Ethics and Professional Practice in Education

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Introduction

Ethics provides an increased understanding about living in meaningful and fulfilling ways. Peter Singer, a contemporary ethicist, has written several books on moral issues. In a volume titled, How Are We to Live? he describes the importance of the study of ethics:

Ethics is everywhere in our daily lives. It lies behind many of our choices, whether personal or political, or bridging the division between the two. Sometimes it comes easily and naturally to us; in other circumstances, it can be very demanding. But ethics intrudes into our conscious lives only occasionally, and often in a confused way. If we are to make properly considered ultimate choices, we must first become aware of the ethical ramifications of the way we live. Only then is it possible to make ethics a more conscious and coherent part of everyday life. (1995, p. 170)

Educators who reflect on ethics and who enable those with whom they work to become reflective about ethics can contribute much to teaching and learning. Singer suggests that ethical reflection can lead to “taking the point of view of the universe.” He argues that this means persons must go beyond narrow self-interest and examine their actions in terms of the effects of their behavior
on a rapidly shrinking planet. This would seem to be a valuable goal for everyone, and certainly a significant objective for those who are responsible for the education of others.

Ethics is part of philosophy. The study of ethics attempts to answer questions about what is right and what is wrong behavior in order to formulate general principles that help individuals choose their own rules of conduct. These rules serve to guide individual behavior. But even as humans better understand the nature of the physical universe, the definition of appropriate human behavior continues to be elusive.

Humans have always pursued ethical standards for living with others. While these have varied over time and from culture to culture, the search has been a continuous one in human history. Deriving the ultimate definition of a moral life is difficult, and so individuals continue to seek ethical guidelines.

Simon Blackburn, a contemporary philosopher and ethicist, discusses the need of persons to become sensitive to the creation of an ethical environment. This environment enables us, Blackburn argues, to determine “what we find acceptable or unacceptable, admirable or contemptible” (2002, p. 1). This often helps us to decide what we are entitled to have for ourselves and the obligations we have to others. Ultimately, Blackburn concludes, our understanding of the ethical environment gives us standards of behavior that help to shape our identity.

In “The Elements of Ethics” (1910, p. 21), philosopher Bertrand Russell indicates that the study of ethics involves two questions:
• What sort of actions ought men [and women] to perform?
• What sorts of actions ought to be avoided?

These questions seem simple, but they are not. Each person seeks his or her own answers to these questions, and the answers vary from person to person. For example, one group of parents and school personnel may be convinced that prayer should take place in public schools; another group opposes school prayer on the grounds that the U.S. Constitution demands separation of church and state.

Is there a solution to this problem that can be obtained from examining professional ethics? At one level, the answer is easy. Professional ethics demands strict enforcement of the law; if the court holds that school prayer is illegal, then the professional educator must not support prayer in public education institutions. But there is another, more difficult question: On what basis does one decide to support or oppose school prayer? Does the educator become an advocate for changing the Constitution? And, most important, how does the professional educator relate to students and their parents who have come to a different ethical conclusion?

The process of finding answers to questions such as these involves the need for educators to determine their own professional ethics in the context of an ethical environment most conducive to the development of students. The purpose of this fastback is to explore the issues that educators need to consider.
Educators — whether in the classroom, the school office, or the district’s central office — need to reflect about ethics as they meet their professional obligations. Significant issues and questions continually confront school personnel in the school environment.

It can be argued that such issues as school prayer are personal ones that depend on values held by individuals. But if this is true, then there are no ethical standards and no generalized ethical environment in which we live. The problem with personal values as the basis for ethics is that a situation can arise where no personal value decision can be challenged. Therefore no ethical principles can be established, and there can be no professional practice guided by a generalized ethical system.

On the other hand, many philosophers and informed practitioners have argued that the study of ethics can lead to universal principles of correct action. Certainly, there is considerable evidence that people broadly agree on certain standards of ethical behavior. For example, all cultures value human life and believe it should be protected. There is widespread belief in human dignity and respect for others. The strong reaction of people against the Holocaust reflects the widely held ethical
principle that extreme mistreatment of people is wrong. The worldwide sympathy for the United States after the attacks of 11 September 2001 also can be seen as support for some kind of universal ethical principles.

Randy Cohen (2003), who writes a column on ethics for the *New York Times Magazine*, recently published a book on ethical issues that contains an interesting analysis of moral choices in schooling. Cohen argues that two separate ethical systems can be found in any school. First there is the ethical code endorsed by the school authorities. It includes such propositions as “no cheating,” “attendance is required except in unusual circumstances,” and “students must not be disrespectful of teachers.” This list can easily be expanded by anyone who has experience as a teacher or a student in a school.

A second ethical system also exists, according to Cohen; and it is one based on principles that are defined and implemented by students. This system, for example, holds that one student will not turn in another for cheating. It defines the dress code in a way that can be in conflict with the official dress code of the school. This second system, often at odds with the official rules of the school, can powerfully influence student behavior.

