

Cultivating Practical Reasoning

Patricia Altenbernd Johnson
Professor of Philosophy, University of Dayton
Patricia.johnson@notes.udayton.edu

Business education at a Catholic university should be committed to helping students envision their work in business as a call to promote the common good. Helping students develop capabilities of listening and discernment is vital to fulfilling that commitment. Often ethics courses are required as part of business curricula in the hope that these courses will help students develop such capabilities. Yet, ethics courses often focus primarily on ethical theory, often deontological and utilitarian theory, and on the application of these theories to dilemmas or specific cases. While students may gain skills in applying these theories, they may never really address the everyday activity of promoting the common good. The courses they take may critique the economic theory that underlies contemporary business but again may not provide students with ways of navigating the challenges of living in the context of global capitalism.

While there is no one simple approach to developing an ethics course that can better help students develop capabilities of listening and discernment so that the common good becomes focal to their decision processes, I suggest that structuring a course so that students reflect upon the process of practical reasoning and the need to develop the virtue of prudence is a helpful beginning. I suggest an approach to teaching business ethics that promotes reflection on practical reasoning. This approach makes use of literature and film, and encourages students to reflect on the role of friendship in helping communities identify, critique, and work to realize the common good. I believe that this approach has much to offer business curricula and is firmly based in Catholic philosophical and theological traditions.

In this paper, I will explain the theoretical background for this approach focusing on the relationship of practical reasoning and friendship. Then I will set out two examples of using this approach in teaching professional students.

I. On the Relationship of Practical Reasoning and Friendship

Practical reasoning is reasoning that is concerned with human affairs, with human action, and with actions that require deliberation, judgment, and choice. While there is a tendency in modern thought to treat practical reasoning as if it is simply about choosing the most effective or efficient means to an end, practical reasoning is more importantly about choosing the end, about discerning what will be good or bad for human beings as they live in the world. It is about discerning the manner in which a means incorporates and actualizes the good for humanity. Aristotle says that we call people who are good at this sort of reasoning “prudent.” A prudent person is one who deliberates well and so helps human societies attain ways of living well. In *Summa Theologica*. Thomas Aquinas writes of prudence:

Prudence is a virtue most necessary for human life. For a good life consists in good deeds. Now in order to do good deeds, it matters not only what a man does, but also how

he does it; in other words, it matters that he do it from right choice and not merely from impulse or passion. Now since choice is about means to the end, rectitude of choice requires two things, namely, the due end, and that which is suitably ordained to that due end. Now man is suitably directed to his due end by a virtue which perfects the soul in the appetitive part, the object of which is the good and the end. But to that which is suitably ordained to the due end man needs to be rightly disposed by a habit in his reason, because counsel and choice, which are about means ordained to the end, are acts of reason. Consequently an intellectual virtue is needed in the reason, to perfect the reason and make it suitably affected towards means ordained to the end; and this virtue is prudence. Consequently prudence is a virtue necessary for a good life. (Q. 57 Art. 5)

As teachers of young people who will make decisions and provide the possibilities for what it means to live well, it behooves us to help our students think about practical reasoning and develop habits that might one day enable them to be prudent people. As Socrates understood, no one would willingly educate someone to that which will bring harm on oneself. Education that focuses economic thinking on the common good is not only good business education, it is good liberal education.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, when Aristotle explains prudence (Book VI) he considers the various ways in which deliberation takes place and says of deliberative excellence that it must arrive at the right conclusion on the right grounds and that it must do this at the right time. Moreover, the action resulting from the deliberation must result in correct results. Aristotle notes that prudence is more than good understanding, although it requires good understanding. Prudence has to do with taking action, with issuing commands. These commands must be equitable and so offered in the context of consideration of others. Aristotle devotes Book VII to considerations of pleasure and self-restraint, for to act in consideration of others is to know how to control one's own desires. But self-control is not sufficient for prudence. It is the quality of prudence to always act in the context of equitable consideration of others that eventually leads Aristotle to place an extensive consideration of friendship within the context of ethics.

