

The University as a Moral Force
by
Robert A. Scott, President
Adelphi University

I. Introduction

Your theme is certainly timely. We have been reading about the effects of fire and heat on the World Trade Towers and their collapse, leaks at nuclear powerplants, and mechanical failures in both domestic and military aircraft. Since the potential effects of the unintended consequences of science, engineering, and medicine have in some ways never been greater, it is no wonder there are concerns about ethical decision-making in your professions.

However, I will leave the technical aspects of these issues to the specialists on the program. Instead, I will focus on ethics more generally, the preparation of professionals, and the role of the university.

As Marcia McNutt, a geophysicist and president of the American Geophysical Union said,

The need will never be greater for inventors who understand and care about the sociological impacts of their discoveries, and for policy makers who understand the limitations of science and the long-term consequences of technology. As we engineer the ocean (she said), we must be cautious in our approach, humbled by our ignorance, and farsighted in our policies.¹

Concerns about ethics, engineering, and science are not new, of course. Many decades ago, the poet Archibald MacLeish “argued that the loyalty of science is not to humanity, but to its own truth, and that the law of science is not the law of the good but the law of the possible.”²

This is not a Luddite’s cry; this is a cry for balance, a claim that we have choices to make between and among competing values. This is what ethics is about, and what distinguishes ethics as a theory of decision-making from morality, which concerns right and wrong, not “right” from “right.”

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¹ McNutt, Marcia K. “Developing the Ocean.” The Futurist, January-February 2002, p. 43.

² Louria, Donald B. “Second Thoughts on Extending Life-Spans.” The Futurist, January-February 2002, p. 48.

The medical scientist, Donald Louria, has said,

We are now more than ever in an era of scientific domination – a period of unfettered technology that has and will produce many stunning discoveries that will benefit humankind, but some that are likely to harm our global society.³

The question, then, is not about where science is taking us, but about where we want to go. Where do we want to go? Who decides? Who minds the gap between what is possible and what is best for society? Do we leave the answer to politics? Remember George Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion, where we hear:

I'm one of the undeserving poor...up agen middle-class morality all the time...What is middle-class morality? Just an excuse for never giving me anything.⁴

That's a powerful statement about choices and values, and who decides. It helps underscore why I chose this topic, "the university as a moral force." The university is the one institution in society that, because of its mission, is more than fact alone, like a library; more than belief alone, like a house of worship; and more than emotion alone, like a club. It is the place in society dedicated to the search for truth, the transformation of meaning, the examination of intended and unintended consequences, and the concern for equity, equality, fairness, and justice. This is the province of ethics. The role of the University is to create ethical professionals, a "culture of conscience."⁵

The university must not take this role lightly. American university faculty and leaders hold a privileged place in society. They are protected by law, by rule, and by custom through tenure and academic freedom to pursue truth as they wish. Nevertheless, these protections are often criticized by those outside the academy. University educators must be especially careful not to allow their special status to be reduced by a drive to serve every market opportunity, and hence allow university education to become another "commodity" product. At the same time, university educators must not only preserve their special role on the margins of society, but also must do so in a way that is not viewed as arrogant, as aloof from and scornful of accountability. This requires a special balancing of the university's mission and the marketplace.

II. The increasing interest in ethics

³ ibid.

⁴ Shaw, George Bernard. "Pygmalion," Act 2, 1916.

⁵ Kahn, Jeffrey P. and Anna Mastroianni. "Doing Research Well by Doing Right." The Chronicle of Higher Education, February 15, 2002, p. B24.

These days, it seems that wherever we turn, one finds the topic of ethics. Does this mean we are becoming more ethical, more concerned about choices and values in decision-making? Has Chief Justice Warren’s famous line that, “in a civilized life, law floats in a sea of ethics,” been taken to heart?⁶

I would gather not, if the examples of Enron and Arthur Anderson are to be taken seriously. Kenneth Lay, former ceo of Enron, issued a corporate Code of Ethics in July 2000 (three months before the implosion) that states, “Ruthlessness, callousness and arrogance don’t belong here” at Enron.⁷ In his cover letter, Lay said, “we (at Enron) are responsible for conducting business affairs of the Company in accordance with all applicable laws and in a moral and honest manner.”⁸ Let us hope that all such codes are not as superficial.

There are, indeed, many such codes and ethics officers. UNESO has an ethics department; WHO is creating one. Ruder-Finn, the giant public relations and marketing firm has an ethics officer. Texas Instruments has an ethics officer. There are, in fact, a sufficient numbers of ethics officers in business to create an Ethics Officer Association.

Academic disciplines have codes of ethics. Your own profession of engineering has discipline-based codes of ethics; specific codes such as the “Principles of Ethical Conduct in Engineering Practice Under the North American Free Trade Agreement;”⁹ textbooks such as Science and Engineering Ethics; ¹⁰ and a National Institute of Engineering Ethics.¹¹

In addition, National Public Radio has a new program, “Playing by the Rules,” about ethics.¹² The New York Times has a popular Sunday column on ethics that has now spawned a book.¹³ And even The Chronicle of Higher Education has reestablished a column entitled, “The Academic Ethicist.”¹⁴

So again, why this renewed interest in ethics? Is it a sign of a move away from a “culture of compliance,” in Greg Koski’s terms, towards a “culture of conscience,” with an assurance of the centrality of ethics?¹⁵ Is it a move from

⁶ Warren, Chief Justice Warren. The New York Times, November 2, 1962.

⁷ Zeller, Tom. “The Tao of Enron: Well, It Sounded Good.” The New York Times, Sunday, February 24, 2002, p. WK5.

⁸ ibid.

⁹ Murdough Center for Engineering Professionalism. “Principles of Ethical Conduct in Engineering Practice Under the North American Free Trade Agreement (www.murdough.ttu.edu/nafta.html).

¹⁰ Martin, Brian. Review of Science and Engineering Ethics by Editors Stephanie J. Bird and Raymond Spur. UK: Opragen. Science, 5 September 96, p. 42.

¹¹ National Institute for Engineering Ethics (www.niee.org).

¹² National Public Radio announcement, April 2, 2002.

¹³ Cohen, Randy. “The Politics of Ethics.” The Nation, April 8, 2002, Volume 274, Issue 13, p. 21.

¹⁴ Douglas, Lawrence and Alexander George. “The Academic Ethicist: The Self-Embroidered Professor; Ironist in Peril; Fund Raiser’s Fix.” The Chronicle of Higher Education, March 22, 2002, B11.

¹⁵ Kahn and Mastroianni.

a culture of laws and regulation to a culture of morality, or is it something altogether different?

Is it an attempt to come to grips with a society in which laws and regulations are being stripped of their power by the politics of special interests, and efforts are being made to provide alternatives? Surely, as we think of the series of crises in values represented by Vietnam, Cambodia, Chile, Richard Nixon, Gordon Gecko, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Dick Cheney, we must be aware of the decline in a sense of shame, a tampering with laws, abuses of power, an increase in greed, a decline in trust, and a continued decline in respect for authority. Just think of the issues highlighted in the last year: cloning, stem cell research, global warming, Social Security, energy policy, racial profiling, access to public policy information, insider trading, pension fraud, and campaign finance reform, to name a few examples.

These trends in behavior by leaders, accompanied by both the increasing gaps between those who have and those who don't, in terms of wealth, power, schooling, and healthcare, as well as a continuing political commitment to market solutions for problems which the "market" cannot deal with adequately, seem to have prompted individuals and groups to say, "Wait." If laws are abridged, and what's considered right and wrong is changing, we need to take a new look at how we express our values. We must take a new look at what Aristotle meant by the "common good."