Cohen’s analysis is useful because it points to the need for reflection about school ethics and indicates how difficult it can be to define the ethical environment of schooling. Multiple problems exist in education that require teachers and administrators to apply ethical principles — and often to rethink ethical considerations as new problems emerge. Some general areas of discussion may be useful as examples, such as ethics in rela-
tion to political decisions, diversity, and relations with students.

*Ethics and Political Decisions.* Political issues often affect education. Many of these cannot be resolved without the application of an ethical perspective. One political issue that also is an ethical question relates to decisions about the outcomes of education. In the current education climate there is intense emphasis on the achievement of outcomes that can be measured by standardized tests. This view is deeply ingrained in the system, so much so that the ethical overtones of the issue are sometimes lost.

Is it ethical to measure student achievement almost exclusively by standardized tests? When this is done, a concomitant perspective develops that maintains that the effectiveness of the teacher is directly related to student test scores. Yet teachers enable students to achieve many outcomes that cannot be measured by tests and that may be more valuable in the long run than is tested knowledge. For example, a teacher may inculcate a love of learning or a love of reading that lasts a lifetime but is not measured by any test. Persons who objectively examine their own education history will recognize personal accomplishments that have shaped their lives but could never be measured. The emphasis on measurement is drawn from the commitment of schooling to behaviorism. The nature of outcomes and their effects on the future of students are ethical questions that need to be considered as part of the political process that leads to assessment-based learning.

The way in which schools are funded also is a political issue with an ethical dimension. The moral question re-
sides in the way in which priorities are chosen. When a society decides to use more resources for military hardware than for school construction, for example, there is an ethical principal involved that needs discussion based on what is right and what is wrong for the society and for the nation. Policy debates about funding the military or funding education rarely occur within an ethical context.

To what extent should professional educators engage in a discussion of the nature of school reform? The kind of schools found in a nation reflect societal values, but this is rarely made explicit. The current emphasis in school reform focuses on standardized tests. However, William Purkey, who founded the International Alliance for Invitational Education, has argued that schools, above all else, need to be inviting. Purkey’s approach to school reform might be more valuable than are discussions of improved test scores. Whether we emphasize school reform that makes schooling more efficient with regard to test achievement or whether we reform schools with an emphasis on making them more inviting is an ethical question. In this way, the nature of school reform, which is a political question, also must be examined as a moral question.

*Ethics and Diversity.* Examining issues relating to diversity also requires educators to be reflective about moral issues. Educators need to ask themselves what ethical principles govern the development of multiculturalism. It once was believed that the United States was a “melting pot” in which all cultures were to be blended into an “American culture.” Schooling in the
middle of the 20th century reflected this belief. A current perspective holds that the United States should celebrate diversity and that ethnic groups should maintain their separate identities within the general American culture. Both of these perspectives have their supporters. Whether one position or the other is correct is partly a moral question that must be understood within an ethical context. Is it ethical to assimilate an ethnic group so that it loses its identity? On the other hand, is it more ethically correct to maintain cultural separateness, knowing that such separation may result in permanent minority status for an ethnic group?

Strong opinions can be found among the general population and among educators with regard to race, gender, and sexual orientations. All of these questions require ethical reflection. And such reflection is not merely philosophical; there are practical outcomes in terms of policies about language instruction, the treatment of minorities, and so on.

_Ethics and Relations with Students._ Many ethical issues arise when examining the ways in which teachers and administrators relate to students. A significant one involves matters of privacy and confidentiality. Are student records protected? To what extent can teachers discuss students with colleagues or others? Can students expect that their discussions with teachers will remain confidential? For example, if a student tells a teacher in confidence that he or she is being abused by a parent, what is the obligation of the teacher with regard to privacy and confidentiality?
How teachers and administrators relate to students also is based on questions of morality. How far can teacher-student friendships go? Can administrators who are supervisors engage in dating behavior with teachers with whom they have a supervisory relationship? Questions also can focus on ways in which professional educators relate to parents. Can a teacher befriend the parent of a child with whom the teacher has a professional relationship? Can teachers date the single parents of their students?

On any school day, professional educators face a myriad of problems that contain moral dimensions. For teachers to act responsibly, they constantly must examine ethical questions.
Some Ethical Perspectives

Philosophers throughout history have formulated a variety of ethical theories. Some may be more viable than others in the 21st century, though most ethical ideas continue to have contemporary advocates.

One popular ethical construct is the idea of utilitarianism. Put simply, this perspective holds that society should result in creating the greatest good for the greatest number of people. On the face of it, this seems reasonable. But how does one determine what will maximize the good for large numbers of people? Early advocates of utilitarianism held that the greatest good could be determined by maximizing happiness. When the sum total of happiness in a society reaches its peak, the greatest good will have been achieved for the greatest number. People become happy when they increase their personal pleasure and avoid pain. Hence, society needs a careful way to measure pleasure and pain in order to increase happiness and arrive at a point where the utilitarian goal has been achieved.

This idea has had many supporters since first formulated by Jeremy Bentham in 1789. It is consistent with democracy because a connection can be made between
maximizing happiness and the democratic ideal of majority rule. It can be argued that when the majority makes a decision, it reflects an attempt to maximize what is beneficial for most people. In a sense that is what deliberative bodies (school boards, state legislatures, the U.S. Congress) attempt to do. And in fact, in its best form, utilitarianism can be seen as a positive rationale for serving the common good.