Aristotle's treatment of friendship has been the focus of much thought. Indeed, it influences much of the philosophical work that has been done on friendship.¹ Yet, most of the reflection on this part of his ethical work is separated from the context in which he places it. How do humans

¹ For recent work that recognizes the importance of friendship see: John Caputo, 'Good Will and the Hermeneutics of Friendship: Gadamer and Derrida', *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 28.5 (2002), pp. 512-522; John A. Cuddeback, 'Truth and Friendship: The Importance of the Conversation of Friends', *Truth Matters*, Ed. John G. Trapani, Jr. (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2004), pp. 26-33; Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, Trans. George Collins (London and New York: Verso, 1997); Thomas A. F. Kelly and Philipp W. Rosemann (Eds.), *Amore Amicitiae: On the Love that is Friendship* (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2004); James Risser, 'Philosophical Hermeneutics and the Question of Community', *Interrogating the Tradition*. Charles E. Scott and John Sallis (Eds) (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), pp. 19-35; Robert Sokolowski, 'Phenomenology of Friendship', *The Review of Metaphysics*, 55 (March 2002), pp. 451-470; Patricia Altenbernd Johnson, 'Phenomenology of Spiritual Friendship and discourse About God', *New Blackfriars* 88 (2007), pp. 549-563.

develop the virtue of prudence? If Aristotle is right, this happens in community with others and with others who are our friends. To be friends, people must have goodwill for each other, wish each other's good, be aware that they wish this for each other, and that they wish this good based on loveable qualities perceived in each other. Friendship for Aristotle is a relationship between citizens who live together and who establish concord in that living. It is not a close personal relationship that is exclusionary. Rather friendship enables people to act in consideration of others, to act well and so be prudent.

If we assume that Aristotle is correct about friendship, then one of the tasks of educating young people toward prudence is to help them expand their imaginations such that they can understand what others perceive to be the good and can come to discern and deliberate with others about the common good. In a time when citizenship is global rather than situated in a small polis, the task of imagining well is vital to human well-being.

II. Helping Students Cultivate Practical Reasoning: Two Examples

In *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*, Martha Nussbaum suggests that one of the primary tasks of liberal education is to help young people become world citizens. This requires more than gaining knowledge about various cultures and places. She suggests that “we must also cultivate in ourselves a capacity for sympathetic imagination that will enable us to comprehend the motives and choices of people different from ourselves, seeing them not as forbiddingly alien and other, but as sharing many problems and possibilities with us” (85). She suggests that reading and reflecting on literature is one way in which we cultivate world citizens. Literature can help us develop empathy and compassion for others. It can show us common human vulnerability. It can help us learn to listen to voices that we might not otherwise hear and identify with those voices. In Aristotle's language, literature can help us discern the loveable in the other; it can help us identify with that which is loveable, and so wish well for that person. It can help us learn to live in concord, gaining an ability to identify the common good and act towards its achievement.

The following are two examples of how literature can be used in courses to help students cultivate their imaginations in ways that lead to identifying with others and their good. Students are motivated by the literature to think about their own ethical frameworks and how they practice their ethics in daily decisions. The first example is taken from a doctoral seminar for students who are engaged in the practice of education. The second example is taken from a course in the humanities for MBA students.

A. Example One: Reading Václav Havel's *Summer Meditations* with Students in a Doctoral Course in Ethics for Educational Leadership

Václav Havel was the President of Czechoslovakia in the Summer of 1991 when he wrote *Summer Meditations*. While the meditations were intended to set out his hopes for the new federation, all that he imagined did not come to fruition. By the time the book was published in English, the federation had split and he was the President of the Czech Republic. Even though the unity that he envisioned has not come to pass, the meditations that he wrote are a reflection on politics and the interrelatedness of all realms of social life in the political arena. He argues

persuasively that the practice of politics cannot be separated from the institutions that structure a society. Political life is life that guides and is shaped by educational and economic institutions. In introducing the meditations in the English translation Havel writes, “I have become aware of how immensely difficult it is to be guided in practice by the principles and ideals in which I believe. But I have not abandoned them in any way” (xiii). For students, Havel’s meditations can serve as an example for how one thinks about how one lives in the concrete situation trying to understand the implications of principles to which one is committed.

Havel’s basic commitment is to what he understands as the purpose of genuine politics. He understands this purpose as one of service to the current community and to those who will come after the current community (6). He holds that no matter what one’s role in the community, one should “live in the truth” (8). For him this means constantly reminding himself that every issue and every problem has a moral aspect. He emphasizes the importance of placing common interest above personal desire and suggests that this resonates with people. He believes that people have what he terms a “dormant goodwill.” In order to foster this aspect of human life, he suggests that it is important to do what we can to foster a climate of openness and generosity, a climate of mutual trust. We need to recognize human fallibility while also recognizing the importance of our decisions. We each function in society in ways such that the decisions we make impact the good of others. We can act to nurture justice and concord; we can also act in ways that create injustice and discord. If we are to do the former, Havel suggests that it is essential to cultivate spiritual and intellectual practices. For the cultivation of such life, Havel suggests that schools are the most important sphere. He writes, “The role of schools is...to develop the individual capabilities of the students in a purposeful way, and to send out into life thoughtful people capable of thinking about the wider social, historical, and philosophical implications of their specialties” (117).

