

**Faculty Critical Thinking Workshop #5**  
**October 30, 2008**  
**“Ethics, Social Action, and Critical Thinking”**

**I. Bethel Definition of Critical Thinking**

We have defined critical thinking as a process of successfully analyzing, assessing, and reconstructing information in an objective manner. It will involve the ability to view new concepts and ideas with an open mind, and the ability to recognize external and internal biases, discerning both the strengths and weaknesses of the information. **Ultimately, the critical thinker will use information in an effective and ethical manner on a consistent basis.**

The last sentence strictly speaking appears not to be part of the definition, but rather is a statement about critical thinkers. The latter are people who have a certain relationship to critical thinking, namely that they apply it under certain conditions, which the definition specifies: they use critical thinking consistently so as to achieve their goal (“effectively”). The sentence contains another idea, namely that the critical thinker reasons in an ethical manner; this may be consistent with the claim that critical thinking contains an ethical component.

Thus the QEP requires that Bethel’s curriculum address the ethical implications of applying critical thinking. In practice this amounts to requiring that critical thinking meet minimum ethical standards, in other words that ethical thinking (1) occur in the context of disciplinary study, and that it (2) be done critically, i.e., according to a logic.

As a practical matter, this presents two challenges for faculty: to what extent should ethics be included in the curriculum? and how should ethical reasoning be taught?

**Background: Ethics in Higher Education**

Two types of ethical study: philosophical ethics and applied ethics. The study of the moral systems of particular peoples is generally not the purview of philosophy, except for those working in the history of philosophy and comparative philosophy.

**Philosophical ethics** includes normative ethics, which asks questions about what is right or what has value; and metaethics, which asks questions about ethics itself (e.g., the analysis of ethical concepts like ‘good’ or ‘right’; whether ethical principles are an independent part of the natural world). It is primarily studied in philosophy departments and is one of the main areas of philosophy (along with metaphysics, epistemology, and logic).

When taught outside philosophy departments, **applied philosophy** addresses ethical issues in particular fields (e.g., business ethics, health care ethics, religious ethics). These are also studied within philosophy

departments, as are relatively non-discipline-specific problems such as animal rights, the right to privacy, and euthanasia.

## **Pedagogy: In What Does Teaching Ethics Consist?**

Applied ethics courses in various departments typically begin by surveying “**theories of ethics**,” or general approaches to problems in normative ethics, such as consequentialism, virtue ethics, deontology. (This is, effectively, a capsule summary of a course in philosophical ethics.) These theories provide systematic methods of thinking about the solution to particular ethical problems, so it would seem that this approach provides a good method for scaffolding students’ critical thinking about ethical matters.

But theories of ethics are not tools for ethical evaluation or schemata for generating valid arguments, as textbooks on applied philosophy often imply. Some books will describe them as *ceteris paribus* (everything-else-being-equal) **principles**, which is misleading. Garrett, Baillie, and Garrett do this when they argue that such theories can serve as the major premise in an argument only when details of the specific situation are accounted for:

“Thus, while everyone agrees that it is wrong to kill innocent persons, before we can pass ethical judgment in a concrete situation, we need to know whether the person is innocent and whether the particular activity will kill.” (p. 13)

This passage is misleading inasmuch as it implies that ethical reasoning simply is constituted by the mechanical process of picking a principle, identifying relevant details of the situation, and plugging the latter into the former. The only elements of critical reasoning found in this quote are the analysis of the concept INNOCENT and the analysis of the particular situation, which might require an understanding of social context and not be purely mechanical.

It is not clear how valuable this is since this requires students to learn “proprietary” methods for analysis: the theories are abstract and can be hard for students to learn, and students must buy into them for the resultant analysis to be useful to them. Also: these theories are content and must be added to any course where they are not normally part of the curriculum (as they would be in a philosophy or applied ethics course); this takes time away from other material.

## **Positive Recommendations**

What is the alternative? Do not treat ethics differently from other course objectives. Organize at least some instruction around problems rather than content (I have made this argument before). Ensure that some of these problems have an ethical dimension, and that students engage actively with this material: pick ethical problems that do not have single, objective answers; require students to generate persuasive and reasoned arguments for positions; combine well-formed problems with more open-ended ones that do not have algorithmic solutions. Ethical reasoning should always relate to course content, since this provides its context for students.