Have we forgotten that "the welfare of the many and the welfare of the individual are inextricably entwined,"¹⁶ that individual rectitude must be balanced by justice for all. As Randy Cohen, The New York Times' ethics columnist says,

...individual ethics can be understood only in relation to the society within which it is practiced...it is also true that individual ethical behavior is far likelier to flourish within a just society. It might be argued that to lead an ethical life one must work to build a just society...(which) forms our values even as we shape its structures.¹⁷

While the current interest in ethics is not new, and certainly was preceded by great interest in the genetic engineering of crops or Green Revolution in the 1960's, bio-medical ethics or patient-doctor relations in the 1970's, and business ethics, greed, in the 1980's, the current interest seems unique because it is so pervasive across all fields. Perhaps this reflects the complexity of contemporary life. Perhaps it reflects a greater awareness, if not agreement in causes or solutions, of the numerous inequities that surround us. It certainly is related to the increased concerns for overall

¹⁶ Johnson, Kirk. "A Plan Without a Master." The New York Times, Sunday, April 14, 2002, pp 35,41.

¹⁷ Cohen, op.cit

standards in a secular society, and accountability at all levels, especially of those who are viewed as institutional leaders or elected officials.

We understand laws. They are formally adopted legislative acts with prescribed judicial sanctions. We also understand morals as “rules describing desirable and undesirable states.”¹⁸ They describe right and wrong. Ethics “represent the rules for deciding how (desirable and undesirable) states are to be achieved or avoided. Ethics are rules for making rules of conduct and action.”¹⁹ That is, ethics are not codified in laws or nursery rhymes; they are principles or civic virtues that guide how we will choose between and among different values. They give us flexibility, with limits.

In an interesting discussion of these distinctions, Professor Robert Artigiani, an historian of science, concludes that, “Complex societies favor ethics over morals because they cannot know in advance exactly which (desirable and undesirable) states (or conditions) will be stable but must educate individuals to act reasonably.”²⁰ That is, they must have a common core of understanding of the common good. And to act in the common good means that we must know not only how to act but when to act and when not to act.

As one of your colleagues puts it, “Engineers now are responsible for saying: Can we do it, should we do it, if we do it can we control it, and are we willing to be accountable for it?”²¹

Our concern ultimately, though, is not only about engineers and scientists, or even about politicians. We are concerned about decision-making by each of us as citizens, about making choices when values are involved, answering questions that cannot be settled by appeal to faith, fear, or fact alone.

And that, of course, brings us to the role of the University which prepares people for the professions and citizenship.

The University As a Moral Force

I chose the title, “The University as a Moral Force,” i.e., as a force for comprehending desirable and undesirable states of being, because I view education in general and the university in particular as institutions that prepare people for making decisions. In the words of Henry Rosovsky, former Dean of Harvard College,

¹⁸ Artigiani, Robert. “Leadership and Uncertainty: Complexity and the Lessons of History.” Unpublished manuscript, Department of History, U.S. Naval Academy, Artigiani@NADN.NAVY.mil

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ “Engineering Ethics Module.” Murdough Center for Engineering Professionalism, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas (www.murdough.ttu.edu/EthicsModule/EthicsModule.html)

An educated person is expected to have some understanding of, and experience in thinking about, moral (i. e., right and wrong) and ethical (i. e., choice and values) problems²²

It may well be that the most significant quality in educated persons is the informed judgement that enables them to make discriminating ... choices.²³

Why do I think of the University as a “moral force”? What is the nature of the institution that bears these responsibilities?

These questions are intertwined. The University is a “force” because it has the power, and influence to cause action, and accelerate processes. The university is a “moral force” because it constantly extends the boundaries of what is known, and therefore challenges societal rules describing desirable and undesirable states and behavior. By focussing on the decision-making competence of those it hires and those it educates, it also makes choices about the values it will express, exhibit, or eschew.

The role of the university is complex. Not only does it challenge societal norms through research, scholarship, and other creative endeavors, but also it is the curator of the past, the archivist of heritage. It is the institution which bridges the past and the future by preparing its graduates in both history and imagination.

Universities have several functions. They preserve the past; they prepare for the future; they challenge the status quo; and they foster progress. Put another way, they teach, they advance knowledge, and they act as partners with other institutions.

Universities are not only at the center of society, as a servant and partner, in terms of preparing the next generation, preserving society’s memory, and working with other institutions, but also at the margins of society -- or at least I think they should be.

In this role at the margin, they stand aside and challenge assumptions; they critique the gap between what is and what could be; they comment on what is possible and what is desirable. They are as concerned about character and citizenship as they are about careers and commerce. Or at least they should be.