Using Havel’s meditations to begin a course on ethical reflection provides an example for students to emulate. Havel understands the moral nature of human relationships and is committed to creating bonds that foster just and trusting human relationships. In the doctoral course with education students, they began to reflect on their own ethical commitments and how these commitments were actualized by them in their daily practices as educators. They also came to recognize that despite differing ethical approaches, they could come to understand and respect the conceptualization and approach to the good that others held.

In the class, we used case examples, not trying to solve the cases, but thinking about what principles each student brought to the discussion of the cases. The class talked about how each member approached the case and what we learned from the various approaches about what we as individuals and as a group held to be good or true. As the instructor, I brought knowledge about formal theories to the discussion. We explored utilitarian theory, deontological theory, virtue theory, and care theory. My purpose in using the theory was not to have students learn the various theories or to apply different theories to the cases. I wanted to help them develop concepts and vocabulary that would enable them to talk with each other and reflect on what each person understood to be the good in various situations.

The structure of the course encouraged the students to develop friendships in Aristotle’s sense. They helped each other understand and they laughed with each other and shared simple

pleasures. But they also came to at least begin to appreciate the goodness of each member of the class. In working on cases, the experiences and insights of all the individuals were able to be shared. Students came to understand that all of them were concerned with the well-being of the students they were educating and with how those student's lives would be lived in relationship with others. They began to understand the good that they held in common.

As the instructor, it was also interesting for me to see how many of them gravitated to a care ethics as helping them formulate their thoughts and give direction to their actions (Noddings). This ethic, more than any other begins with the premise of the relational nature of human reality. While individual members of the class came to understand that they thought in terms of duty, utility, and divine command, everyone was able to use the language of care. More work on this ethical theory may well serve to nurture capabilities that can serve the development of prudence in individuals and of caring relationships in human society.

B. Example Two: Exploring *Weapons of the Spirit* and *Henry V* with MBA Students

The class, "Humanities Seminar: Freedom and Responsibility," is for students in an MBA program, most of whom are working fulltime in a business setting. It is taught on three very intensive weekends with a couple weeks between each session. Students read a wide range of materials including classics such as Sophocles' *Antigone*, Plato's *Apology*, and Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Some of the materials for the course, such as Miller's *All My Sons* and Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener," focus specifically on ethical issues in business. Other materials focus less on business life, but help students think about the importance of how one lives on a daily basis as preparation for important decisions. Two of these are Pierre Sauvage's documentary film *Weapons of the Spirit* and Shakespeare's *Henry V*.

Weapons of the Spirit is a documentary about the people in and around the village of Le Chambon, France, who during the Nazi occupation during WWII sheltered approximately 5,000 Jews. Pierre Sauvage was born there in 1944 to Jewish parents who were among those taken in. He returns as an adult to try to understand the motivations of the people of the village. The village was primarily people of Huguenot descent. In the course of many interviews, it becomes clear that the people of the village do not believe that they did anything extraordinary. In the interview with Magda Trocmé, she says, "When the first Jew came to my house, I just opened the door and took her in without knowing what would happen later. It was even simpler than one might suppose."

Most people in the village were members of the local church whose pastor was André Trocmé, a conscientious objector. While he was clearly the leader of the community, the documentary makes it clear that this was not one person's action, but the act of the community. Most homes sheltered people and schools were opened to educate the children who were there. Magda Trocmé remarks that the people understood that they were together and that together they would try to do their best. The film is accompanied by a conversation between Bill Moyers and Sauvage. In that conversation, Sauvage suggests that while there is no single explanation for the actions of the community, "the most important fact for us to know is that they were brought up to understand all the idioms of the language of love. When their hearts spoke to them, they first listened, then they acted."

The documentary is moving, and leads to discussions in class about the importance of educating children from an early age to listen to their conscience and the importance of adult role models for learning this practice of discernment. While students may not articulate this in terms of virtue and care ethics, they reflect on the importance of the development of character within trusting relationships. They think about what it takes to develop a community that could so easily resist together and so allow hope and goodness to survive. The final session of the course requires students to take time to think through the materials and select one person that they would like to emulate. If they select someone from this film, they usually remark that it is the people of the village, not just one individual, who provide a model for how they would like to live.

