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Reader's Response: Response to K. Hornsby's "Developing and Assessing Undergraduate Students' Moral Reasoning Skills"

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Abstract

Excerpt: Hornsby's article is timely because of the current popularity of ethics and "character education." We can agree with her that the development of "moral reasoning skills" is a very desirable outcome for an ethics course. Hornsby, however, does not stick to her stated goal: "not to change or alter students' moral positions but provide them with the tools to reflectively endorse their views and to evaluate the consistency of their positions." This would be consistent with the objectives of any philosophy course, but there is an essential equivocation in Hornsby's actual discussion about what it is possible or appropriate to teach in such a course. Her final decision to focus exclusively on virtue ethics also carries with it an implicit endorsement which subverts the critical stance.

Keywords

K. Hornsby, Students' moral reasoning skills

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Response to K. Hornsby's
Developing and Assessing Undergraduate Students' Moral Reasoning Skills

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Hornsby's article is timely because of the current popularity of ethics and "character education." We can agree with her that the development of "moral reasoning skills" is a very desirable outcome for an ethics course. Hornsby, however, does not stick to her stated goal: "not to change or alter students' moral positions but provide them with the tools to reflectively endorse their views and to evaluate the consistency of their positions." This would be consistent with the objectives of any philosophy course, but there is an essential equivocation in Hornsby's actual discussion about what it is possible or appropriate to teach in such a course. Her final decision to focus exclusively on virtue ethics also carries with it an implicit endorsement which subverts the critical stance.

Even if we answer the question in the Meno affirmatively, we still must specify which virtues should be taught. Who is qualified to teach them? And how will we know when the desired learning has taken place? Hornsby tackles the last question using empirical tools, but seems to make a series of uncritical assumptions related to the first two:

- That moral behavior can be taught.
- That proficiency in moral reasoning will lead to improvement in moral behavior.
- That it is the task of philosophy and philosophers to give moral instruction.
- That we have defined what constitutes "moral reasoning."
- That we have agreed on what constitutes "moral behavior."
- That we have determined who is qualified to give instruction in ethical or moral behavior.
- That we have determined conclusively that the positions, knowledge and values students bring with them are "naïve" and contain "inaccuracies and misconceptions."
- That there is a universal pattern of ethical development.
- That no one completes this process of development.
- That ethical relativism, skepticism, nihilism and religious absolutism represent finally discredited points of view and that (presumably autonomous) "universal moral principles" characterize the ethical beliefs of an "engaged citizenry."

This set of assumptions may result from a mistake regarding what philosophers qua philosophers can and should do when they are acting as teachers. For better or for worse, the role of the academic philosopher is now very different from what it was in the nineteenth century, the last time when ethical and moral philosophy was such a preeminent concern in American life. Philosophers can no longer pretend to acquaintance with absolute or universal ethical truths, nor is their inculcation part of the philosophical charge, even as a matter of pedagogy. This is not to defend ethical relativism or any other position, but merely to

acknowledge the evolution of our thinking, under the chastening effect of time and events.