ETHICS AS EXPERIENCE:
HOPE, REVELATION AND ANGST

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"The only source of knowledge is experience. Everything else is information."
-Albert Einstein
"Experience is a hard teacher because she gives the test first, the lesson afterward."
-Vernon Law

ABSTRACT

As an AACSB accredited institution, we are required to demonstrate how learning occurs, what steps we might take to assure learning. With respect to the subject of ethics the focus is on student mastery of concepts. Not that such an understanding is without merit, and is in fact essential as it is intended to inform choices that we make, but it reflects a de-minimis approach to the subject. If we can agree that ethics must be more than a spectator sport, a passive endeavor that invites observers to offer critical insights and see it instead as a "contact sport", in an intellectually challenging and controlled setting, then we might agree that the best way to test what has been learned, must be in the arena, a place of action. This may be akin to the clinical education used to educate healthcare professionals, but more broadly understood as supervised practical experience in any relevant discipline. This paper examines a specific discipline, the study of ethics in the context of business, and how we might close the divide between the conceptual understanding of the subject and how we might test that understanding under conditions where participants must actualize that learning.

INTRODUCTION – THE GREAT SORTING

Each semester begins with an invitation to students to think about their values. They are, in advance of our first class meeting, asked to identify, in order of priority, their values; their top ten values, along with a brief explanation as to why each chosen was a value for them. I also advise them that their values can and will no doubt change. But in this moment in time, I ask them to share those values to which they attach the most importance in their lives and to think about their values as a statement of their priorities. I keep each student's values as a point of reference within easy reach throughout the semester as I ask them, in the midst of their unpacking a problem or analyzing a case, which of their values was being given expression in that particular situation.

I also make a point of asking students how they came to understand that the values they identified, were in fact their values. Students will invariably explain that their values were instilled by their families, by religious institutions with which they were affiliated, as well as their early education in elementary and middle school. But our values are informed by many experiences and perhaps most notably by the experience of loss. It might be said that our values are forged in a crucible of loss. The loss of a loved one, a parent, child, spouse, partner sibling; the loss of a job or career; all are formative experiences that move us to think about what is important, what really matters, what our priorities should be.

The values conversation is an important one because it requires students, throughout their work here to reconcile what they claim to believe with the actions or decisions they are contemplating. Considerable research suggests that most of us believe that we are ethical, and more often than not, more ethical than others. But if we actually "take a look at the person in the mirror," we might not recognize him/her/they.

Why this pre-occupation with values? Well, our subject is ethics, but specifically business ethics. But, whether we are talking about business ethics or legal ethics or engineering ethics, they all stand on the same foundation of moral philosophy and values are the bedrock of ethics as they inform our moral knowledge or understanding. This is something that was understood in a very practical workaday manner by Gerald Cavanagh, a Jesuit priest who taught in the College of Business Administration at the University of Detroit Mercy, and expounded upon in his book, "American Business Values."

In her book, "Giving Voice to Values- How to Speak Your Mind When You Know What's Right", Mary Gentile asked us to consider how we might align our professional lives with our principles; how we might stand up for our values when challenged.

In asking students to think about their values, I am asking them to experience a lost art form in this breathless, running on empty world - the art of contemplation and I do so in keeping with a principle tenet of liberal education- that "the unexamined life, is not worth living." Our values, though elusive and clearly unquantifiable, are, if we are able to discern them, what makes us human. Our values are anchors in an uncertain world. The most un-nerving experiences people face as professionals, are those situations in which clear answers are inaccessible. Our own sense of identity is bound up in our understanding of who we are, and who we are is best understood by what we value, what we are inclined to be faithful to in life's uncertain moments. In our quest for consistency, the

plan might be viewed as follows: Our beliefs inform our values and our values are given expression in what we actually do. And what we actually do and do consistently, results in those values becoming our principles. (At least Aristotle saw it that way).