In addition, it is worthwhile to go beyond the ethical-reasoning model of applied ethics and think about the moral development of students. Consider some student outcomes of Utah Valley State's Ethics Across the Curriculum Program:

- Challenge students to . . . confront inconsistencies in their own ethics and values systems.
- Elicit a sense of moral obligation and develop a personal code of conduct.

Normative outcomes are targeted by some of our peer schools, for example among the student outcomes of the core curriculum at Lees-McRae College we find:

- The student will understand the importance of responsible, informed, and involved citizenship as it applies to the region, the nation, and the world, and will understand how his or her chosen vocation relates to that role.

Among the "dimensions of development" at Lambuth University we are told that "a Lambuth graduate will exhibit": "an understanding of Christian, ethical, and spiritual principles," "good citizenship, community service, and social responsibility," and "self-awareness." Similar ideas are found in Bethel's Mission Statement, which analyzes the notion of a "whole person" in intellectual, spiritual, social, and physical terms.

In short, the **moral development of students** is still considered a viable goal, even in some public colleges. Assignments that encourage students to reflect on their own decisions and actions, and to justify them to others as good choices, are obvious methods.

## II. Tools for Teaching Ethics: Case Studies

Case studies (or simply "cases") present students with sanitized exposure to real-world problems. They describe a real-life situation (sometimes these describe actual situations that have occurred, though often details have been changed; and sometimes they are loosely based on real events or even purely fictional), and provide background information and data. Often the case sets students with a problem for solution, though sometimes this is left to instructors who adopt the case. Case studies were originally developed in law schools, and have become a major part of business education.

Instructors may write cases for their courses, but there are hundreds of thousands of published cases, particularly in business. The best source for cases is the European Case Clearinghouse (<http://www.ecch.com/>); see also the Asian Business Case Centre (<http://www.asiacase.com/>). A number of scholarly journals are dedicated to publishing cases, including *Annals of Cases on Information Technology*, *Business Case Journal*, *Case Research Journal*, *Journal of Accounting Case Research*, *Journal of Applied Case Research*, and *Journal of Information Technology Cases and Applications*.

### Bibliography on Case Studies

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## **Tools for Teaching Ethics: Problem-Based Learning**

Problem-based learning is similar to case study. A PBL exercise is essentially an ill-structured case: students are presented with a problem and some background data, and are expected to collect further data as a means to further defining the problem and seeking a solution. This contrasts to case study, in which students are given all the data they need (often more than they need) and are told explicitly not to collect outside data; the problem is also clearly defined for them, and their task is simply to seek the best solution. PBL derives originally from medical education as a means of introducing students to the complexities that doctors encounter in everyday practice. A reasonably good resource (developed with Pew grant money, and now apparently rather static) may be found at <http://www.udel.edu/pbl/>.

## **Tools for Teaching Ethics: Service Learning**

Service learning challenges students working cooperatively in groups to seek solutions to real world problems. It is similar to PBL, except that it places the student in the case or develops the case around the student's experiences. Good resources may be found: <http://www.servicelearning.org/> and <http://www.compact.org/>.

One method of teaching, sometimes called the Critical Incident Technique or something similar, asks students to write reports in a genre similar to the case study, but based on their own experiences in service learning or field experiences. These methods were largely developed in the health sciences, and seem most common in nursing education. The idea is to encourage students to reflect on their experiences, and can serve different purposes depending on how it is implemented. The term "Critical Incident Technique" is also used, in a very different context, for a method of systematically collecting data about a process for the purpose of improving it.

## **III. Common Subjects for Ethical Study**

In some fields there are standard subjects that receive the bulk of attention when ethical reasoning is to be taught (the bulk of case studies in these fields often address these subjects). In computer ethics, for example, privacy concerns are often central; in business, the focus is on problems growing out of the theory of the firm, or on issues that have been codified in law, such as employee relations or bribery in

foreign countries; in health care, abstract concepts such as informed consent are popular, as are recent technologies such as transplantation or gene therapy.

Divisions may find it helpful to develop a list of topics relevant to each major as a resource for faculty. Such a list may prove helpful in developing annual, critical thinking assessments, but they should be viewed as a resource for faculty rather than as a comprehensive list of topics to be addressed. Ethical issues appear in all fields, sometimes in surprising places.

