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Chapter 22

The Challenge to Make a Difference. Teaching Ethics to Business Students

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The whole object of ethics is not to attain an end, but to manifest the gift which has been given us, the gift of grace and of peace, of love and of the Holy Spirit: that is, the very end pursued by God and miraculously present within us. (Ellul, 1989, p. 67)

Introduction

Teaching business ethics to students in a postmodern global society is a challenge in itself. Can we still consent about a common understanding of good business practices, or is teaching ethics no more than offering a set of tools to defend a student's own moral position? If we agree that teaching ethics should have a goal in creating responsible behavior in business practices, what kind of teaching environment should be offered to train this competence? This short essay tries to give an answer on these questions. Answers not derived from theory, but based on practical experience in teaching business ethics at the CHE, Christian University of applied sciences.

Problems of teaching Ethics

A recent study of KPMG among Dutch companies has shown that 90% of the companies agree upon the importance of teaching business ethics and training moral competences in higher education. At the same time, this research has shown that trade and industry are dissatisfied with the level of moral education among young employees in The Netherlands. One in three companies complain about the absence of norms and values among recent graduates (KPMG, 2009).

Though some skeptic people might argue that *Business Ethics* is a *contradictio in terminis*, (Jones, Parker and Bos, 2005), this study of KPMG shows us the relevance and importance of teaching ethics to Business students. When we take notice of the outcomes of KPMG's study the question arises whether a course in Business Ethics would be the solution. Probably more fundamental problems underlie the outcomes of the KPMG's research. A recent study by a Dutch research institute analyzed the problems of the young generation in The Netherlands. According to Spangenberg and Lampert (2009) the youth has become more individualistic, more narcissistic and less responsible. Their main analyses focuses on the role of the parents and the less authoritarian style in upbringing. Therefore the problem raised by KPMG will not only be solved by teaching more ethics at school and universities. On the other hand it challenges teachers and professors in ethics to address the hearts and minds of the students to be motivated to take responsibility for themselves and others in their professional career.

This might be one of the most important goals in teaching ethics and this not an easy job. Many of our students have an inconsistent attitude when it comes to moral behavior. On the one hand a student might refuse to work on a Sunday, since he believes the Bible prohibits him; on the other hand, the same student would not seem to have any trouble to working in the black economy on a sizeable scale. Therefore, one major aim in teaching ethics is to create an environment in which students are stimulated in deep reflection (Hegeman en Jochemsen, chapter 6 of this volume) Reflection is of course not a goal in itself, but it is a precondition to gain insight in their own moral decision making process. The next step in teaching ethics would be to derive consequences of their philosophy of life – e.g. Christianity – for their moral actions in their profession and confront it with other main ideas of the good life. The proof of the pudding would be the eating – the last step - the confrontation of their moral opinion in a hostile environment. In this paper we will further analyze this teaching process.

For Business Ethics

Two important questions are raised: (1) What should be the goal in teaching business ethics and (2) how to create a study environment in which the above mentioned steps can be taught and trained. The first question is a difficult one and it would take more than a short essay to answer it. I'd like to address just a few thoughts about this by engaging in some 'shop talk' about teaching ethics.

These days – also among Christian students - there seems hardly any agreement possible about e.g. the ideal of a good business practice. How to identify an idea about a good moral business? You can try to define factual statements of a moral business practices according to Christianity and agree upon that, or you might see that a good life and a good moral business are self-evident or else (Frankema, 1973), but it is a fact that our post-modern society has become subjective in its preferences. Subjectivity itself has become the objective

morality, which makes use of worldviews seems futile (Verbrugge, 2004). A student might say; “Though I am going to church, I am a liberal in my economic thoughts and my ethical principles are derived from the ideas of Utilitarianism. And I don’t care that they don’t mix.” Another Christian student might be convinced of the moral righteousness in Virtue Ethics, but be turned off by the fact that Protestants often shy away from virtue talk. How then can we come to a synthesis in business ethics, or better, do we want to establish this as truth value? Do we need an agreement on the ‘good life’, In moral business practices?

For an answer, we look to our common practices of morality. Most of our actions, our moral decisions, are (unconsciously) based upon ethical principles. These principles are derived from our philosophies of life, our basic values. When there is a moral conflict, mostly people differ about the prioritizing of ethical principles (e.g. should the principle of freedom of speech be valued more than the non-discrimination principle?) Therefore, in difficult moral cases, each person should take into account the basic values to solve a moral dilemma. To understand one’s basic values, the instructor will prompt learning on ‘the good life’ in business ethics.

Sometimes it seems that textbooks in (business) ethics and teachers in ethics just explain the different ethical theories and leave the rest to private picking. A discussion about the values from which those theories are derived is mostly a bridge too far. In such a situation, attending an ethics course or reading a book about business ethics just gives the student a basket of options to choose from when dealing with a moral dilemma. This common practice in teaching is quite shallow. Of course, in teaching ethics the main theories should be addressed and above all contemporary ethical practices in business discussed. But the challenge is not to leave the students with this basket of options, but to gain insight in the values and philosophies of life that are found at the root of current business morality.

So far, I have described what I believe every conscientious educator would do in teaching business ethics, but we need to realize that the success of professional teaching is not measured by class room performance, but by actual performance as a professional. What is at stake is the moral development of the student as professional. