Teaching Ethics at a Catholic College or University

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What role should the Catholic intellectual and social tradition play in the way that moral philosophy is taught at Catholic colleges or universities? At such institutions, should moral philosophy be taught in a distinctive manner? For students at Catholic colleges and universities who plan to pursue a career in business, what role should the study of moral philosophy play in their education? Should this role be different at a Catholic institution than at a secular one?

These questions might arise for several sorts of readers. Some philosophers teaching ethics at a Catholic college or university might not have a great deal of background in either the Catholic intellectual tradition or in teaching business students. Others readers might include business school faculty or those involved in the disciplines of business education; such readers, while obviously committed to educating students who behave in a responsible and ethical way, might not have advanced academic training in the discipline of philosophy and may be uncertain about the content of a course in ethics or whether there is a distinctive role for a course in ethics in the undergraduate curriculum of business students at Catholic colleges or universities. Finally, administrators, students, parents, and others might find themselves asking whether and how the Catholic intellectual tradition, along with contemporary Catholic social thought, can or should contribute to business education at Catholic colleges or universities. What challenges are faced by those charged with teaching ethics in such contexts? How might these challenges be addressed?

To address this topic with these readers in mind, we proceed in eight steps. 1) First, we reflect briefly on the notion of the “Catholic intellectual tradition.” 2) Next, we consider the contemporary context, especially the way that moral philosophy is frequently practiced in the contemporary academic context, especially the way it has become an area of specialization. 3) We then consider the place of philosophy, especially moral philosophy, in Catholicism. 4) We reach a preliminary conclusion: one of the central purposes for the study of moral philosophy at Catholic universities is to cultivate in students a deepened understanding of and appreciation for the Western philosophical tradition and Catholic heritage, especially to nurture in each student a philosophical habit of mind, a spirit of intellectual inquiry, and a lifelong desire for wisdom. 5) We outline briefly four distinctive contributions to moral philosophy that are associated with and which have developed in Catholicism: virtue ethics, the natural law tradition, practical reasoning, and the emphasis on the dignity of the person. 6) We discuss several reasons
why students who study moral philosophy at Catholic colleges and universities benefit from familiarity with other philosophies, especially utilitarianism, deontology, care ethics, and non-Western approaches to moral deliberation. 7) We draw attention to the importance of helping students develop the ability to engage in a responsible manner with, learn from, and evaluate other moral traditions. 8) We conclude with some thoughts about how this approach can benefit business faculty.

1. What is the Catholic intellectual tradition?

The Catholic intellectual tradition is a living tradition. As such, it is an ongoing argument about the excellences involved in Catholic life and practice. So, one of its central characteristics is debate and inquiry. The Acts of the Apostles describes various disputes among the apostles. One of the most famous of these was described as “dissension and debate” (Acts 15:1). So, the tradition, from the beginning, is characterized by debate. Another characteristic of the Catholic intellectual tradition is its willingness to engage with and learn from individuals and cultures that are not Catholic. Of course, there are instances, regrettably far too many, where Catholics individually or as a group have not been hospitable to others or willing to learn from them. Still, the Catholic tradition at its best aspires to find God’s presence in all of creation; this includes a willingness to engage with others. Doing so opens one up to the possibility of learning from others. For example, when St. Paul visited Athens, he engaged in conversation and debate with the philosophers of that city (Acts 17:18-19). So, the Catholic tradition includes conversation and debate, both within itself and with others.

It might be tempting to conceive of the Catholic intellectual tradition as a sort of museum piece that can be dusted off and studied. After all, this tradition has a 2,000-year-old history, and important parts of that history involve engaging with the (non-Christian) Greek philosophical tradition as exemplified by St. Paul in Athens. Further, many of the most important Catholic intellectuals lived centuries ago. Consider for example St. Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430), St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033 - 1109), or St. Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 1274). Because the Catholic tradition is ancient, it is easy to overlook the degree to which it is a living tradition. Rather than considering the Catholic tradition as if it were a museum-piece like a painting or a statue, it would be better and more accurate for students to learn that it is a developing tradition. Learning this tradition is more like entering a garden than entering a museum.