In the course of a working life, most people will at times, find themselves in a situation in which they are expected and perhaps even required, as a condition of employment, to do something that they find offensive, that they believe will require them to deny themselves. In those moments, all that stands between a person and those who would seem intent on using them to their own advantage; to corrupting them in some way, is what that person believes in, what he/she/they values and how far they are willing to go to protect those values, to defend the integrity of who they are.

The second part of the preliminary assignment is a pandemic inspired offering. I ask each student to reflect upon their personal journey during this pandemic; to consider what was lost, learned, and now reconsidered. What assumptions were unsettled by this experience. I ask them to reflect upon what their priorities were as we went into lockdown and to consider how those priorities have fared through it all. At this point in their lives, this has been, for many, a defining experience, worthy of real reflection. It has been an experience that has tested their resilience and revealed something that is perhaps a byproduct of this difficult time -a recognition of their capacity for empathy. As Adam Smith wrote in "The Theory of Moral Sentiments", "What makes us human is the imaginative capacity to see ourselves in someone else's situation."

LET THE GAMES BEGIN

At our first class meeting, students are presented with an exercise that has been used in classrooms across disciplines. This is the fallout shelter exercise in which students are assigned to civil defense shelter planning teams that are intended, in the face of a looming nuclear attack, to ensure that people across the country, find their way into such a safe space. The problem is that with one remaining shelter, that can accommodate six and ten people in need of accommodation, which of the ten will be admitted to the remaining shelter and which four will be left to fend for themselves. Each team is given twenty minutes to make their decisions and share with the class who got into the shelter and who did not and why. They are expected to discuss the criteria that was used and to provide an explanation for each decision.

I then ask students which values they were acting on in the decisions that were made. I ask which values were being tested, which among them they were able to honor and which they were not. If choices seemed to fly in the face of claimed values, I would ask- "Is that really a value for you or should you re-consider?"

This exercise is a preview of things to come. There is a temptation in a course of this nature, to assume the stage and deliver a 'Sermon on the Mount,' to convey wisdom drawn from the deep reservoirs filled by the moral philosophers, Aristotle, Kant, Descartes, etc. and convince students of their enduring relevance. And to be sure, in my course, I remind students that ethical theory is still the foundation upon which corporate mandated ethics training is built. There is also attentiveness to decision models that are intended to inform the analysis of students grappling with an ethical dilemma. Still the challenge remains- how do we convert the understanding of the theoretical into the basis for a reasoned response to a real-world dilemma? Students are invited to "live the questions", embrace ambiguity, shun the arrogance of certitude.

Over many years, instruction in this course has evolved. From papers, exams, and traditional lectures to engagement in which students have the opportunity to take the stage and share their learning and their process, with the class. Two specific project models have been developed: the case analysis and the corporate deliberations exercise. Teams are formed around each project and the presenting team makes their presentation to a responding team, that is expected to be versed in the subject matter that is being examined. The responding team's role is to hold the presenters accountable, to ensure that the presenters are not locked in an echo chamber. The project presentations are described below.

THE CASE ANALYSIS

The case study has been referred to by Roland Christiansen as "an exercise in managing uncertainty." A case study provides the opportunity for a team to come together to examine a particular quandary or dilemma, and ultimately make a recommendation as to how they might best proceed. The team that considers this case is a consulting team that is tasked by the CEO/President of an organization to examine the problem and view it through multiple lenses. The team is provided with an analytical model/template and is required to come up with two additional areas of inquiry based upon what they have learned in the process of considering the case before them.

The case method was first devised and used in the classroom by Christopher Columbus Langdell, the dean of the Harvard Law School. It was adopted in the classrooms of the Harvard Business School by the school's second dean, Wallace Donham, himself a graduate of the Harvard Law School (kinda fishy). For business students who come to this course under compulsion (it is a core course), they view it as medicine that they just have to swallow. In attempting to make the case that this may be the most important course in the business school curriculum, I argue that the work that they do here, will touch, and in no small measure, every part of their lives because at its' core it is an exploration of what it means to be human. To be human is to be vulnerable, uncertain, frightened, ashamed and our challenge is to recognize that what some perceive as weaknesses, often prove to be enduring sources of strength. The case study frees students to come to terms with these truths that reside in each of us.

