

The Point of Teaching Professional Ethics

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Title: The Point of Teaching Professional Ethics

Abstract: Weighing the merits of various pedagogies for professional ethics requires an understanding of the goal of teaching professional ethics. If you don't know where you want to go, you can't determine the best way to get there. So why do we want students in professions like accounting, engineering, or medicine to have training in ethics?

The answer is that we want professional people to be guided by the correct moral standards even when those standards have not been made explicit in a body of law or a professional code of conduct. And so we need to give students the skills to decipher these standards.

The best way to arrive at this goal is to teach students a three-step methodology similar to the scientific method. Students should learn to (a) gather ethical data, (b) propose a moral hypothesis to explain the data, and then (c) refine the hypothesis in light of counterevidence. In ethics this amounts to identifying moral judgments about somethings being good, bad, right, wrong etc., proposing a moral principle to explain the truth of the judgment, and then refining this moral principle to make it fit as much of the moral landscape as possible.

Consider an example from the field of medicine. Suppose a child needs medical care but her parent refuses to approve the treatment. What should be done in such a scenario? One potential principle that would settle the case is this: "It is morally right to treat a child only when there is parental consent." However, this principle is false. It fails to explain cases where we think a medical professional should act despite a lack of parental consent. So the principle must be refined.

In short, we should give students the tools to clearly identify moral judgments as opposed to other sorts of judgments (like legal or prudential ones), the skills to articulate general principles that would explain moral judgments, and the acumen to test these principles on difficult cases within her profession.

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