REINFORCING STUDENTS’ CORE ETHICAL COMMITMENTS THROUGH EMPHASIS OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT

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Moral Formation

Running deep throughout the mission of Catholic universities is the notion of formation, the shaping of the “desires, expenditures, hopes, drives, activities” of our students. Central to the notion of formation is the identification and refinement of a student's core commitments, those values and life projects that give one's life meaning and purpose. Those who teach in a university setting facilitate the student's ethical and moral development from an ideology that is grounded in the world of family and peers to one where the authority for one's ethical actions is grounded in the self. This particular transition is critical because if people fail to take on the responsibility of being an ethical self within the community, they remain tied to the projects and commitments of their family and community of origin instead of moving into adulthood. While the value commitments of the family are never completely rejected, a critical task for the young adult is to choose which commitments to bring forward and which to replace with a more expansive or enhanced view of the community and world in which they live and work.

As those within universities embark on the project of moral formation, many competing psychological and spiritual models are offered to map a trajectory of growth. While beyond the scope of this paper, each of those models in some way moves the individual toward what Bernard Lonergan calls authenticity, a state in which one not only knows but acts upon that which is actually true and really worthwhile: in traditional philosophic language, the authentic person is one who seeks out and acts upon the good and the true.

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2 James W. Fowler, Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Mean (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 18n2-183. See also Daniel A. Helminiak, Spiritual Development: An Interdisciplinary Study (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1987), 72-73, which provides an overview of eight theories of moral/spiritual development.
For many years those of us in higher education have assumed that by the time our students' graduate we have achieved some measure of success in moving them toward authenticity. We assumed that philosophy and theology classes were part of the core curriculum. We talked about “values based education” and intentionally wove themes of ethics and justice into our various classes. As faculty members were hired, attention was given to “hiring for mission” and then developing programs and opportunities to assist the formation of our new colleagues in light of the values and mission of our respective institutions. However, as assessment for learning becomes ever more important for the university enterprise, explicit attention to the goals and outcomes of ethics education and intentional methods of assuring learning are more critical to assure that we are actually accomplishing what we say we are doing.

**Ethics Assessment at Notre Dame**

One such effort was undertaken by the University of Notre Dame’s Mendoza College of Business. Faculty wanted to make the implicit explicit through determining appropriate learning outcomes for ethics and values-based education. Assuring that threads of ethics that often include considerations of Catholic Social Thought foundational to the mission of Catholic higher education are also included in the educational enterprise makes the challenge daunting. The Mendoza College of Business has intentionally attended to ethics in business since its inception; however, faculty and administrators consistently strive to enhance their efforts. In 2009, the undergraduate program continued to evolve and one of the tools included in the curriculum was the Ethical Lens Inventory (ELI).

**Embracing Ethical Plurality**

The ELI is an instrument that helps students identify their core ethical commitments. The instrument was designed by Catharyn Baird and Jeannine Niacaris after Baird developed a meta-ethical approach to ethics education. In 1986, as Baird was tasked with teaching law and ethics in an MBA class, the question she asked was how to help students make sense of the various ethical theories. In many ethics classes and traditional business ethics texts, the students are introduced to the various theories and their flaws, then left on their own to decide how best to live. In the process, ethical decision making became synonymous with following the law; the rational approach to ethics and economics supported by the Chicago School of Economics became the default position. As the policies supported by the Chicago School fly often contravene the

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4 Colleagues in Jesuit Business Education, an organization founded in 1997, has as its mission the formation of new faculty members into the Jesuit mission as well as providing a forum for best practices for folding the Jesuit mission into the business curriculum. Founded by Fr. Robert Spitzer, who at the time was at Seattle University, this conference attracts upward to 150 scholars each year to discuss the role of Jesuit mission and Catholic thought in the shaping of the business curriculum.
themes of justice and Catholic Social Thought, a different approach to ethics education was desired. In light of Lonergan's notion of ethical formation for authenticity, the first task was to find the commonalities among the theorists to see how the approaches could work together rather than compete against each other.

Baird’s meta-analysis demonstrated that the four primary ethical theories (deontology, consequentialism/utilitarianism, justice, and virtue ethics) that are included in a typical ethics curriculum can be mapped against core values in tension inherent in every community. The first value in tension continuum is between autonomy and equality: When should the individual and organizations be privileged and be free to choose a personal course of action and when should the community be able to impose criteria for ethical actions on those who live and work within the economic and political community? As articulated within the Catholic Social Tradition, the call for a “preferential option for the poor” requires that one set aside personal prerogatives and power in order to assure that the needs of those without voice or resources are met. This emphasis leads to a commitment to economic justice, again a hallmark of Catholic Social Thought, rather than solely maximizing profit both at an individual and firm level.