Problems with utilitarianism arise from attempts to measure pleasure and pain. One difficulty occurs because many kinds of pleasures exist; a pure utilitarian approach can result in hedonism, where each person seeks to provide for his or her own needs in a greedy way. While this may provide for maximum short-term happiness, it may not result in an ideal society.

A second difficulty can be found in the understanding that pain sometimes may be necessary to achieve happiness. To become really good at something may require painful work in the short run before any long-term pleasure is achieved. Furthermore, many people are willing to experience discomfort in order to help others. Parents are often in this situation when they provide for their children. This also is true of the many firefighters who died on 11 September 2001 trying to save others. These heroes went far beyond what was required of them, giving up pleasure permanently for the good of others.

This, in fact, is the major limit of utilitarianism: that it is difficult, if not impossible, to create a calculus of happiness that will lead to achieving the greatest good for the greatest number. While this is certainly a posi-
tive ethical goal for schooling — many administrators and teachers speak the language of utilitarianism in working with students and parents — its achievement is difficult, if not impossible.

A more useful and less problematic approach is called "duty ethics," which was first described by Immanuel Kant.

Kant was born in Koenigsberg in East Prussia (which is now part of Germany) in 1724. He attended the University of Koenigsberg and eventually became a professor of philosophy there. As a philosopher, Kant's primary focus was on the importance of reason in human social life. In 1781 he wrote his most famous book, *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Because of his belief in the primacy of human intelligence, Kant's approach to ethics attempted to bring a rational approach to morality. When Kant died in 1804, he was honored for his views on equality before the law and his belief in the need for international peace. These views were not popular with the authoritarian regime under which he lived.

Kant believed human reason can lead to an understanding of ethical principles. Once human beings understood the moral law, it was their duty to obey it.

For Kant, human reason demonstrates the validity of freedom for all people. Kant believed in the fundamental principle of human dignity. Because of the intrinsic value of persons, Kant argued, mutual respect between people is necessary and should exist without regard to social status.

Kant held that human reason could lead to the identification of absolute obligations that persons had to
each other, and these obligations are what Kant meant by "duties." This leads to the concept of duty ethics. A duty is an obligation that each person has regardless of his status or of the status of other persons with whom he is in contact.

Kant was interested in "a good will," and with this construct he explored the difference between intention and outcome. An act can be judged as ethical when it is based on a good intention, even when the outcome is negative. By the same token, bad-intentioned behavior that leads to positive results is not ethically acceptable. In effect, Kant rejected the evaluation of behavior based on outcomes and insisted that intention is the basis for deciding moral activity.

Kant distinguished between obligations that are conditional (if you want to go to college, then you need to study in high school) and obligations that are absolute and hence can be viewed as duties. Kant labeled conditional obligations as "hypothetical imperatives" because they are not duties. A hypothetical imperative is not difficult to identify because it usually can be put in the form of an "if-then" statement.

If you wish to be the principal of a high school, then you must obtain an administrative certificate. You have no obligation to do so; you can decide that you will be happy to spend your career as a teacher. But as a teacher, you have duties that are obligations (treat each child fairly within the rules, for example, and avoid being arbitrary with students.)

Obligations that are duties Kant based not on hypothetical imperatives but on what he called "the categor-
ical imperative.” The categorical imperative has three formulations:

Formula One, the formula of autonomy: “I ought never to act in such a way that I could not also will that my maxim should be universal law.”

Formula Two, the formula of respect for the dignity of persons: “Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of any other, always as end and never as a means only.”

Formula Three, the formulation of legislation for an entire community: “All maxims that proceed from our own making of law ought to harmonize with a possible kingdom of ends as a kingdom of nature.”

Kant believed that these formulations would enable human beings to live in a “kingdom [community] of ends,” where all people are recognized as ends in themselves and are not used as the tools of others.

Kant examined the choice between telling the truth and lying. Everyone agrees, of course, that telling the truth is more ethical than lying. But why is it important to be honest? Kant argued that that human social life cannot function in any meaningful way unless people are committed to being truthful. Otherwise, no one can depend on the veracity of any statement made by others and no agreement can ever be made which is not viewed suspiciously. If telling the truth is not a universal principle that demonstrates the categorical imperative, then human social life is in great trouble. This is one reason the government seeks to support truth in advertising and why contracts are supported by the law.
The result of Kant's ethical system is to maximize human freedom and create autonomous human beings who can live in a community regulated by a well-defined moral law. This adherence to moral law is a kind of social contract that provides a rationale for ways that persons can live together in community. This results in the well-being of individuals and the existence of a well-functioning political system.

The tradition of rational thought for determining ethical behavior is a very strong one in the Western philosophical tradition. It is particularly interesting when it is coupled with the idea of autonomy. A belief in autonomous human beings who make positive ethical choices is a prerequisite for the success of democratic theory.

Professional educators can gain much insight from Kant. The categorical imperative in each of its formulations can help teachers and administrators develop a code for solving moral dilemmas. It can be applied to all of the ethical issues discussed in the preceding section.

In terms of relationships with students, for example, pupils are sometimes perceived as a means to an end. The success of the teacher in the classroom is measured by how well the students have learned. This puts the focus on the teacher, and what students learn is a means to the teacher's end of successful teaching. However, Kant argues that people are ends in themselves and not means to an end. This outlook can help define ways in which teachers relate to students and ways in which administrators relate to teachers.
Another example of an issue that can be addressed by Kant's system can be found in Kant's commitment to human dignity. Suppose one accepts Kant's idea of the need for mutual respect and his belief that one must avoid making people into means to an end. If a society uses more resources on military hardware than on school construction and this results in some decrepit and even unsafe buildings, how does this affect the idea of human dignity?

If the society spends more on space travel and less on the education of some children, are the children in effect subsidizing the space program and being used as means to an end? How would society evolve if all children were seen as a lower priority than space travel, military spending, or the construction of baseball stadiums? These kinds of questions are based on Kant's philosophy.

Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980), a leading existentialist philosopher, formulated a point of view on ethics that is reminiscent of the work of Kant. His views can be contrasted with those of the ancient Greek philosophers who collectively created an outlook that can be labeled "virtue" ethics.

Sartre begins with the proposition that "existence precedes essence." What he means by this is that the birth of a human being does not delineate the nature of that person. Rather, as individuals grow and develop, they must characterize themselves in a process that results in the creation of an essence, a personhood that is self-defined.

Sartre argues that each human being is responsible for his or her own actions and that these determine the
nature of the person. This is different than Kant’s view, which is focused on intention, rather than outcome. For Sartre, it is the action of a person, not the intention, that defines essence.

What Sartre shares with Kant is the idea that one’s behavior must be evaluated as to whether it can serve as a model for humankind. Sartre places great emphasis on the idea of personal choice, but the choice must meet Kant’s criteria of universality found in the categorical imperative.

Sartre focuses on the process of choosing when one engages in an act. If a person has no options — if one’s behavior is compelled by another — defining an essence becomes impossible. The most important prerequisite for defining oneself is freedom. People must be free to make choices. Society must be organized in a way that maximizes freedom for individuals. The greater the amount of liberty, the more the possibility for choice. Given free choices, one can select ethical standards that can serve as models for humankind.

Sartre’s approach has many ethical implications for professional educators. First, the application of existentialism in education demands maximum freedom. Following Sartre’s philosophy would require schools to operate with a minimum number of regulations and would impose these only when no other means of maintaining order could be found.

For many educators, freedom is threatening. There probably are many rules that could be eliminated without creating excessive problems, but many administrators and teachers take comfort in rules. This makes it difficult to fully apply existentialism in education.
A second aspect of Sartre that can be applied in education and that has implications for professional ethics is the concept of choice. Proponents of choice in curriculum design have been present among education theorists for a very long time. From an ethical point of view, it can be argued that students need to make as many free choices in schooling as possible. They need to do this because experiencing free choices can lead to ethical choices that are meaningful and can serve as models for ethical activity for the larger society.

Sartre’s emphasis on the need for choices can be contrasted with the concept of “virtue” ethics, which has a different emphasis and which can be viewed as an approach that limits freedom. The idea of virtue ethics began with the ancient Greeks, particularly Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.

Socrates and his pupil Plato were concerned with defining the nature of the good life. Living a good life was ethical, and not doing so was unethical. The good life consists of living according to one’s function in society. Whereas Sartre believed that existence precedes essence, Plato held the opposite view. Each person’s role in the society is predetermined at birth. Simply put, Plato believed that some were born to rule, some to be bureaucrats, and the rest to be workers in service to the state.

For Plato an ethical society exists when it is organized so that each person fulfills his or her purpose in the society. Virtue consists of meeting one’s responsibility in the world as it was ordained at birth. There is very little need for freedom of choice in such a world.
Aristotle, who was Plato’s student, viewed ethical life in a somewhat different manner because he was not convinced that a person’s essence was determined at birth. Aristotle had a different metaphysical view of the world that led him to focus on explanations of human behavior in less deterministic ways.

For Aristotle the good life required moderation in all things. He formulated the concept of the golden mean, which requires persons to avoid extremes of behavior and to find reasonable actions between polarities.

One extreme is cowardice, in which a person is unable to face a difficult situation and may avoid or even flee from it. The other end of the continuum is foolhardiness, in which a person takes unnecessary chances that can be dangerous. The golden mean in this situation is courage, in which a person can confront a difficult situation reasonably without being foolhardy or cowardly.

Another example can be seen in the concept of ambition. One who is extremely ambitious may be ruthless. On the other hand, lacking ambition can result in never achieving one’s potential. The golden mean is to avoid ruthlessness and to seek success within reasonable limits.

Another virtue advocated by Aristotle is the principle of equity. This holds that sometimes it is appropriate to violate a particular law when obedience to it could result in unethical behavior.

These Greek philosophers created a system by which they sought to help persons achieve happiness, which they believed was not the same as human pleasure. Happiness occurs when persons engage in a virtuous life, which comes from following the dictums described
above (and others). It is not necessary for persons to enjoy short-term pleasure; and in fact, an ancient Greek playwright wrote that no one’s life could be judged as happy until he or she reached the end of it.

An interesting conflict exists between ethics that seeks to maximize freedom and choice and ethics based on virtue. As can be seen from this discussion, freedom and virtue are not necessarily compatible and can be in conflict. It is a virtue, for example, to meet one’s responsibility; and one is not free (from the point of view of virtue ethics) to choose otherwise.

In schools, professional educators often deal with variations of the conflict between virtue and freedom. Teachers and administrators expect unquestioning obedience to rules within the school, in which students fulfill their functions as pupils.

Randy Cohen, whose work was cited before, goes so far as to argue that schools can be viewed as colonial empires in which the students have colonial masters (teachers and administrators). The pupils are always controlled by others, with little or no freedom of independent movement.

Students, of course, perceive the school environment differently and want to maximize their freedom within it. That is why rules are sometimes subverted in both subtle and unsubtle ways. Professional educators need to understand this conflict when pursuing effective ethical behavior in schooling.

One also can note a significant difference, for example, between those living in Western cultures and those in the Middle East who support terrorist activity. The
United States and other Western-style democracies value freedom and individual choice above all else. Virtues based on religion are left to one’s conscience. Muslim extremists, on the other hand, value living a virtuous life based on religious precepts above freedom and choice.

Some of the current conflict involving the war on terror can be understood from this perspective. Many terrorists believe that they are commanded by God to attack Western-style democracies that lack a commitment to religious virtue and that must therefore be punished. Osama Bin Laden and others like him are followed because they advocate virtues based on a particular interpretation of the Koran. The lack of freedom that occurs is much less important because of a commitment to the attainment of happiness (though not necessarily pleasure) through being virtuous. It is this kind of belief that can lead to suicide missions.
Personal Views and Professional Ethics

The preceding section described some of the many ethical perspectives that have been formulated throughout history. In Western civilization, beginning with the ancient Greeks until the present day, philosophers have sought to develop moral codes.

Part of the reason for ethical standards comes from the need to create a social arrangement by which people can live together in relative harmony. While considerable conflict always has existed among human beings, some means must be found to enable people to live together in a civil way.

In *The Prince* (1513), Niccolo Machiavelli presented a cynical and sinister view of governance. He argued that a leader must manipulate his subjects in ways that maximize his authority and power. For Machiavelli, the primary goal of leadership is to attain and maintain authority. *The Prince* demonstrates how this can be achieved. For leaders, in Machiavelli's opinion, moral rules are simply technical descriptions that are used to obtain and keep control. Machiavelli operates from the assumption that most men are corrupt, at least to some extent. The value of an action is judged by its useful-
ness in attaining one’s goals without regard to the negative effects the behavior may have on others.

In 1652, in *The Leviathan*, philosopher Thomas Hobbes argued that in order to avoid living in a violently competitive state of nature, people come together and agree to create a “social contract.” On the basis of this contract, they form an orderly society in which they can live in relative peace.

In a recent publication on the ethics of Immanuel Kant (1994), Roger Sullivan suggests that the world may be returning to the kind of governance described by Machiavelli and the state of nature that Hobbes feared. He bases this assertion on his analysis of contemporary social life.

The world of *The Prince* and Hobbes’ state of nature may be extreme cases, but some evidence exists to support Sullivan’s thesis. The corruption that leads corporations to go bankrupt at the expense of workers and stockholders reflects one example of this. Political leaders who fabricate evidence to destroy opponents provide additional support for this point of view. In schooling, there have been many documented cases of administrators who change scores on standardized tests to make their school look better in comparison to others. It would seem that the need for educators to create effective professional ethics is greater than ever.

Understanding the problem of creating ethical standards for professional educators must begin with an examination of the boundaries and intersections of one’s personal moral code with the demands of teaching and administration in the schools.
Personal ethical standards are first obtained from the early socialization that occurs in the family. Before any child goes to school she or he already has learned much about ethical behavior in the home. The relationship the child sees between parents can lead to ethical practice with regard to sexism. The way in which parents describe persons of different races, nationalities, or ethnic groups can result in moral views that support or oppose racism or xenophobia. Watching parents engage in commercial transactions can lead to views about cheating. If children are lied to constantly, their socialization with regard to telling the truth will be different than it is for those whose parents are usually honest with them. By the time a child reaches school, she or he already has been intensely socialized with regard to ethics.

Socialization also is partially derived from the religious outlook of one's family. The personal moral code of a person often is based on his or her religious orientation, and this comes about in part from the kind of religious commitment that exists in one's nuclear family.

Religion easily could serve as the basis for the ethical beliefs of a society, and this would simplify the entire process of ethical reflection. Unfortunately, this would be possible only if everyone within a society shared identical religious views. However, even belonging to the same church does not guarantee this, because persons who share the same religion often have different personal interpretations of the teachings of their faith.

Members of the same religion often disagree, for example, about such issues as capital punishment or war. Some persons believe that the commandment against
killing is an absolute one and prohibits them from taking life in any circumstance. This means that they cannot participate in a war no matter how just the cause may seem. They also cannot serve on juries in capital cases. However, there are persons from the same religion, even in the same house of worship, who take different positions on both of these issues.

Another issue in which persons of the same religion often disagree is the question of abortion. Persons who belong to the same church may support a woman’s right to choose or may decide that the life of a fetus cannot be terminated under any circumstances. Sharing the same faith does not necessarily end this dispute.

The problem is further exacerbated when persons belong to different religious faiths. Some Christians and some Jews are opposed to birth control. This is often the case for Catholics and Orthodox Jews. Yet other Christians and Jews regularly engage in this practice.

Religion cannot serve as the basis for ethical decisions when one seeks to apply those decisions to the entire nation. Persons make different moral judgments even when they belong to the same religion.

Furthermore, in any society, including the United States, there are those who are able develop a meaningful ethical outlook but are not committed to any religion and cannot be influenced by moral arguments based on religion. Both Bertrand Russell and Jean Paul Sartre wrote extensively on ethics and formulated positions that have many contemporary followers. Yet both of these men were secular humanists who did not believe in the existence of a divine being.
In dealing with ethics, the danger exists that professional educators will assume that others in the same setting, students and teachers, share identical religious perspectives. However, this is an incorrect assumption given the personal ways in which people view and interpret religion and its moral teaching.

Ethical perspectives that have been derived from socialization and ethical views that result from religious experience are deeply ingrained in people. Often it is difficult, if not impossible, to look at issues outside of these viewpoints. However, ethics also need to be derived by a process of reflection in which one examines one's assumptions and examines ways in which one ought to relate to others in particular circumstances. This process can be enhanced by the study of ethical systems advocated by philosophers. This can enable professional educators to distinguish between personal views that are based on religion or socialization and the need to meet one's professional obligations in working with others in the school environment.

A school counselor, for example, may find premarital pregnancy morally offensive. His or her socialization and religious views may have led to the belief that sexual relations before marriage are immoral and will lead to eternal damnation. But the young woman student coming to the counselor for help may have an entirely different perspective. She finds that she has an unwanted pregnancy but does not believe that it has resulted from an immoral act. She concludes that she wishes to abort the pregnancy. This can be a difficult moral dilemma for the counselor; but the counselor must approach it from
a professional point of view, based on professional ethics. The obligations of being a counselor must operate independently from the personal moral views of the counselor to the largest extent possible. The counselor needs to find the most helpful solution available to the young woman and not condemn her or reject her. While it may be ethically appropriate to examine all the options available to the female student (abortion or adoption, for example), the student cannot simply be rejected because she has acted in a way that is not morally acceptable to the counselor.

Another example can be found in attitudes toward particular wars. The Vietnam War led to great ethical divisions in the society. Some persons felt that communism was the ultimate evil and that the fighting in Vietnam was a way to combat that evil. Others believed that it was immoral to intervene in what they perceived as a civil war.

Professional educators, of course, could be found on both sides of the dispute over the Vietnam War. Persons may have reached their conclusions based on ethics derived from socialization, religion, reflection, or some combination of these. But educators also had to deal with the attitudes and behaviors of students who may have reached different conclusions. For example, how should a principal respond to a student who organizes a protest against a war when the principal favors it? Again, this example demonstrates the need to distinguish between personal views on morality and professional ethics.

Questions about the intersection of personal boundaries and professional ethics also can be raised by examining
the contrast between cultural diversity and cultural relativism. Support of cultural diversity enables professional educators to celebrate the existence of cultural differences in the schools, and this can be part of a positive ethical commitment. Cultural diversity exists because the population of schools in the United States is no longer homogeneous in its cultural, ethnic, and religious composition. While it is probably the case that America was never a homogeneous society, it was clearly dominated by white Protestant values for a long time; schooling was organized as if everyone belonged to or ought to belong to the same American culture.

The transition from a belief in a single dominant culture in education to an understanding of cultural diversity and its celebration required a reflection about ethics that is similar to thinking about such issues as war and peace and questions about abortion. Is it ethical to expect everyone to share a single way of life, or is cultural diversity an acceptable alternative for life in the United States? This question is one that can lead to reflection about the morality of cultural diversity.

The emergence of cultural diversity can be seen as a positive ethical development. Cultural relativism is a different problem, and it needs to be addressed as part of the examination of ethics.

Philosophers have sought to find moral standards that can be applied to all of humankind. For example, the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights assumes that there are ethical standards for all people without regard to cultural practice. Yet there are those who argue for cultural relativism, and professional educa-
tors need to understand this point of view. Persons who support cultural relativism argue that all societies have their own moral codes and that no objective way can be found to judge the ethics of one culture in relation to another. This viewpoint holds that morality depends on the customs of the people. It requires persons of different cultural backgrounds to accept and tolerate ethical viewpoints that contradict their own.

Cultural relativists believe that there are no consistently true ethical practices across civilizations and that individuals and societies who believe otherwise are guilty of arrogance. This is easy to accept when responding to the actions of Osama Bin Laden, who seeks to destroy those whose practices are different from his own; but it also can be applied to Western nations that seek to extend their value systems to other societies.