These multiple roles are necessary to prepare morally reflective citizens who have thought deeply about such ethical issues as justice, equity, fairness, and equality in relation to the fundamental needs of humans: food, housing, family, healthcare, clean air and water, schooling, meaningful work, and

²² Rosovsky, Henry. *The University: An Owner’s Manual*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1990, p. 107.

²³ ibid.

freedom of expression. This is an act of transformation, an act to prepare a new person, unleashed from a previously provincial background, no matter what his or her age, place of origin, ethnicity, nationality, or religion.

I contrast this act of transformation – of changing the character of something or someone – with another description of education and training, i.e., transaction, which is the exchange of information in a manner that doesn't qualitatively transform the meaning of either party. A student paying a bill at the bursar's office enters a transaction. In class, he or she had better be transformed.

An important means for ensuring transformation is to emphasize questions rather than answers. In one of my favorite quotes, author James Baldwin says that we must be certain to “lay bare the questions hidden by answers.” As a consequence, when I am given a recommendation, I will sometimes reply, “that is an answer, what is the question?”

In some sense, answers are like transactions, often given without thought to assumptions, history, or context. Questions are more likely to be reflective. This is the difference between education and training, with one emphasizing questions and the other focussing on answers.

Questions provide a way of learning about motives, needs, and interests as well. Often we hear or read about suggestions that seems to be based more on opinion than on reason, more on belief than on fact. Education assists us in framing questions in ways that help us find the essence of an issue. Education helps us shape questions that reveal the “how” and the “why,” not just the “who” and the “what.”

Educators talk about the need to develop students' problem-solving skills and abilities. Unfortunately, they often don't spend sufficient time preparing students so that they have the knowledge, skills, abilities, and values necessary to judge which problems to solve. Questions help students discern the broader historical and analytical context of issues and fields. Only by comprehending history and context can any of us understand goals and principles, and the questions that suggested answers often reveal only partially.

To say that the University is a moral force is both a declarative statement and a statement of hope. It applies to each mission and role of the university, whether as teacher of undergraduate or graduate students, as home of scholarship and creative arts, as the sponsor of sports and cultural events, or as partner or patron of area schools, communities, non-profit organizations, or businesses. In each case, the University is called upon to be ethical, i.e., to be fair and just in decision-making, in encouraging the advancement of knowledge, because ethics, as a system of decision-making, moderates the influence of superstition, belief, and fact by showing that we appreciate consequence as well as cause.

In addition to teaching and scholarship, including creative arts, universities are partners with or models of behavior for other organizations. Unfortunately, universities are not yet as good at “doing what they teach,” when it comes to ecological sensitivity and good practice, community sustainability, and relations with schools. I cite these examples not as answers but as attempts to engage the university in the community, to show by its behavior that it attempts to live up to what it teaches.

Think about the values expressed by a University through its athletics programs, fraternity systems, admissions policies, graduation rates and requirements, relations with neighborhood schools, investment and hiring practices, government lobbying for grants, etc. We teach by our actions, by our priorities for investment, and even by our silence, as well as through our curricula.

How does the university balance its commitment to mission as well as to the market? How do we balance our participation in “the world of practical affairs (the center) and in the world of ideas (the margin)?²⁴

Morality is about virtue; ethics is about balance. To be ethical is not to abandon objectivity, but to know what to be objective about. To keep objective science alive, we must show that we understand and act on ethical considerations – to know the difference between using stem cells to repair a spinal cord and creating an “ubermensch” –or else our science, technology and engineering will be further hampered by fear, superstition, bias, and blind belief.

The University is a moral force. It has the mission to be one; it has the potential to be one. The University has a unique opportunity to help create a culture of conscience not only for the professions and professionals, but for all citizens, through its teaching, scholarship, actions, and service to and with others. With this as its stance, the University would strengthen its place at the center of society and solidify its place at the margins.

All this is possible, and your conference is a major step in that direction.

Thank you.

²⁴ Ikenberry, Stanley O. “The Practical and the Ideal: Striking a Balance.” The Presidency, Spring 2001, p. 16.