The second value in tension continuum is between rationality and sensibility: When should the exact requirements of an ethical principle be applied and when should some flexibility in application be allowed? This tension is seen in the distinction between an ethics curriculum that is based on rationality and principle based ethics that comes from the Kohlbergian ethics tradition versus a curriculum that is grounded in theories of character formation and prudential judgment that is characteristic of Thomistic tradition.

This meta-analysis also provided a theoretical foundation to advocate for ethical plurality rather than getting lost in the mire of arguments about ethical relativism, the notion that people change their values and actions based on the expediency of the moment. While current literature about behavioral ethics is rich with examples of how we fail to live into our ethical commitments, that body of work demonstrates a lack of ethical maturity as people do not consistently live into their core commitments rather than providing a critique of the various ethical theories and perspectives. The concept of ethical plurality allows us to acknowledge that different people
might have varying ethical commitments that inform which of several possible courses of action one might choose when face with ethical dilemmas.

The ELI thus first provides students with a snapshot of their own ethical commitments as they identify which of the four ethical perspectives is their foundational ethical lens. Designed with thirty-six questions, the ELI measures a responder’s preference for privileging autonomy or equality and rationality or sensibility in resolving an ethical dilemma. The questions are forced pairs and students are instructed to choose the item that would indicate their value or action if they had to choose, if their back were against the wall. From the choices, the preferred ethical lens is identified. The notion is that one’s home lens is the preferred perspective taken when analyzing an ethical dilemma. Thus, the values and the language of the lens tend to be the place where one begins to analyze a problem when faced with a disruption in the flow of action due to the presence of an ethical dilemma. 5

In addition to helping students determine which of the four ethical perspectives is their preferred “lens” for viewing ethical issues, the materials included with the instrument help learners identify both their ethical strengths and blind spots. The ELI also helps students understand the ethical perspectives of other people and develop strategies for effectively working with those with other ethical priorities. The materials presented in the class in conjunction with the ELI also teach students how to advocate for those without voice or power, consistent with values of Catholic Social Teaching.

Once each of the students in the class has completed the ELI, the class as a whole gets a bird’s eye view of the range of commitments held by their colleagues. The aggregate information for a class is presented in a scatter plot that maps the typology of the participants. A typical scatter plot for a BAET 20300 class at the University of

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5 Gordon D. Kaufman. *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). Kaufman distinguishes three types of disruptions that would cause an interruption in the automatic flow of action that is characteristic of human existence: (a) technical, not knowing the right way to do something, (b) aesthetic, an interruption in one’s preferred way of acting, and (c) ethical, not knowing how best to act given the core values and commitments of oneself and those with whom one is in community.
Notre Dame shows the differences in ethical sensibilities of the students in a class. As faculty members look at a scatter plot, several questions typically get asked. The first is how to interpret the ethical commitments of those who land in the center. A preliminary answer is that those who are in the center of the grid are not certain of their own ethical commitments. Thus, they do not have a particular grounding in any ethical tradition. Anecdotally, that explanation appears to hold when talking with freshmen or sophomores.

Adults who land in the center often report that they answered the questions based on how they wanted people to see them rather than truly on their preferred ethical commitments. Another typical response is that the person answered some of the questions based on their personal preferences and some based on their professional commitments. One possible explanation for placement in the center is that the person has ethical agility; they are able to easily access and use all of the norms of the various ethical theories in resolving ethical issues. Additional research is being designed to determine whether the ethical agility theory will hold.

The second question is what to make of the ethical commitments of people who place close to the edges of the grid. Again, anecdotally, people who find themselves on the edge confirm that they have very strong ethical commitments in the direction of the placement. People on the far autonomy edge will often confirm that they are rugged individualists, preferring to work alone. One respondent who was at the very edge of rationality commented that she had just finished defending her dissertation; she was looking forward to getting “out of her head” back into a more balanced mode of living. Interestingly, colleagues of those on the edges will report their experience of the person as rigid and inflexible.

While the notion of different ethical perspectives goes back to the beginning of ethical discourse, in many ethics classes, the different perspectives are set up in opposition to each other rather than showing how the approaches work together for balance and stability. The pedagogical theory behind the ELI is that while at a high level of abstraction universal ethical concepts can be found, when each of us moves those abstract values into action, the values take on different priorities. Thus, someone whose typology is the Results Lens (consequentialism/utilitarianism) tends to value harmonizing conflicting desires to reach the greatest good (sensibility) more than someone whose typology is the Rights/Responsibilities Lens (deontology) and values embracing the duties that would flow from relentlessly seeking the truth.

The goal in the classroom is to help learners see the differences and understand that differences in value priorities do not make someone more or less ethical. Rather, acknowledging and working with the variations assure that all ethical perspectives are represented and considered in resolution of an ethical dilemma. The result is an embracing of robust ethical plurality that
supports a thoughtful and vibrant community rather than a devolution to ethical relativity, which occurs when the source of the differences is not seen limiting the options for action.

**Transmission of Value Memes**

When students come to the university, their world view has been shaped by their community or birth. A primary developmental task at the university level is through the various classes and extra-curricular activities to have that world view challenged and then reconfigured from an adult point of view. The assumption behind the educational enterprise is that the values that are part of the fabric of the curriculum and the academic life will inform the beliefs and values of those who graduate. The question becomes: In what direction will the twig be bent? In terms of ethics, from a developmental approach, Kohlberg described the process of ethical maturity: individuals move from making decisions based on pure self-interest, to being blindly obedient to rules and authority, then to a higher stage of acting according to mutual interpersonal expectations and, finally, to the aspirational stage, where all decisions are made based on universal ethical principles. Norma Haan, a feminist theorist, reminds those with a teleological bent that we must attend to the relational aspects of ethics, how we use our power in the various situations in which we as humans find ourselves. The behavioral ethicists have shown us that attending to both is necessary and neither alone is sufficient. As Stephen Winter, writing on the intersection of the law, ethics, and the mind reminds us:

> Developments in cognitive theory undermine both of these philosophical presuppositions: Thought is not primarily linguistic and propositional, but embodied and imaginative; language is neither entirely arbitrary nor merely socially contingent, but grounded in our embodiment and motivated by our interactions with the physical and social world.

Winter suggests that our freedom as humans is best served not by transcending our context but rather by reworking the very ground of our social situation from the place in which we stand, a “real physical and social world that we construct and reconstruct through acts of imagination and commitment.”

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10 Ibid., 357.
To begin to envision how those of us charged to teach in a classroom might help students construct and reconstruct their social world, we turn to one more conceptual breakthrough in the world of ethics—value memes. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi first used the concept of memes to describe the origins of human behavior.\(^{11}\) Clare W. Graves, a behavioral psychologist who pioneered the work of behavioral ethics in the mid-twentieth century, identified what he calls “value memes,” (vMEMEs) that

…establish the pace and process for gathering beliefs. They structure the thinking, value systems, political forms, and world view of entire civilizations. vMEMEs are linchpins of corporate culture that determine how and why decisions are made.\(^{12}\)

Graves suggested that our ethics depend on “a world view, a value system, a level of psychological existence, a belief structure, organizing principle, a way of thinking, and a mode of living.”\(^{13}\) The behaviors that express our principles become a virtual kaleidoscope where each of the above factors informs what we designate as “ethical” behavior. Because vMEMEs are created as we copy ideas from each other, a phenomenon that allows us to learn from each other rather than having to experience everything ourselves, the academic community needs to attend to the vMEMEs that are part of its culture, including what beliefs and behaviors are held up as virtuous and which beliefs and behaviors are not acceptable in the community.\(^{14}\)

Research shows that our behavior will tend to be consistent with the value meme from which we view the world. As increased attention has been given to ethics education at the university level, we have an opportunity to see whether or not the values embedded in the curriculum, whether implicit or explicit, have informed the values of students upon graduation. In the five years that the ELI has been available for academic use, more than 68,000 learners in 165 universities have completed the instrument. The learners have ranged from entering freshmen through graduate students, each class demonstrating its own pattern of ethics commitments. As we began looking at the aggregate data, patterns began to emerge, giving insight into the process and results of ethics education. As the results were reviewed and broken into different learner segments, striking differences emerged between the core ethical commitments of students attending Catholic institutions versus public and/or private institutions.

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\(^{13}\) Ibid., 40.

We noticed that the progression of student value commitments tended to mirror the value commitments of the institution. At first blush, the data would tend to show that those whose business programs were built on the individualistic themes of the Chicago School of Economics and Kohlberg tended to graduate students with a bent toward principle-based ethics while Catholic universities who would tend to include themes of social justice tended to graduate students with a bent toward virtue based ethics. The MEMEs of the institution and its faculty were being transmitted to their students.