Cultural relativism requires the acceptance of actions that would be morally intolerable within one’s own culture. An example of this is the need to accept the treatment of women in places that do not value women as equal partners in daily life. In fact, cultural relativism may lead to the acceptance of practices that large numbers of persons would consider inhumane. When members of a culture seek to justify certain practices, such as the stoning of women for adultery, they argue that since it is acceptable in their way of life, others ought not to condemn the practice.

Simon Blackburn (2002) suggests that people should ask the victims. How do woman feel in cultures that require them to be totally covered in extreme heat or in cultures that stone them for adultery? Blackburn sug-
gests that most women would reject these customs, as did the women of Afghanistan when they were liberated from the Taliban.

Professional educators need to understand the distinction between cultural diversity and cultural relativism, and they need to understand how their orientation to cultural relativism might affect the ways in which they work with students.

Cultural diversity can add an important dimension to schooling. However it came about and whatever problems may occur as a result, the United States will never again be a homogeneous nation; and attempts to maintain a belief in homogeneity of culture become more and more problematic as the United States becomes increasingly multicultural. But the opportunity for students in schools to celebrate multiculturalism by sharing the traditions and customs of people from a great variety of cultures can result in learning and growth for all students. Professional educators must learn to accept these differences despite whatever personal feelings they have about customs that are very different from their own.

However, celebrating cultural diversity is not the same as becoming a cultural relativist. Educators need to engage in a process of ethical reflection that enables them to distinguish between their deeply held ethical views and their professional practice, which requires them to respond to those who hold moral viewpoints that are different from theirs. The greatest difficulty is to know when it is not appropriate to reject someone with whom one has an ethical difference (the school
counselor needing to advise a pregnant female) and when one must resist a behavior because it can be accepted only if one is a cultural relativist.

Suppose one comes to the conclusion, advocated by Kant and many others, that telling the truth is a necessary concomitant of human social life. Suppose also that one is working with a colleague or student whose definition of honesty is different. There are cultures, for example, where truth must be told to members of the same group but may be withheld from outsiders. The professional educator faces a dilemma if he or she has formulated a professional code of ethics in which telling the truth is essentially an absolute. How one proceeds in this situation requires the kind of ethical reflection that is necessary in order for educators to function effectively.

The need to develop an ability to distinguish between the case of a young woman who is entitled to advice because of one’s professional obligations and the case of a person who is culturally free to lie supports the necessity of training in ethical reflection for professional educators. The examination of ethics belongs in the curriculum of those learning to be teachers and administrators.
Ethical Reflection in Professional Education

The professional education of teachers and administrators should include sufficient examination of ethical content to enable educators to understand the difference between personal and professional ethical boundaries. This can be a demanding task.

Understanding moral issues begins with comprehending the importance of ethical reflection. While many issues are examined as part of the curriculum for professional educators, these questions often are studied in ways that do not reveal the ethical content inherent in the problems. For example, the question of curriculum standardization and its relationship to testing is debated in schools of education, but it often is examined in terms of whether the use of standardized testing can improve schooling. The debate over a one size fits all curriculum usually occurs without reference to implicit ethical issues.

A standardized curriculum might conflict with an ethical commitment to cultural diversity. Furthermore, it can involve questions about priorities in the society. If the curriculum is standardized, will the conditions of learning be uniform as well? If every child from every
subculture is to achieve the same curriculum goals, will every child have equal access to high-quality facilities, materials, and instruction?

Does everyone need to achieve the same curriculum goals? Supporters of virtue ethics would deny this and would argue that those who will lead the society and its institutions might need a different kind of education than those who install and maintain technology. The debate over standardized curriculum involves ethical issues that are not necessarily made clear when the issue is examined.

The issue of vouchers contains ethical issues relating to democracy. Is it appropriate to separate persons from their community for educational purposes? Does this weaken the sense of belonging necessary for democratic living? Neighborhood elementary schools are among the last vestiges of communal life in the United States. Is it ethical to disrupt the natural community formed in an elementary school by parents, teachers, and students? Are there alternative ways to improve schools? If vouchers lead to increased racial segregation, what ethical implications follow from this?

Issues relating to church-state separation, multiculturalism, mainstreaming, bilingual education, and the role of technology in education are additional issues that have ethical aspects that should be addressed in the study of these questions.

Another aspect of professional ethics needs examination. What is the responsibility of the educator to students in his or her classroom with regard to moral behavior?

For example, plagiarism is a growing problem in schooling at all levels. The problem is on the rise because the Internet has made it easier than ever to obtain ma-
terial written by others. Students sometimes plagiarize because they intend to deceive and sometimes because they do not understand the definition of this practice. Teachers can instruct their students about what plagiarism is and how to provide adequate documentation, but what of the student who simply intends to deceive knowing full well that he is offering the work of another as his or her own? Professional educators know that this is unethical and warn their students against it. Students can be severely punished for this practice.

In most schools today, behaviorism is questioned and the use of negative reinforcement in teaching is not acceptable. However, efforts to overcome plagiarism by threats still exist. While it is certainly the case that penalties for stealing another's work should continue, an additional approach that might be useful is for the instructor to examine the ethical perspectives with students. Understanding the ethics of plagiarism might help to diminish its existence. However, to do this, the teachers must have a good grounding in ethical theory.