We also view Kenneth Branagh's film version of Shakespeare's *Henry V*. The film suggests that Henry grew up rapidly when he became king. He leaves behind the indulgences of his youth and breaks with old friends who clearly want preferential treatment. Henry is depicted as a leader who commands with justice and who feels deeply for his soldiers. Many students find him a compelling model for how to be a good leader in the business context. However, when they read Lawrence Weschler's *New Yorker* article, "Take No Prisoners" they begin to better understand the moral complexity of Shakespeare's play. Weschler interviews Douglas Hughes, who is at that point working on producing the play for performance in Central Park. Hughes argues that the play presents a Henry who begins by playing at being King and ends as "a humbled man who is King and knows he will one day—and, in fact, as it happens, quite soon—be meeting his Maker, armed only with his self" (54-55). In the interview, they discuss scenes where Henry seems to support humanitarian norms and where he threatens the town of Harfleur with horrible consequences but does not have to carry through when they surrender. But the focus of the interview and the article is on the scene that is usually omitted, and is indeed omitted in the Branagh film. This is at the end of the Battle of Agincourt. In the Branagh film, it is made clear that the French enter behind the English lines and kill some of the boy attendants. The film also supports the contention that Henry and the English consider this a breach of the rules of war. The film, however, does not include Henry's actions, which are sometimes justified as taken in response to the slaying of the boys.

Henry orders the execution of the French prisoners. Theodor Meron, a scholar on international humanitarian law, is also interviewed for Weschler's article. He suggests that the men who were killed were still in heavy armor with only their helmets removed. "dismounted, defenseless, dazed, and demoralized, squatting in the mud and barely able to move, they could hardly be regarded as constituting any sort of threat to the English troops...It was like killing turtles" (57). When students begin to consider Henry's action in giving this order, they also begin to reflect on how easy it is in situations of "heated battle" to issue commands that undermine even the most minimal kinds of human civility.

Thinking about Henry in relationship to the people of Le Chambon enables students to think about the different situations and what it means to act in ways, even in situations of war, that can enable the best of what it is to be human to survive. They usually conclude something about the importance of thinking and discerning together. Through conversation and counsel thoughts and

actions are cautioned, developed, and confirmed. The rashness of individual action and command usually tend not to serve the common good.

III. Some Conclusions for Thinking about Cultivating Practical Reasoning

Two questions guide the conclusions that I draw from these teaching experiences: What do these examples suggest about practical reasoning? How do we as teachers best help cultivate such reasoning?

When we teach, we learn, and I have learned about practical reasoning in the process of trying to teach about ethics and such reasoning. In asking students to reflect on the process of reasoning that they see in literature and film and in which they participate in their daily lives, I have come to understand that prudence, excellent practical reasoning, is not fundamentally an individual virtue. The people of Le Chambon are prudent, but the source and strength of their prudence is the character of their community. Discerning the common good and the good means for accomplishing this good takes place in communities. Practical reasoning requires a relational setting that fosters and nourishes “doing our best together.” This is why friendship is so important to practical reasoning. Friendship enables us to appreciate the goodness of the other and so help us choose the good together in counsel with each other. The counsel and choice of which Aquinas wrote are acts of reason in its relational form. This is also why I believe that more work on and teaching of care ethics can contribute to practical reasoning.

So, how do we structure our courses and our pedagogies to help cultivate practical reasoning? There is no one answer to this question, but constantly holding the query before ourselves and asking the question together should help us develop some positive practices. Some practices that I believe to be successful include teaching with colleagues or at least working together on pedagogical labor. Providing students safe opportunities to think and discern together and so develop habits of counsel and relational knowledge that will serve them well in individual decisions is also important. Ways of designing classes and course requirements that facilitate this learning are vital, not only to the education of our students but to the well-being of our societies and their public discourse.

Works Cited

Aquinas. *Summa Theologica*. From *Introduction to Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Anton G. Pegis (ed.). New York: The Modern Library, 1948.

Aristotle. *The Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. H. Rackham. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968.

Havel, Václav. *Summer Meditations*. Trans. Paul Wilson. New York: Vintage Books, 1993.

Noddings, Nel. *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

Nussbaum, Martha. *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997.

Shakespeare, William. *Henry V*.

Weapons of the Spirit. Dir. Pierre Sauvage. Friends of Le Chambon, 1989.

Welschler, Lawrence. "Take No Prisoners." *The New Yorker*, 17 June 1996: 54-59.