In evaluating the data, we sought answers to several questions. First, what was the overall typology pattern? How many students landed in the center of the ELI, potentially indicating that they were not secure in their own ethical commitments, versus placement in the various lenses, which would indicate stronger value commitments? Second, did the results of students from Catholic universities indicate different value priorities than the value priorities of students from secular or other religious institutions? And finally, did we see any evidence of increasing ethical maturity, defined as becoming more confident in one’s ethical commitments, over time?

Thus, the first step was to identify the overall predominated ethical values of students enrolled in universities in the United States. Starting with EthicsGame’s database of approximately 68,000 ELI scores that were identified by university and course name, the data was categorized by type of institution of higher learning (Public, Proprietary, Independent, Catholic, Lutheran, etc.), by subject matter of the class (Business, Nursing, Philosophy, etc.), and by course level (lower Division, upper Division, graduate). After scrubbing, we had a net of 60,466 records.

The first aggregate chart identified the overall ethical commitments of the students broken into 25 different sectors. Interestingly, 16.8% of the students landed in the central zone, indicating that they either did not know their ethical commitments or were able to use the ethical criteria of all the lenses. The next striking observation was that

Complete Database (60,466 observations)

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15 In reading the charts, the dark shading indicates students who landed within the lens itself. The light shading indicates students who straddled two values. For example, the light shading by “autonomy,” indicates students who were balanced between “rationality” and “sensibility” in their value preferences. The dark arrows indicate the markers for the square grid. The light arrows show the mean. So, for the chart above, the “tilt” is toward the Rights/Responsibilities Lens and autonomy.
looking around the perimeter of the chart, very few students were on the outer edge. Thus, people were either moderate in their ethical preference or uncertain. For those with strong commitments, the greatest number fell within the Rights/Responsibilities quadrant, with 2.3% strong autonomy and 2.0% strong rationality. Given the emphasis in the United States for independent, individualistic thinking, that data point is not particularly surprising.

When the data from the sectors was aggregated by ethical lens, we saw that 14.6% of the learners were in the Rights/Responsibilities Lens, the deontological perspective. 12.4% of the students were in the Reputation Lens, the virtue ethics perspective. Given that most of ethics education in the United States focuses on principles (deontology) or character (virtue ethics), the placement was not unexpected.

When the data was disaggregated according to type of university, a striking pattern emerged. The Catholic universities represented include Notre Dame, Vanderbilt, Regis University, Creighton University, St. Thomas (Texas), the University of Portland, and the University of San Diego. In these institutions, more of the students were clear about their ethical commitments, as indicated by a smaller number of results in the middle of the quadrants. Students were equally divided between the Rights/ Responsibilities Lens (deontological perspective) and the Reputation Lens (virtue ethics perspective). We also see an increase in numbers in the Relationship Lens (justice ethics).

The next question was how the public universities compared with the Catholic universities. For that data set, the majority of students were located in the Rights/Responsibilities Lens (18.2%) with only 12.8% in the Reputation Lens (virtue ethics) and 4.5% in the Relationship Lens (justice ethics). Again, given the emphasis on principle based ethics in the public sector, this data is not a surprise.
What was a bit of a surprise is that the data spread for independent universities, many of whom are traditionally faith based and still have a seminary presence, was the same as that of the public universities. Thus, while the independent universities had slightly more students landing in the center, the distribution between the Rights/Responsibilities Lens (deontological focus) and the Reputation Lens (virtue ethics) was the same.

This data snapshot confirms that the Catholic Universities, whatever their stripe, both attract and form students who have a bias toward the community and virtue ethics. While precepts of Catholic Social Thought track squarely with the Relationship Lens (justice theories), the first slicing of the data would indicate that Catholic students have a higher interest in assuring that the values of the community are upheld (Reputation Lens/virtue theories) but not necessarily a focus on justice. However, when we look at the data across the span of the collegiate experience, another picture emerges.

**Framing the Ethical Self**

A developmental task for the college student is identifying the embedded ethical commitments of their family and community of origin, choosing which ones they want to adopt and which they want to jettison, in order to develop their own ethical commitments—their emerging adult ethical self. To see whether the data showed that students changed over their academic career, the data was then divided by university type across three levels: lower division, upper division, and graduate students. The first question was whether as students progressed in their studies, they became more certain in their ethical commitments. The second question was how their ethical commitments changed, if at all. With a developmental approach to ethics, we would expect to
see students over the course of their studies moving out of the center toward one of the ethical perspectives.