The study of ethics often has a transactional bent to it in that we are trying to understand how we might address and perhaps

resolve a specific problem.   Virtue ethicists however believe that the better approach is to think about ethical challenges we face more holistically. Not in terms of what I might do in a particular situation but instead thinking about who I want to be, how I might like to be regarded, recognizing that the decision I make in a given instance, says much about who I am.

THE DILEMMAS

Each student team (seven or eight members) is tasked with making a recommendation to the CEO or another senior executive, regarding a particular quandary facing the organization. Each member of the team is required to bring a unique perspective to the problem, drawing upon course materials that might inform each team members contribution to the analysis. Coordination with other team members is critical in order to avoid repetition. Team members must grapple with the unknown as the information provided is less than optimal, requiring them to make assumptions and consider the possible consequences (desirable and undesirable) of their decisions.

- The problems/cases (and these are very brief descriptions) that teams have been presented most recently are as follows:
- A non -profit organization in dire financial straits is considering whether or not to accept a large gift from a donor of questionable repute.
- A rising star in a corporate setting witnesses the firm's leading sales person who is currently trying to close the firm's largest deal, beating his wife. He reports what he witnessed to his superior an Executive Vice President and is told to forget what he saw.
- A company CEO is considering the implementation of a vaccine mandate for all employees.
- A communications firm has been approached by the NRA to craft a message that will clarify misconceptions about their organization. This in turn sets off a heated debate in the firm about the advisability of taking on this client.
- When two employees come to the office wearing buttons that speak to their societal concerns, other employees protest.

CORPORATE DELIBERATIONS

The second exercise is one that seems to flow quite naturally from the case problems that students considered. One of the questions that I pose to student teams presenting their case analysis is - Do you believe that this problem or dilemma that you are trying to navigate, might be effectively addressed in the future, if you were to implement a company policy that would speak to the concerns that you had to struggle with in this case, and what would that policy look like?

The Corporate Deliberations presentation has as its' focus, an organization considering a policy or an initiative that might be an attempt on the part of the company to establish a standard in order to bring clarity to an emerging challenge or issue that they might face or have to address. In the absence of a policy, organizations often find themselves making ad hoc decisions, which reflect a commitment to flexibility that is the earmark of dealing with situations on a case by case basis. Such an approach does have its appeals in that a policy statement may alienate people in the company that you would like to keep in its fan club. But of course ad hoc decision making establishes a standard as well, albeit less structured.

The charge of the team that is considering a policy proposal is to fully vet the initiative, with each team member offering an assessment of the risks, opportunities, disruptions, and resistance that such an initiative might meet. Consistent with the aims of experiential learning, this exercise does foster the development of important skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and creativity. Such an experience can also be daunting for participants as they have to face up to the complexities and intricacies of policy making in an organizational context.

Policy Proposals

- Should the company ban political/social issues discussions in the workplace?
- Should the company implement lifestyle choice limitations for employees?
- Should the company institute a training and development initiative for historically underrepresented groups in its ranks?
- Should the company implement a policy that would exclude smokers from consideration for employment and require incumbent employees to stop smoking or face termination?

CONCLUSION

With experiential learning the classroom becomes a laboratory. Course content does matter and in the teaching of ethics there are volumes of wisdom and insight to impart. But in this subject area, mastering the content will not carry the day. A truism that we often here relative to ethics is that people talk the talk but often don't walk the talk. What we are challenged to do, what our students, our future leaders are challenged to do, is to align their words with what they actually do, that they figure out a way to convert familiar pieties into an action plan for themselves and their organizations. Words and platitudes fall on deaf ears when what people proclaim and commit to doing does not align with what they actually do. The result of such a failing is that people stop listening and they watch closely and skeptically.

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