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ETHICAL BEHAVIOR IS STRATEGIC BEHAVIOR

by

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Ethical Behavior is Strategic Behavior

by
Ronald D. Pearse

Hardly a week passes nowadays that does not confront us with new reasons to feel concern about the prevailing state of ethics within contemporary society. We learn of ethical breaches by government officials, by high ranking corporate figures, by idolized athletes, even by persons in our own helping professions; and distressingly, few of these individuals show much remorse for their past behavior. Not so long ago we trusted and admired our spiritual leaders and political representatives, but today integrity in high places appears to be a scarcer commodity. In fact, deviations from traditional principles of fair play and decency are not hard to find among the citizenry at all levels. Recently in a brief article entitled "Pennies from Heaven" the *Wall Street Journal* reported on a survey, conducted in 7-11 stores, of persons who used automatic teller machines. Those questioned were asked, "If an automatic teller machine gave you \$200 too much, would you inform the bank or else return the money?" More than half of the 7.6 million respondents indicated they would do neither; they would quietly pocket the cash.

Academia has suffered its own share of embarrassment recently following revelations of failure to observe traditional standards of scholarship, honesty, and law. For example, Congress has expressed mounting concern over the value received from federally sponsored research in our most distinguished academic institutions. The Food and Drug Administration has alleged that clinical drug researchers at UCLA fabricated false results of their studies, apparently to justify further funding. Donald Kennedy, the president of Stanford University, recently appeared before a congressional subcommittee to accept responsibility on behalf of his institution for overcharging the federal government for its support of certain research projects. Kennedy was asked to explain how funds from \$200 million earmarked for research in the basic sciences should have been used to purchase a \$1,600 shower curtain for his

own official residence, to defray a \$2000 monthly bill for flower arrangements, and to underwrite a \$4000 reception for his new bride. Two years ago two prominent scientists, B. Stanley Pons and Martin Fleischmann, captured the attention of the world scientific community with their claim to have achieved "cold fusion." Today their purported breakthrough has been discredited as irresponsible if not downright fraudulent.

Whether individual or corporate, carelessness or duplicity of the sort described above is of course indefensible. It not only obstructs the effort to further human knowledge, but it also undermines the assumed basis of honesty and good faith that ought to characterize the interrelationships between persons and institutions. When our leaders cannot be assumed to present themselves as paradigms of ethical behavior, whom shall we trust?

Today, more than ever, responsible academics recognize the need to address the subject of ethics as an integral part of pre-professional curricula. Courses in professional ethics now form part of many graduate and professional school programs of study. Following the convictions of several persons who wielded great influence in Wall Street during the 1980s, and who are responsible in some degree for financial reversals experienced by millions of us, the call for our business and management curricula to provide instruction from the point of view of social responsibility has been sounded with particular urgency. Business consultant Peter Drucker observes rightly that management deals primarily with people, not with things, and that management devoid of a humane value system is bound to cause harm. Reflecting the new awareness of ethics in business as a topic for more than token attention, a new scholarly journal, the *Business Ethics Quarterly*, is about to begin publication. Similarly, medical schools recognize the need to sensitize their students to the ethical implications of the new capabilities becoming available to those who provide health care. Physicians and ethicists engage in anxious debate concerning the use of mechanical life-sustaining devices, the transplantation of fetal tissue to treat heretofore irreversible neurological defects in the bodies of others, the practice of screening for fetal abnormalities in order to help determine whether a pregnancy should be terminated, and a myriad of other procedures that raise grave questions about our human rights and responsibilities. In sober truth, the ethical burdens our physicians-in-training must expect to take up as they enter practice are daunting to consider.

As undergraduate educators, we bear a responsibility of our own. We must foster our students' capacity for critical thinking so as to help them address the ethical dilemmas that surely await them later in life, whether in professional life or elsewhere. And that shared responsibility demands that we maintain integrity in all we do. Because students choose to attend college as the gateway to their professional future, their faculty mentors are the primary sources of theoretical, technical, and practical knowledge from whom they expect to gain the information that will effect their academic development. But college faculty members possess in addition an opportunity to engender within their charges a sense of ethical responsibility. At the very least, we have the obligation to make available a learning model, a course of study, which instills a personal commitment to the disinterested search for truth. Manufacturers of consumer goods, whether toys or automobiles, implicitly promise to make available safe and efficient products. By analogy, should we not also accept some obligation for the character development of our students? I think we do have a responsibility as faculty members to use our contact with students to help them build realistic and honorable codes of behavior.