Further, it is worth noting that the various strands and chutes within the ongoing argument that is the Catholic tradition have been embodied in communities, and that these communities have frequently developed a variety of approaches with differing emphases. Many students who take an introductory course in philosophy may encounter an argument from Anselm or Thomas Aquinas. It is helpful for students at Catholic colleges and universities to become aware that Anselm was a Benedictine monk, and that Thomas Aquinas was a Dominican friar. These two traditions each have their own communities, spiritual disciplines, practices, and emphases. To oversimplify, Benedictine spirituality emphasizes prayer and work along with the love of learning in a stable community that opens itself in hospitality to others. Dominican spirituality, while...
also emphasizing community and prayer, places perhaps a greater emphasis on teaching and preaching to bring about personal and communal transformation. Of course, many communities have enriched the Catholic tradition: Christian Brothers, Franciscans, the Congregation of the Holy Cross, the Jesuits, LaSallians, Marianists, Vincentians, and others. So, the Catholic tradition is, in a sense, a tradition of traditions. Many of these communities have formed colleges and universities. For those who are teaching at a Catholic college or university shaped by one of these traditions, it may be appropriate for the curriculum of a particular Catholic college or university to be shaped in a distinctive way to reflect the charism and emphasis of that institution’s founders, community, and tradition.

With that said, there are several central features of the Catholic intellectual tradition that might inform a course in ethics at any Catholic college or university. Later, we discuss especially virtue ethics, the natural law tradition, practical reasoning, and an emphasis on the dignity of the human person.

Another significant feature of the Catholic intellectual tradition is the development, especially since the late 19th century, of Catholic social thought. Expressed especially in a series of social encyclicals and other texts from the Vatican, this part of the Catholic tradition concerns many contemporary moral and social questions having to do with the changing conditions of contemporary life and its impact on individual human persons, the family, culture, economics, politics, and international issues. Contemporary Catholic social thought is highly interdisciplinary in character. While it certainly involves theology, economics, and politics, it relies heavily on, and contains within it, philosophical arguments and concepts concerned with ethics. For philosophers more familiar with focusing solely on formal arguments (as presented in scholarly journal articles and books), the social encyclicals may seem, in certain ways, non-philosophical. However, it is worthwhile to recognize that moral philosophies can be embodied and transmitted into social life many ways, and the social encyclicals are an important medium through which Catholic concerns for justice and peace have entered contemporary life. As such, professors charged with teaching moral philosophy at Catholic colleges and universities do well to engage this body of literature with their students.

Because the Catholic tradition is both ancient and living, and because the tradition is an ongoing conversation, students need to learn the ideas and arguments that are integral to the tradition. This allows students to “catch up with themselves,” as it were. By becoming introduced to the arguments, debates, and competing philosophies about what makes for a good life and what makes an action moral, students become able to understand their heritage in a responsible and mature way and to participate in its ongoing conversations.

2. The Challenge of Specialization

The discipline of philosophy, like theology, faces several distinctive challenges in the contemporary context. Philosophy, like theology, has played an integrative role in the
curriculum. Part of philosophy’s role has been to call attention to questions of ultimate purpose. However, contemporary research universities have seriously challenged the integrative role of both philosophy and theology. At modern research universities, where aspiring college and university professors pursue their doctoral studies, each academic discipline frequently is treated as autonomous and self-defining. Prestige and influence at such universities often is associated with intensely and narrowly specialized research and scholarship. In such a context, it might seem imprudent to spend time learning or focusing on any discipline other than one’s own. The same is true of the discipline of philosophy, at least according to a widely held contemporary attitude. For example, Scott Soames has written that contemporary philosophy “has become an aggregate of related, but semi-independent investigations, very much like other academic disciplines.”\(^1\) As such, philosophy is “done by specialists primarily for other specialists.”\(^2\)

In contexts where specialized knowledge is needed to solve a particular problem, specialization is certainly helpful. Faced with a complicated problem, it is wonderful to be able to consult with someone who possesses the appropriate expertise. Whether one’s arena is research (as with the scientist), corporate effectiveness (as with the manager), or philosophical problem-solving (as with the professional philosopher) each specialist claims expertise based on effective problem-solving ability drawn from skilled analysis. The expert’s analytic method, relative to each field, involves breaking things down to fix manageable problems.

