on a personal level this is the best the university can ask of the faculty. But James Laney argues that faculty mem-

bers do not want to be role models for the students, as the responsibility is too heavy. And Robert Coles illustrates the dilemma of a university being concerned with personal moral behavior when the students may have faced societal moral aberrations. To be involved is to stand disarmed in the task. The university must defend society and criticize it at the same time. To pursue ethical education would be to ask the university to promote a higher standard than is observed—perhaps to ask for more than it is willing to give. And there is always the concern that to enforce moral behavior implicitly teaches that moral values should be adhered to because they are backed by coercion, not because they are right.

There are different levels of morality and differences between them. Personal morality is different from social morality. They respond to different demands and different issues. Can the university be expected to influence and respond on both levels?

As late as the end of the last century the culminating course at many universities in this country was moral philosophy. The college president often personally taught the course to all senior students. It was intended to integrate the college experience and place it in an ethical context.<sup>10</sup>

Sandalow argues that the modern university operates under different conditions than it did in the nineteenth century. Today it has limited responsibilities to educate its students and to foster the advancement of knowledge. Yet the government and the students often look to the university to promote social justice, alumni and donors expect it to promote the common good, and parents often expect it to fill in where they have failed.

Warren Bryan Martin surveys the weaknesses of the university being looked to to provide moral understanding, and James Billington agrees that university administrators and faculty are neither responsible for the problem nor can they provide the remedies. Students come to the university as adults. The university or college cannot be held responsible for a regeneration of morality which has not been conveyed by schools, home, church, or the public institutions of society. It is neither at fault nor can it provide the solution. In fact, the university may be the least responsible for moral performance. The univer-

sity is one of several participants in the mosaic of society—and only a portion of the others come into direct contact with it. Martin, again, for example, argues that it is the professional association which should set standards, not the university; and as the standards reflect specialties they are often devoid of values. Still, that does not excuse the university from contributing where it can—even if only in understanding the condition and the course of morality in the college. Billington believes that families and churches are not given adequate public support. Hafen also believes that parents and public schools need to be bolstered in their more basic task of moral preparation and that the universities can do that.

None of the authors really provide any prescriptions for developing a moral sense within the university. Some options remain open for discussion such as concern for the core. It is widely agreed that a common reading list creates a transforming experience when it is read. President Laney believes that it is not the curriculum, but the *ethos*, that is central to the university's contribution. Central to that, he argues, are the humanities. There is a perception that whatever binds people together has been lost, or at least has declined. This is what Robert Bellah and his associates have discussed as the loss of community and the rise of individualism.<sup>11</sup>

Abraham Kaplan does not believe that the university can inculcate values but rather that it can cultivate the “tools and resources for moral reflection.” He refers to the university as providing an oasis for the life of the mind. While the university does not have a responsibility to teach morals, he says, it should teach ethics. In a like view, Ivana Marková discusses reflexivity—the ability to make reflexive judgments—as the moral element which requires monitoring and an area in which constant reflection on the world can take place. The university can provide this. Billington agrees that the role of the university is to train the critical intellect.

Sandalow does not believe that the university would be acceptable to impart values, nor that it has a record of being very influential. But this does not mean that it is irrelevant to the task. Its limited potential in one area does not mean that it cannot have an impact. It is, after all, a significant organization in society. That impact, he argues, can

best be had by doing what the university does best—educating students. The university has a role in imparting a vision of what might be to its students, as well as training their minds.

Noel Reynolds would go further than any of the others in defining the responsibility of the university. He believes that the external relationship of the university to the community constitutes a moral responsibility to promote basic functions which are understood by both, while internal corporate responsibilities within the university translate into individual responsibilities for the various members of the academic community. Thus, institutionally and individually the corporate university is obliged to be engaged.

The debate on moral values and higher education will continue. These essays both focus our attention and widen our perspective. Significantly, they expand the discussion of the university's role in teaching moral behavior and performing moral duty.



Notes

1. Harry A. Blackmun, "Thoughts about Ethics," *Emory Law Journal* 24 (1975): 3:9.
2. Rushworth M. Kidder, "Barbara Tuchman," *The Christian Science Monitor*, Oct. 7, 1986, 19.
3. "Opinion Roundup," *Public Opinion* 9 (Nov./Dec. 1986): 22.
4. Quoted in Frank Goble and B. David Brooks, *The Cast for Character Education* (Ottawa, Ill.: Green Hill, 1983), 7.
5. A. Bartlett Giamatti, "A Liberal Education: The Values That Make Us Free," *The Atlantic Community Quarterly* (Winter 1985-86): 316.
6. "Call for Emphasis on Moral Values," *New York Times*, 9 Jan. 1988.
7. Karl A. Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (New York: Hawthorn Books, [1973]).
8. Meg Greenfield, "Why Nothing Is 'Wrong' Anymore," *Newsweek*, 28 July 1986, 72.
9. "Opinion Roundup," 21.
10. Douglas Sloan, ed., *Education and Values* (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1980).
11. Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).