Entering freshmen and sophomores in Catholic universities have a slight bias toward the Reputation Lens (virtue ethics) and a strong preference for the Rights/Responsibility Lens (deontology). 15% of the lower division students were in the center, slightly higher than the aggregate for all Catholic universities but considerably fewer than the aggregate for public and independent universities. One provisional conclusion could be that entering freshmen at Catholic universities have a more clear sense of their ethical commitments than their counterparts in public/independent universities. However, the change in ethical commitments over the course of studies was striking.

By graduate school, the percentage of students in the center had dropped from 15.5% to 12.4%. The most intriguing shift was the migration away from the Rights/Responsibility Lens (deontological focus) toward other perspectives. As lower division students, 16.9% were placed in the Rights/Responsibility Lens, dropping to 14.6% for upper class students, and then 12.9% for graduate students. The trend was exactly the opposite for public universities (17.5% — lower division, 18.5% — upper division, 20.1% — graduate students) and independent universities (11.0% — lower division, 18.7% — upper division, and 22.6% — graduate students). Clearly, the emphasis in the Catholic universities toward virtue ethics and themes of justice showed an evolving ethical self that was very different than the public/independent universities.

When the overall movement was analyzed, the clear trend for students in Catholic universities was an increased focus on the community and following the heart with the emphasis on
sensitivity. The pattern for the Relationship Lens (justice ethics) showed a strong movement toward embracing the principles of Catholic Social Thought — whether implicitly or explicitly (4.3% — lower division, 3.3% — upper division, 8.6% — graduate students). The other strong movement was toward the Reputation Lens (virtue ethics), again a strong theme in Catholic education (15.4% — lower division, 13.6% — upper division, 17.2% — graduate students).

While the data can provide interesting preliminary interpretations, we must remember that the studies are not longitudinal, where the same students are tracked over time. However, the trend would indicate that both as students mature and as they are exposed to increasingly sophisticated ethical thought, those in Catholic Universities are, in fact, formed in the classic sense of Catholic thought as they embrace themes of justice, virtue, and civic responsibility.

**Intervening with intention**

Every regional accrediting body requires that a university demonstrate how the educational enterprise allows students to grow into the commitments embodied in the mission statement of that university. While many public universities do not mention ethical formation in their mission statement, every Catholic university espouses some notion of development of an ethical self in service to the community. As curriculum development and assessment efforts take on the requirement of demonstrating a commitment to ethical development, the mission statements can come to life in a variety of classes, equipping students to go into the world with a commitment to serve.

As we map the ethical development of students using the tool of the ELI, we can see that the institutionalization of the values of Catholic education clearly has an impact. While graduate students in public and independent universities tend to migrate toward a greater emphasis on individual responsibility, students in Catholic universities are taught to look at the greater whole, the community at large. As the global community faces ever increasing challenges to make sense of complex understandings of the common good as seen in topics such as sustainability and environmental ethics, those who have embraced ethical leadership from the perspective of the community will be able to shape our collective future in a thoughtful, intentional way.

Kwame Anthony Appiah, in his very thoughtful book *The Ethics of Identity*, discusses the critical project of education with a goal of formation. He reminds us that the task of education is to prepare people to live as autonomous adults and second to assure the good of the polity as people contribute to the overall wellbeing of the community.16 Included in that education are experiences of discourse that show equality of respect as various ideas are communicated and

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discussed. However, just as important as encouraging a discourse of respect is considering “what narratives we will embed them in; they are about which of the many true stories we will tell.”

Our conclusion is not that Catholic or other faith-based schools produce more ethical students—just students with value commitments that are traditionally associated with the justice and virtue perspectives rather than those value commitments that are traditionally associated with individual principle based ethics. Because students at Catholic universities are persuasively introduced to the perspectives of Catholic Social Thought and servant leadership, they adopt a narrative of a good life that includes care for the community and the particular human lives within the community.

As we survey a tattered global financial system almost brought to its knees because insufficient attention was paid to the effects of individual actions on the community as a whole, those of us committed to the value structures Catholic Social Thought can provide great benefit to our larger community by graduating students who carry forward the values of community and justice into their various professions. In the process, we also provide a specific foundation for students to exercise moral courage as they speak in opposition to those who would trample the rights and opportunities of those without voice and power, those whom we are all called to serve.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 207