In many contexts, specialized knowledge is quite desirable. Indeed, higher education and professional schools have become outstanding at producing countless experts. Despite the benefits that come from expertise, the culture of specialization has several shortcomings. For example, it can result in hyper-specialization and fragmentation. The result seems to be that there is an expert for every perceived problem. In that context, several problems have remained largely hidden and unaddressed. In some instances, experts who profess to assist us actually end up doing harm. Frequently, what is needed is not another expert with specialized knowledge; rather, what is needed is the practical wisdom to determine whether or not the one offering expertise is promoting human flourishing or harm.

The culture of specialization leaves us with another problem. There seems to be no expert or specialist who can address the question as to whether human life has any integrated meaning or deeper purpose. Contemporary culture, that is, the culture of endless specialists, leaves us without any rational way to evaluate the various attempts to provide such a synthesis. Every effort to discern an integrated understanding about what makes for a good human life seems to get reduced to individual preferences.

Part of the task of philosophy in the curriculum at Catholic colleges and universities is to awaken our students to this problem. Those who teach philosophy have the task of

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2 Soames, 2:463.
awakening students to pursue answers to questions of deep purpose. “Who am I? Where have I come from and where am I going? Why is there evil? What is there after this life?” How shall we live? What makes for a good life? How can we shape the communities of which we are members to help make them just, humane, and civil?

These are not the questions of specialists. Such questions arise in the lives of ordinary persons. Of course, it is possible to live for long periods in a state that is unreflective and unphilosophical. One who exists in this unreflective state may unwittingly presume the truth of the philosophical views embedded in the customs and culture in which one has been raised, perhaps even in a fragmentary manner filled with unnoticed inconsistencies. Such a person may be confronted by a crisis of meaning that provokes deep questions. Once provoked, this person may ask more profound philosophical questions. Is it possible to distinguish appearance from reality? Can we know the thoughts and inner life of another? Can we reliably predict the future based on generalizations from the past? Faced with these sorts of questions, such a person finds himself or herself on a quest. To take up that quest with seriousness, the person will need to withstand the temptation to dismiss that search as non-rational, thereby learning to use practical reason with others to uncover the order implicit yet actually present in the world while calling into question the norms espoused by one’s contemporaries.

Part of the task of philosophy at Catholic universities involves awakening students to these sorts of questions of deep purpose. Another part of the task of philosophy is to provide students with those intellectual excellences that allow one to participate in such a quest. This includes the ability to engage in conceptual clarification, evaluation of the truth of propositions, and the analysis of arguments. It also involves learning to read patiently and to interpret accurately the ideas and arguments of others who have engaged such questions. By learning to understand competing lines of reasoning, one can enter into a perennial debate about such questions.

As part of that process, it is altogether appropriate for students to learn that philosophical questioning can become rigorous and to recognize that the discipline of philosophy demands the development of a technical vocabulary. At the same time, teachers of moral philosophy need to recall that the philosophical debates that constitute the discipline of philosophy arise out of the concerns of ordinary persons and that the quest to pursue the truth about such questions contributes to the common good of ordinary persons.

3. The Place of Philosophy (and Moral Philosophy) in Catholicism

Teachers and students of moral philosophy at Catholic universities do well to recall that the Catholic faith prizes the activity and practice of philosophy. While it is no doubt true that there have been many Catholics with an anti-intellectual streak as well as episodes in the history of the Church where people acted in a manner that is not conducive to the

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activity of philosophy, such individuals or episodes do not reflect the aspirations of Catholic life.