From my own standpoint of professional practice in psychology, the word "ethics" refers to a set of guidelines that provide direction for personal conduct. Ethics defines the system whereby values and rules give guidance as to what behavior is acceptable and good; it goes to the heart of what we human beings regard as right and wrong. Emile Durkheim, one of the pioneers of sociology as a modern academic discipline, defined the term somewhat differently. Ethics, he wrote, is the body of "rules which determine the duties that men owe to their fellows" (3). The course content in my discipline, counseling psychology, stresses the student's need to comprehend the substance and implications of an explicit code of behavior. Throughout the student's academic and clinical experience the centrality and authority of that code is made evident. Such an emphasis seems right and proper to me, since the value of pursuing one's practice in an ethical manner is a principle that permeated my own learning experience. From the psychologist's general awareness of human behavioral principles to his specific task as a practitioner of implementing tailored strategies for the improvement of an individual's adjustment potential, ethical considerations must remain in his view. All behavioral decisions must be grounded on an ethical foundation.

As we all know, in circumstances where relationships of power exist the potential for abuse of that power is always at hand. Anyone who by virtue of his or her position of authority—be that position psychologist in relation to client, faculty member to student, supervisor to supervisee—exerts control, and hence possesses power. Those of us who are entrusted with the lives and futures of others must be scrupulous practitioners of responsible conduct as we exert that control. Owing to the special position of authority we occupy as faculty members, we exert enormous leverage over our students, who often perceive us as being virtually omniscient. Several years ago a pseudonymous author, “Aristides,” wrote illuminatingly in this regard of the professorial role and the kind of feelings it can inspire. This magisterial figure, he observed, is “the man with the most knowledge in the room where knowledge is the only business of the hour, a figure of authority, confidence, and intellectual grace—an object, if he does his work even half well, of love” (361). Perhaps inspiring though certainly humbling, this characterization is not without its grain of truth. And it makes clear how, without really intending to, we can easily cause our students to fall into a dangerous dependency on us and our authority, a dependency which can actually inhibit their personal development. By elevating their professor to an unrealistic plane they may lose something of themselves. Certainly we must remain wary of exploiting in any way the trust and respect our students feel toward us. Recognizing the potential everywhere for the abuse of power, we must ensure that attention to our personal needs does not hinder fulfillment of our educational mission.

As a practicing psychologist I am keenly aware of the code of professional conduct promulgated and periodically updated by the American Psychological Association. As I have indicated, during my years of training the faculty-practitioners who supervised my progress demanded that I develop a more than cursory knowledge of our professional code. They taught me that I must present my services appropriately and that I must accept responsibility for my actions. Now, as a teacher of psychology, I recognize an obligation first of all to aid others in their acquisition of knowledge. My profession’s code of conduct is explicit that my classroom instruction must be “accurate, current, and scholarly” (“Ethical Principles” 391), and that I must practice social responsibility in all my professional actions. Whether teaching or practicing, in order to promote the best interests of the public I need to be sensitive

to the impact my actions may have on others. While on the one hand a lowered level of ethical behavior could jeopardize the fulfillment of my professional responsibilities, on the other hand by adhering to appropriate standards, retaining a due sense of the dignity of all those with whom I come into contact, I may hope to produce useful and informed judgments of my clientele and so promote their welfare. In my doctoral dissertation I analyzed the ethical relationships that prevailed between a particular group of students and their mentors—in this case, pre-doctoral interns in psychology and their respective supervisors. My research, completed in the fall of 1990, yielded the conclusion that these latter psychologists—an ethically sensitized group of professionals—affirmed overwhelmingly the need for scrupulously observed controls on the interactions between the student-intern and his or her practitioner-supervisor. The respondents to a survey I conducted indicated that the danger of standards being compromised or at the least blurred during this difficult and potentially stressful relationship was continuous. The danger was perceived as especially great in dual relationships between mentors and trainees. Becoming romantically involved during or after supervision, or even maintaining a business relationship of some kind during that same period, are two striking examples of such potentially harmful oversteppings of the proper limits. I learned from my research how breaches of ethical standards can seriously jeopardize the development of a trainee. For this reason, I have come to understand especially well the American Psychological Association's emphasis in its code of behavior upon the supervising psychologist's obligation to facilitate the professional development of students by ensuring the integrity of the educational process.

To be ethical is, professionally, to be strategic. Strategic behavior is simply behavior that promotes a plan for attaining a goal. If, as a psychologist, I maintain a proper ethical stance in relation to my students or my clients, I will be pursuing a course that contributes to their optimal personal development. The same is true, I think, for all educators. A steady sense of responsibility toward all whom we serve will go far toward helping our students take their places in a complex and often confusing world. If our ethical compass is true, we can by example encourage our students to act responsibly while at the same time we meet our formal responsibilities as academic specialists.

As we perform our parts in educating our future leaders we

must attempt to produce technically competent workers, communicators, and specialists. We must also promote our students' understanding of the need to make appropriate ethical discriminations as part of their everyday functioning. Contact in college is our chief professional opportunity to influence the coming generation. If we fail to prepare our students to think in ethical terms, we will compromise their academic achievement by not drawing attention to their duties as informed citizens and professional persons, and even, it might be argued, as friends, colleagues, neighbors, and parents.

Wise men and women have always recognized the importance of liberal arts education for the illustrations it affords of the challenges, the complexities, and in a broad sense the rewards of living ethically. Examples drawn from art, literature, history, and philosophy can stand clear as useful examples, valuable especially in times of moral slippage, of the standards we ought to uphold. Could not such modern classics as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, or F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* offer lasting insights into the damaging power of deception and, at the same time, the saving nature of integrity? Similarly, C. S. Lewis's *The Abolition of Man* illustrates how various world civilizations have interpreted and affirmed ethical responsibilities. Readings like these bring one face to face with the need to define oneself by identifying and selecting among the conflicting social and personal value systems that surround him. Literature reflects and illuminates the human condition. Through the study of literature the student can vicariously experience the dilemmas and fates experienced by characters who embody impulses and conflicts we all feel, and in this way he or she may gain insight into the human identity we share. The study of biography may provide a thoughtful reader with models for emulation or avoidance. Understanding the circumstances within which past cultures flourished and died may enhance a student's adaptation to the changing conditions of his own professional or vocational career. Analyzing the clash of credos or immersing ourselves in the writings of a Plato or a Bacon helps us to seize the essence of problems perennially confronting us as individuals and as a society. And the fine arts, even as they afford us instruction in precision and discipline, put us in touch with our most deeply human selves.

Amassing and considering all this knowledge sharpens our intellect and also, potentially, our ethical sense. Study of Abraham

Lincoln's historical setting, and moral leadership within it, may one day prove crucial to a former student of political science who now aspires to public office. Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* lingers in the memory, perhaps as effectively as any sermon, as a parable of our mutual relatedness.

A college education must provide more than a degree. It should develop one's intellectual potential while at the same time fostering a sense of ethical imperatives. No other cultural institution today bears this responsibility toward young persons, and no other enjoys this opportunity. The educator and philosopher John Dewey considered that the chief purpose of education is the formation of a good self. Granting that our students reflect our success as faculty members in every regard, we may ask, "Will they live out their careers according to standards they found lived by us?"

Some may say that if we wait to begin forming character until a person has enrolled in college, we will have missed eighteen years or so of perhaps the ripest opportunity. Beyond question, empirical research and anecdotal evidence confirm the centrality of early experiences and models in the development of ethical thinking. A generation ago, the social learning theorists Bandura and Walters gave us research findings which indicate that, in their early interactions with parents, children internalize a variety of ethical behaviors. The child's moral world is shaped through his or her interaction with parents, and the primary avenue of this development is through observation and modeling. What psychologists refer to as a social learning model is most useful in helping us understand how children derive ethical behaviors from their parents. After all, personal experience forms the ultimate basis for ethics, and standards learned early tend to last.

Securely implanted in my own memory, a modeling experience from my childhood serves me even yet as an ethical paradigm. What began simply as an eight- or nine-year-old son's enjoyment of an automobile ride with his father ended with internalization of a code of behavior I then saw exemplified. As usual, I had accompanied my father to the local bank, where he cashed his paycheck, and then we had returned home. But a few moments after our return he informed me that we would need to make a second trip to the bank. This was something quite out of the ordinary, and of course I was curious. When I asked why we were returning, my father explained that the teller had filled the envelope with too much money and so we needed to return the extra cash. And that we did. Long before

the advent of 7-11 stores and automatic teller machines, experiences like this one firmly stamped personal responsibility into my everyday thinking!