An understanding of ethics is necessary if educators are to find the boundaries between personal orientation to ethics and the nature of professional ethics. This also is true if educators are to help students deal with such issues as plagiarism. Improved understanding can result from formal instruction during the training of educators.

**Ethics in Preservice Education**

Because of the increasing complexity of ethical decisions in education, the study of ethics should be required
as part of preservice education. Current foundations courses are a valuable part of the curriculum, but a course in philosophy taught by the philosophy department also should be included in the general education requirements of those who wish to become professional educators. This would serve as a basis for later courses in the philosophy of education. In addition to an introductory course in philosophy, preservice education might include a formal study of the history of ethics.

With this kind of study in philosophy and the history of ethics, teacher education students could apply moral theory to the many problems that have been identified in this publication. The study of philosophy, the study of the history of ethics, and the study of the application of ethical theory to teaching and learning would enable new teachers to develop a reflective stance on ethics in education.

**Ethics in Inservice Education**

Inservice education, pursued in formal graduate programs and in workshops offered by school districts, should include the study of ethics. This would build on the foundation begun in preservice education. Inservice moral education would examine specific problems currently affecting schooling.

Inservice education also can focus directly on the boundaries between personal ethics and the application of ethics to the demands of teaching and administration. Once persons have become educators, they can explore the differences between personal ethical stan-
dards and the sometimes conflicting requirements of being a professional. In the role of teacher or administrator, educators must understand the process of working with those whose values are different from their own. This process will be facilitated if there has been effective preservice education in ethical theory.

**Ethics in the K-12 Curriculum**

As social life in the 21st century becomes more complex, the need for the formal study of ethics from kindergarten to grade 12 has increased. Requiring the study of ethics as part of professional education can help teachers more effectively instruct their students.

Teachers can introduce ethical discussions in the elementary grades by raising moral issues with students and helping them to understand the choices involved in these issues. Such issues as abortion may be too complex and controversial for younger children. However, elementary students can examine the way in which telling the truth is a necessary component of social life, and this can be studied in the context of many issues. These pupils also can study ethical issues relating to racism, sexism, and ethnocentrism.

The secondary education curriculum can be strengthened by the inclusion of formal studies in philosophy and ethics. Modern life, if it is to avoid a return to the total self-interest advocated by Machiavelli or to a Hobbesian state of nature, requires this more intense understanding of ethics achieved through classroom study.
Many courses offered in secondary education could contain ethical components. For example, courses in social studies could explore the ethical implications of decisions made by the government. Science courses could include opportunities to explore the social issues of technology from an ethical perspective.

Society could gain much if teachers were to formally study ethics in their preservice and inservice training. Teachers and administrators who are ethically aware can help to raise the ethical awareness of the students in their schools. Everyone would gain from seeking to understand ethical ways for improved social life.
Conclusion

The importance of the study of ethics in modern life continues to increase. At the beginning of the 20th century most people lived in well-defined communities, either in rural areas or in urban neighborhoods. People were acquainted with each other in more personal ways than they are today. Ethical life among neighbors and friends, who often attend the same churches, has a different quality than does life in settings where people relate to their neighbors in much more superficial ways. The need for augmented moral reflection in society and among professional educators results from the greater complexity of life in the 21st century.

This new pattern of relationships affects schooling as well. Many factors weaken the school as a community. Secondary schools are larger than ever and draw students from diverse locations. Elementary schools increasingly have become less of a community institution for a variety of reasons, including the distance that children travel to school on buses. If school choice, using charter schools or vouchers, continues to develop, this will be more true than ever. This change in the nature
of education also demands more direct reflection about ethics. For educators, this means the need for a more in-depth study of ethics as part of the teacher education curriculum.

A more concentrated instruction in moral reflection is necessary both in the preparation of educators and in the instruction of students. While other institutions — families and religious organizations — will continue to provide socialization, there is a need to help persons learn to reflect on ethics in analytical and rational ways. Many philosophers throughout history have provided ideas that can support and encourage this process.

After 11 September 2001, the United States entered a new ethical era that needs to be subjected to intense reflection. As a result of the terrorist attack, President Bush introduced the concept of preventive action against potential enemies. This is a new concept for U.S. military and foreign policy. Until 11 September 2001 it was the position of the United States that it would respond militarily only against those who attacked it. Now the President’s policy is that the United States can attack those who may pose a threat. This policy was used to justify the war in Iraq.

This perspective has implications for ethics in education. To what extent is it ethical to take preventive action in schooling? If the teacher believes that a student might create difficulty in the classroom, can the student be disciplined before he or she causes a problem? Should principals remove probationary teachers who might be disruptive if they are tenured? Should the curriculum be used to teach about the need for preventive action
against potential trouble makers? These are new ethical questions that are now part of the ethical landscape of the post-9/11 world.

The study of ethics has become more urgent as people seek to determine ways to live ethically meaningful lives in the most complex times in human history. Persons now face the most destructive forces to ever confront humankind. Professional educators need to engage in the process of moral reflection more than ever before.
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