It was noted above that St. Paul engaged in debate in Athens with philosophers. Church leaders repeatedly have praised the practice of philosophy. Pope John Paul devoted one of his encyclicals, *Fides et Ratio*, to the question of the relation between faith and philosophy. In it, he praised philosophy, stating that the Church “sees in philosophy the way to come to know fundamental truths about human life. At the same time, the Church considers philosophy an indispensable help for a deeper understanding.” The Second Vatican Council praised the study of philosophy⁴, and during the 19th century, Pope Leo famously called for a renewal in philosophy that emphasized reviving the study of Thomas Aquinas.⁵ In doing so, he pointed to the precedent of many earlier popes who praised the importance of the philosophical and theological writings of St. Thomas.⁶ Finally, it is worth noting that the study of philosophy plays an important role in the formation of Roman Catholic priests. Indeed, the undergraduate study of those preparing to become priests includes extensive coursework in philosophy, roughly equivalent to that of an undergraduate major in philosophy including a required course in ethics.⁷ Although the Catholic faith is not a philosophy, and the official teaching of the Church does not endorse a specific approach to philosophy,⁸ the discipline of philosophy and the study of moral philosophy play an important role in the intellectual life of Catholicism.

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⁸ See United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Program of Priestly Formation. Fifth Edition*. Washington, D.C.: United States Conference Of Catholic Bishops 2006. “In the college seminary, students follow a double course of intellectual formation. They first pursue the liberal arts, through which they acquire a sense of the great human questions contained in the arts and sciences. They synthesize and organize their study of the liberal arts through the study of philosophy, which also serves as a preparation for the study of theology. This two-fold college program also initiates students to the study of theology that will, of course, be pursued in greater depth in the theologate.” Prior to study in the theologate, those in priestly formation must first complete “at least 30 semester credit hours” in philosophy (23). This must include the study of ethics “which treats general principles of ethical decision making, provides seminarians with a solid grounding in themes like conscience, freedom, law, responsibility, virtue, and guilt. Ethics also considers the common good and virtue of solidarity as central to Christian social political philosophy. It provides a foundation for the seminarian’s study of moral theology” (60).
⁹ See John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* 49. “The Church has no philosophy of her own nor does she canonize any one particular philosophy in preference to others. The underlying reason for this reluctance is that, even when it engages theology, philosophy must remain faithful to its own principles and methods. Otherwise there would be no guarantee that it would remain oriented to truth and that it was moving towards truth by way of a process governed by reason. A philosophy which did not proceed in the light of reason according to its own principles and methods would serve little purpose. At the deepest level, the autonomy which philosophy enjoys is rooted in the fact that reason is by its nature oriented to truth and is equipped moreover with the means necessary to arrive at truth.”
4. On Learning One’s Tradition

At this point, we can reach a preliminary conclusion: one of the central purposes for the study of moral philosophy at Catholic colleges and universities is to cultivate in students a deepened understanding of and appreciation for the Western philosophical tradition and Catholic heritage. The contemporary world seems to be full of debates, and these are sometimes presented as if they are absolutely new. The study of philosophy can provide a framework for engaging contemporary moral debates. By learning that there is a tradition of inquiry as well as ways in which competing arguments can be evaluated, students can learn to think from within a discipline. In contrast to the consumer-attitude that paints each moral challenge as brand new, the study of philosophy allows students to learn the long history of their tradition and to cultivate a set of philosophical and moral dispositions. The discipline of philosophy, when communicated well to students, should nurture a philosophical habit of mind, a spirit of intellectual inquiry, and a lifelong desire for wisdom that is practical as well as theoretical and so seeks the common good. Of course, something like this might be said at any liberal arts college or at any university that prizes philosophy as an important component in undergraduate education. Are there distinctive contributions in the field of ethics that flow from the Catholic tradition and which should inform courses in ethics taught at Catholic institutions?

5. Virtue Ethics, The Natural Law Tradition, Practical Reasoning, Dignity of the Person

We suggest that there are at least four such: virtue ethics, the natural law tradition, practical reasoning, and the dignity of the person. While none of these approaches to moral philosophy are distinctively Roman Catholic, each is strongly associated with the Catholic intellectual tradition. Students at Catholic institutions who take a course in ethics should expect to cover these approaches, along with others. We provide a brief description and discussion of each of these approaches to moral philosophy.

