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## OBSERVER

### Before Teaching Ethics, Stop Kidding Yourself

By GORDON MARINO

Socrates used to wonder whether virtue could be taught. But his concerns would have seemed priggish to most people today -- certainly to most academics. Of course virtue and ethics can be taught. Everyone is ready to lead ethics classes and workshops -- even undergraduates. One of mine recently asked me if I would agree to supervise an independent study in which she planned to design an ethics curriculum for middle-school and high-school students. "Maybe we could even take it down to elementary-school level," she effused. This bright young woman earnestly believed that if people in low-income, high-crime areas would just take a couple of ethics courses, they would be less inclined to mug people and more inclined to act like the college students she knew.

Over the past couple of decades, the ethics industry has kicked into high gear. We now have a growing number of professional ethicists who are prepared to act as superegos for hire to the various professions. Indeed, take any given profession and there is another profession called the ethics of that profession. (Think bioethics, medical ethics, legal ethics, computer ethics, and so forth.)

I have often wondered what qualifies someone as an expert on matters moral. Randy Cohen, who writes "The Ethicist" column for *The New York Times Magazine*, was a comedy writer for the David Letterman show before he assumed his present post as director of right and wrong for the *Times*. I will not deny my skepticism about this new class of expert or about the very notion that ethics is an area of expertise like, say, geology. And while some people are crying out for required ethics courses for graduate students and beginning professors, I am of the Aristotelian persuasion that it is not more theory that we need but more mettle, and that this will not come from memorizing meta-ethical paradigms and analyzing case histories. Still, I suspect that the ethics doyens are as ensconced in academe as the assessment bureaucracy is. So I have a suggestion for professors who design ethics curricula: Leave a little room for the topic of self-deception.

Ethics missionaries are driven by the assumption that improving our moral lives is a matter of developing our conceptual understanding and analytical acumen. The fantasy seems to be that if up-and-coming accountants just knew a little more about ethics, then they would know better than to falsify their reports so as to drive up the value of company stock. But sheer ignorance is seldom the moral problem. More knowledge is not what is needed. Take it from Kierkegaard: The moral challenge is simply to abide by the knowledge that we already have.

In his lapidary *Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard observed that most people "work gradually at eclipsing their ethical and ethical-religious comprehension." He believed that moral knowledge is universally distributed, in the form of conscience. However, as he saw it, conscience has an uphill battle because we all know in our bones that its directives will clash with what seems to be our immediate self-interest.

So what do we do when our moral principles push us toward losing our jobs or our friends, or just having to put up with people's irritation with us? He answers, "We allow a little time to elapse, an interim called: 'We shall look at it tomorrow.'" And during that interval our moral knowledge becomes more and more obscured, until finally we come to our senses and convince ourselves that the convenient course is the righteous course.

Here's an example of that principle. I was staying in a hotel in Europe. I threw my coat on the bed. My pen slipped out and left a tiny ink spot on the silk bedspread. After uttering a few choice words, I decided that I would have to go down and tell the manager. But I was exhausted and did not welcome the prospect of having to pay for the damage. So I took a nap and then went out for a beer with some friends and put the question to them. One of them told me to stop with the moral fanaticism. He argued, "The management expects such accidents and builds their cost into the price of the rooms." It did not take long to persuade me that there was no need to trouble the manager. I reasoned that if I had spilled this ink in a family-owned bed-and-breakfast, then I would have immediately reported the accident, but that this was a chain hotel, and yadda yadda yadda went the hoodwinking process. I did leave a note at the front desk about the spot when I checked out.

Ethics education also ought to include training to make us better able to detect inner reflections that are solely in the service of the pleasure principle. Consider another example of a dubious inner dialogue. A few weeks ago I was on my way to a fancy restaurant when I was accosted by a disheveled man who put out his hand and pleaded, "I haven't eaten all day -- would you buy me a meal?" My first impulse was to say, "Of course." My second thought was, I don't want to stop, and besides, I have only 10- and 20-dollar bills on me, and I don't feel like doling out that much money. Plus, I thought, if I give money to this person, I should also give it to all relevantly similar people. Because I am unwilling to make that kind of a sacrifice, it would be only fair to hold onto my money and keep on truckin' to the four-star restaurant. Besides, the poor guy will probably use the money to get high, and I could do more good if I gave my dollars to a homeless shelter. So went the voice of my bamboozled conscience. To be sure, many believe that they do not have an obligation to try to personally feed strangers who claim to be hungry. After all, what if they use the money for drugs or booze? I think such reasoning is cynical and patronizing -- unless, of course, I am in a rush and have only tens and twenties on me.

The cultural observer and sociologist Philip Rieff once told me that the modern idea of "workshops" is used to hide the obvious fact that, unlike real workshops, in which material goods are actually produced, the kinds of workshops we sit through today result in no products. Still, if -- heaven forbid -- I were assigned the task of running an ethics workshop, I would begin by having participants think about impediments to the righteous life. Though most ethics maestros seem to repress the fact, both world and individual history attests that self-deception is one of the greatest of those impediments. To help us explore how we reason ourselves out of what we know, ethics professors ought to consider assigning Augustine, Kierkegaard, Montaigne, Dostoyevsky, Freud, Nietzsche, and other masters of the vicissitudes of the instinct toward self-obscuration. Perhaps they might even devote a class to Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance.

Festinger taught that when we hold conflicting beliefs, we are motivated to change them in predictable directions. For example, suppose you would like to believe that you are a compassionate individual who is willing to help the poor. At the same time, you think that it would be nice to have lower taxes, and you are convinced that the welfare system increases the government's draw on your wallet. If Festinger is right, you might be inclined to try to convince yourself that the welfare system has to be cut, not because you want lower taxes, but because having fewer welfare benefits will motivate people to find jobs. Cutting benefits would be for their own good.

People who presume to teach ethics should help their students be honest with themselves about their own interests. Such candor is, of course, part of the Socratic curriculum of coming to know yourself. But it is hard psychological work, which we do not value much in these post-Freudian times. Unless our ethics students

learn to examine themselves and what they really value, their command of ethical theories and their ability to think about ethics from diverse perspectives are not likely to bring them any closer to being willing and able to do the right thing.

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