Perhaps no one has expressed the value of early instruction in ethical behavior more eloquently, yet more simply than Robert Fulghum, informal philosopher, cowboy, parish minister, artist, and currently resident of a houseboat in Seattle, Washington. In his recent book *All I Ever Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* Fulghum sets forth a simple yet far reaching ethical code. Here are its tenets:

Share everything.

Play fair.

Don't hit people.

Put things back where you found them.

Clean up your own mess.

Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.

When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together. (6)

Imagine if everyone, young and old alike, could learn to practice these seven simple tenets. Our task as college educators would be a bit easier!

But we all know that the development of an individual does not stop at some definite age; the process continues, or should continue, throughout our lifespan. Certainly during their college years our students just out of high school are still in their most impressionable and formative period. They are continuing to develop, ethically and otherwise. For many students the experience of higher education is also a first adventure in autonomy, life physically removed from parental influence. At this period the educational system needs to continue instilling a sense of principled conduct. We as faculty members must use the window of opportunity afforded by our contact with students to express our will that they should realize our expectations of them. According to Edmond F. Day, former president of Cornell University, through both curricular and extracurricular stimuli colleges need to ensure that students continue to develop their ethical orientations. Day warned more than a generation ago that performance without character and ambition without integrity threaten to be the undoing of mankind.

Post-secondary education must address the development of ethical habits of mind, not merely the literal compliance with some

professional code of ethics. Regarded thus broadly, ethics then serves us as a relational template, governing how we treat people. Whether the relationship be that of lawyer to client, of psychologist to patient, or of professor to student, when we respect the dignity and worth of the individuals with whom we come into contact, we function ethically. The eminent Jewish theologian Martin Buber remarks in *The Education of Character* that the educator is “distinct” in his influence upon personal development “by his will to take part in the stamping of character and by his consciousness that he respects in the eyes of the growing person a certain selection of what is, a selection of what is ‘right,’ of what should be.” For Buber, the formation of this mature ethical stance is precisely where the “vocation of an educator finds its fundamental expression” (488). The real-life modeling of ethical behavior will surpass the most stirring lecture in its power to influence the behavior of others. And for this reason, ethical responsibility is a matter of relevance to us all.

Our social responsibility as educators is not only to provide our students a body of knowledge and specialized skills but also to instill in them an awareness of the necessary balance between healthy self-interest and professional responsibility. By being models of ethical behavior, we can demonstrate to our students the benefits of living honest, selfless, and caring lives. Almost a century ago John Dewey stressed the relevance of academic study to life as it is actually practised:

Briefly, only psychology and ethics can take education out of its purely empirical and rule-of-thumb stage. Just as a knowledge of mathematics and mechanics has wrought marvellous improvements in all the arts of construction . . . so a knowledge of the structure and functions of the human being can alone elevate the school from the position of a mere workshop, a more or less cumbrous, uncertain, and even baneful institution, to that of a vital, certain, and effective instrument in the greatest of all constructions—the building of a free and powerful character.”
 (“What Psychology Can Do” 5)

Do we as faculty members wish to be remembered as builders of “free and powerful character” in the students whom we meet and influence from year to year? This is the question I offer for your deliberation tonight.

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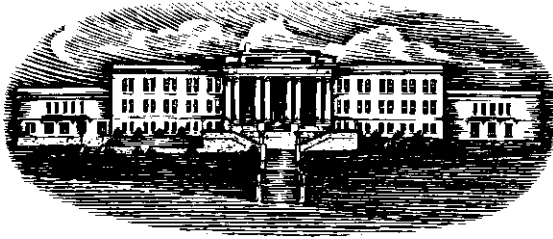
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Fairmont State College, the largest institution in the West Virginia state college system, currently enrolls over 6,000 students. Incorporated in 1867 as a state-supported normal school, for over seven decades it helped train teachers for the public school system until, in 1943, it was authorized additionally to offer bachelor of arts and bachelor of science degrees. At present, following two decades of rapid growth, the college offers one-year certificates, two-year associate degrees, four-year bachelor's degrees, preprofessional study in several fields, and a range of continuing education classes.

Drawing a high proportion of its students from within its own region, Fairmont State College welcomes the support it receives from surrounding areas. In return it participates actively in community projects, shares its programs and facilities with the public, lends its resources to promoting economic development, and serves as an information center and cultural focus.

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