A. Virtue Ethics

In academic ethics as it is practiced in the English-speaking world, it is well-known to specialists in moral philosophy that virtue ethics has enjoyed a revival during the last 50 years. At the time when Elizabeth Anscombe published her famous article, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” the two reigning approaches to ethics in the secular world were utilitarianism and duty ethics. (We discuss these in greater detail in the next section.) Modern moral philosophy tends to proceed as if the central philosophical question has to do with determining which rational first principle can be used to justify actions. Anscombe was famously critical of both of utilitarianism and duty ethics. She called for a return to an ethic of virtue. In the secular academy, many philosophers heeded her call, including Alasdair MacIntyre, Phillipa Foote, and Rosalind Hursthouse. In fact, a widely

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10 Elizabeth Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” *Philosophy* 33, No. 124 (January 1958). This essay is included in many anthologies and collections.
held view in the secular academy states that virtue ethics is currently one of “three major approaches in normative ethics.”

At the same time the secular academy in the English speaking world was “rediscovering” the virtues, there was a continuous emphasis on the virtues in many other places, including especially within the Roman Catholic tradition. It is worth noting a certain difference between the “virtue theory” of many contemporary philosophers and the “virtue ethic” of many ancient and medieval writers. For many contemporary theorists, the retrieval of the virtues is attractive for theoretical reasons. The standoff between utilitarianism and duty ethics seems to lead to interminable debates. The way out of the apparent interminability is to retrieve the tradition of the virtues. Questions of character thus become central.

In contrast, the ancients and medievals advanced an account of the virtues, not for the sake of theory, but in order to build up good habits of character. Of course, the quest to build up excellent character traits raises philosophical questions. For example, what makes a character trait an excellence? To find an answer, it might help to begin with a list of excellent character traits. These include patience, perseverance, determination, bravery, humility, temperance, sobriety, studiousness, modesty, gentleness, kindness, self-discipline, intelligence, practical wisdom, deliberative ability, ability to make good judgments, ability to execute, resourcefulness, clarity in expression, sharpness of memory, depth, justice, fairness, honesty, truthfulness, punctuality, initiative, attentiveness, integrity, loyalty, friendliness, cooperativeness, civic concern, sensitivity, compassion, creativity, faithfulness, hopefulness, and loving-care.

What is it about these particular character traits that make each person, and the societies that cultivate such habits, excellent? Why is it good to become a person whose actions, thoughts, feelings, desires, and relationships are characterized by these traits? According to Aristotle and St. Thomas, the virtues are those character traits that are integral to one’s flourishing as a human within community. This, of course, gives rise to metaphysical questions: What is it to be human? What kind of animal is the human being? How is the human animal different from other animals? In order to know what makes for an excellent human life, we need to understand, at least in outline, what it is to be a human animal. Aristotle and St. Thomas both conceive of the human as a rational animal. Each provide a detailed account of our humanity by focusing on the powers of growth, nutrition, reproduction, sensation, attentiveness, emotion, desire, imagination, abstraction, memory, judgment, reason, linguistic capacity, and so forth. In particular, this account focuses on four central features of our humanity: thoughts, feelings, desires, and relationships. The virtues, then, are those character traits that perfect thinking, feeling, desiring, and relating. The cardinal virtues are those habits that perfect these four features of our humanity: wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice. These four, it might be noted, are traditionally added to the three virtues prized by St. Paul: faith, hope, and love. The resulting list constitutes the seven habits or virtues that are central to

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11 “Virtue Ethics.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. The other two “major” approaches are, of course, utilitarianism and duty ethics.

12 1 Corinthians 13:13.
B. The Natural Law

An episode from ancient Rome provides insight into the notion that there is a natural moral law. Cicero recounts the ancient story of Sextus Tarquinius regarding the rape of Lucretia. Tarquinius tried to defend his action by arguing that he did not violate a written law and that the rape occurred outside the borders of Rome in an area where the law did not apply. Cicero responds that these concerns are irrelevant. Cicero reasons that, though there was no written law forbidding the crime, the action was a violation of the eternal law.

He had the light of reason deduced from the nature of things, that incites to good actions and dissuades from evil ones. And this has the force of a law, not from the time it was written, but from the first moment it began to exist. Now, this existence of moral obligation is co-eternal with that of the divine mind. Therefore the true and supreme law, whose commands and prohibitions are equally infallible, is the right reason of the Sovereign Deity.  