## **Yes/No Problems**

Often ethical problems are represented in the case study literature as admitting of binary solutions. For example:

“A debate erupts when Community Hospital announces that as a cost-savings measure it will close its emergency room from 10:00 P.M. until 6:00 A.M. The hospital explains that it is in danger of going bankrupt, and its emergency room is a very expensive hospital department. Patients will still be able to receive emergency treatment at the nearby State Hospital. Opponents argue that this will severely restrict indigent patients’ access to care. Granted that Community Hospital is in danger of going bankrupt, is its decision ethical?” (Garrett, Baillie, & Garrett, *Health Care Ethics: Principles and Problems*, Prentice Hall, 1998, p. 108)

Certainly in practical situations there is the need to decide whether or not to perform an action (more generally, there may be a decision between multiple choices, including inaction), but when cases are presented in these terms students may tend to focus on the yes/no answer rather than the analysis underlying it. Printed case studies may encourage this.

This can be partially avoided by the careful choice of cases and by the way they are used in class: critical thinking instruction may best be served by not asking yes/no questions, and instead asking questions that require **arguments rather than conclusions** (compare Bruffee’s strategy of prohibiting conclusions in position papers, Workshop #3). See also Caroline Whitbeck’s argument (*Ethics in Engineering Practice and Research*, Cambridge UP, 1998) that “people confronted with ethical problems must do more than simply make judgments; they must figure out what to do”; she presents an interesting analogy between the synthesis required in engineering design and this practical focus of ethics.

## **The Necessity of Teaching Metaethics**

Sometimes it may be necessary to consider metaethical problems even in non-philosophy classes, because students may wish or need to discuss them. We may wish to focus on issues of normative or applied ethics, but if students are preoccupied by more fundamental questions, they will keep returning to them. For example, many business textbooks assume restricted egoism, but this may seem misguided to some students. More generally, many students will argue that ethics is just a matter of opinion and this can really cause problems in a course that assumes ethical relativism is not true.

## *The New Year's Eve Crisis*

### Case Objectives and Use

The case is designed to present students with a situation where they need to evaluate and confront issues of ethical decision making in a crisis situation. The discussion could also be expanded to include questions of stages of moral development and models of ethical standards. The case should also be used to help students understand the difference between symptoms and the root of problems, since the immediate decision will actually only resolve the symptoms while Mike Valenti, the entrepreneur and principal decision maker, also has to decide how to overcome the more basic problem of a clash of culture between his company and the one he has acquired.

The case is designed to be used in a graduate or undergraduate level course on Small Business Management/Entrepreneurship, Business/Government/Society (BGS), or Principles of Management. The instructor's manual covers ethical and moral reasoning in depth appropriate for the BGS course, and offers suggestions on incorporating the ethics discussion into the other course in the probable absence of theoretical support from the course text.

### Case Synopsis

Mike Valenti, founder and president of Michael's Homestyle Pasta of Connecticut, has just finished a four-hour conference call with his top managers, his lawyer and Fred Jones, the QA manager at Southern Pasta Company. Michael's had acquired Southern, a Florida firm, three weeks earlier, on December 10, 2001. It had taken the quality

assurance manager until early in the morning of New Year's Eve day, Monday, 2001, to admit to Ted Brewer, V.P. of Operations for Michael's, that he had been falsifying safety inspections of Southern products. He told Brewer that the seafood stuffed pasta shells leaving the Southern plant had been contaminated with listeria. Much of the last batch of product had been sent to Southern's largest customer, a national chain of 200 restaurants. Michael's had purchased Southern, in no small part, to capture this account.

Jones stated that the president of Southern had coerced him into falsifying the quality control reports. The discussion leads to options that the management team could follow. Since New Year's Eve is the largest sales day of the year for restaurants, Valenti knows that he has to do something quickly. He also knows that, regardless of what he does, the reputation and future of his company rest on the outcome of his actions. He is considering what to do at the end of the case, late in the afternoon of New Year's Eve day.

### Disclaimer

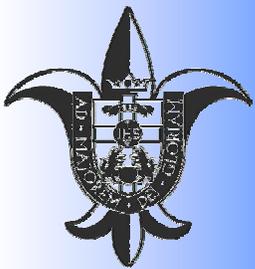
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<sup>1</sup> This case was prepared by William Naumes and Margaret J. Naumes, University of New Hampshire, and is intended to be used for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of the situation. Presented to and accepted by the North American Case Research Association (NACRA) for its annual meeting, November 2003, Tampa, Florida. All rights reserved to the authors and NACRA. (C) 2003 by William Naumes and Margaret J. Naumes.

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