Cicero proposes that, by virtue of our capacity to be rational and reflective, there is imprinted upon our humanity a natural law that motivates orderly action and advises against disorderly actions. This natural law is the human participation in the eternal order of the cosmos, which is accessible to us through the light of reason and reflection. In other words, Cicero proposes a three-fold notion of law. Law includes 1) the eternal order of the cosmos, 2) the natural law that is imprinted upon the human heart by virtue of our capacity for reasoned reflection, and 3) the written laws posited by each particular society.

This account of law, and of the natural law, was developed during the medieval period by various thinkers, including especially St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. Although Cicero was not a Christian, many Christians saw in his account of law ideas that were consonant with St. Paul’s teaching that God’s law is written on the human heart and revealed in one’s conscience. Many moralists have appealed to the natural law to criticize injustices. Pope Leo XIII, in his encyclical on the condition of workers, appealed explicitly to the natural law in decrying unjust economic conditions and defending humane working conditions and decent wages. After the atrocities of WWII,

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14 Romans 2:14-16. “For when the Gentiles who do not have the law by nature observe the prescriptions of the law, they are a law for themselves even though they do not have the law. They show that the demands of the law are written in their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even defend them on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge people’s hidden works through Christ Jesus.”
the United Nations appealed, in the “The Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” to the notion that every human being is “endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.” Martin Luther King, Jr. appealed to the natural law while providing a succinct summary of this philosophy in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” where he argued that “all segregation statutes are unjust” because they violate the natural law.

Of course, this brief summary of the “natural law” leaves out many of the debates that surround the natural law philosophy. While the natural law philosophy has played a very important role within Catholic moral theology, there have also always been debates about the natural law, both within Catholicism and in relation to Protestantism and secularism, and students would do well to become introduced to these debates.

C. Practical Reasoning
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.” 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. 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.

During the 20th century, the vocabulary of virtue, the natural law, and practical reasoning, was complemented in Catholic thought with an increasing emphasis on the dignity of the human person.

D. The Dignity of the Human Person
The Second Vatican Council pointed to “a growing awareness of the sublime dignity of human persons” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 24). Immoral social practices that were, in previous eras, sometimes tolerated or even promoted (such as human slavery and various forms of economic exploitation) now are widely and increasingly recognized as unjust, even though they regrettable still sometimes occur.

Of course, the notion of the dignity of the human person is ancient; this truth is given theological expression in the first chapter of the book of *Genesis* when God, at the pinnacle of creation, is said to state, “Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness.” The text continues: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (*Genesis* 1:26-27). This text has, over centuries, been the source of profound inspiration for many theologians and philosophers aiming to reflect on what it means to be human.

Over the last several centuries, with the rise of modern science and technology along with modern forms of government and the shift to an industrial and post-industrial economy, many thinkers have placed an increased emphasis on recognizing each human as a subject with human rights and human dignity. The moral philosophy of Immanual Kant, which emphasizes respecting each human as a person, is perhaps the clearest example of the modern emphasis on human dignity. Two things might be honestly noted about this development in modern moral philosophy: 1) historically, many of the thinkers who most emphasized human rights and dignity were non-Catholics, and in some cases they were quite critical of Catholicism, especially because they associated the Church with the *ancien regime*, seeing in the Church a defender of a status quo perceived as unjust, and 2) among those who have aimed to defend human dignity over the last several centuries, there has been widespread disagreement about both its concrete meaning and how to account for the truth of human dignity. During the 20th century and continuing to the present, Catholic intellectuals increasingly find themselves in conversation with other defenders of the dignity of the human person about these and related questions. In a curious and ironic twist, some leading secular defenders of the dignity of the human person, such as Richard Rorty, have suggested that it is a truth that must be accepted on faith without reason, while Pope John Paul II and many Catholic thinkers have expressed confidence in the ability of philosophers to reason together in order to deepen our
understanding about the human being and “the concept of personal dignity” (Fides et Ratio, 83). In this way, a central feature of the Catholic intellectual tradition involves philosophical reflection about both what it means to be human and the truth that every human is endowed with an inviolable dignity deserving of fundamental respect.

6. Contributions of Modern and Contemporary Moral Philosophy

One challenge to developing a course in general ethics at a Catholic university is to find a balance that introduces students to the various approaches to ethics while avoiding moral relativism. How can ethics be taught without simply creating a smorgasbord from which students are encouraged to select options that are most personally appealing? Focusing on virtue ethics, the natural law, practical reasoning, and the dignity of the person would be the easy way out of this problem. Yet, students are part of a society and world that have been formed by, and continue to be formed by, a range of ethical theories and practices. Utilitarianism and deontology are more than formal theories about fundamental principles of ethical action. They are embodied in various aspects of the communities in which we live. Business practice, for example, often accepts a form of utilitarianism without reflecting on the implications of this for the role of business in creating just and humane societies, and some governmental institutions and policies embody a kind of deontology, perhaps unwittingly.

So one thing that teaching modern and contemporary theories can do is help students recognize the ethical theories and practices that are part of the world in which they live. They can also learn to recognize when and how their own choices and actions are shaped by these various approaches. As they learn to critique various ethical theories, they can also learn to become more reflective about the basis for their own actions. If they act primarily to attain what they perceive as their own individual good, what notion of the human person are they embracing and actualizing? Is this the kind of community that they want to help create?

Teaching these theories should not simply be an exercise in identifying deficiencies in theories other than virtue ethics. Indeed, some forms of virtue ethics also have limitations. When the emphasis is on the formation of virtues in individuals, the importance of relationship can sometimes be lost. Contemporary approaches can be seen as compatible with and also augmenting a virtue approach. For example, Nel Noddings’ approach, in Educating Moral People, emphasizes the importance of starting with “the caring relation as a basic good.” It is not so much the activity or the disposition that has moral worth as it is the caring relationship. Care ethics “recognizes moral interdependence.” As individuals we appreciate the other in the caring relationship as the source of our own ethicality.

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Teaching a range of ethical approaches can be beneficial if the course is organized around fundamental questions about how we should live and the kinds of communities that we want to help structure, maintain, and improve.

7. Developing a Capacity to Engage, Learn From, and Evaluate Other Traditions

Just as it is important for students in American society to understand the ethical approaches that inform and shape our society, it is also important for them to have some knowledge of other world traditions. Not only is the United States increasingly pluralistic in terms of cultural groups, the world that our students live in is increasingly a global community. To have some understanding of ethical approaches that shape people in various communities of the world will help them better understand fundamental similarities and differences in how people understand what it is to be human and what makes for a good life. This understanding will enable students to engage people from other traditions in a way that promotes dialogue rather than dispute and violence.

Catholic universities may have a unique position because of the many ways in which Catholics have influenced and responded to cultures into which they have moved. Clearly, there have been times when such engagement has been intolerant and destructive. These realities can be learned from and so help promote more humane actions and choices. But there are also examples that illustrate productive ways for engaging other traditions in ways that enable mutual respect and challenge. For example, Catholicism in India has had significant impact on advancing notions of the dignity of the human person while at the same time recognizing the richness of spiritual practices of the many religious communities in India.

8. Engaging Business Faculty in the Dialogue

We are suggesting an approach to teaching ethics that enables students to focus on questions of deep purpose for their lives, that emphasizes the dignity of the human person, the importance of practical reasoning, and the fundamental insights of the natural law theory and virtue ethics. We also suggest that teaching a range of ethical theories can support this emphasis and can help students develop reasoning skills and understandings that will serve them well in developing practices that help them become “good people.” How can this approach benefit business faculty?

Probably most fundamentally, business faculty are also people who ask questions of deep purpose. To know that the students that they teach are also being encouraged to ask such questions in philosophy courses can position business faculty to be more comfortable in raising these issues in business classes. Business faculty are also a lot like other faculty. They are educated in a specialization and are most comfortable remaining in that specialization. Recognizing the integrative role that philosophy and theology can serve for Catholic education, as well as for their own lives and those of their students, can help them become more comfortable exploring these issues with their colleagues and students.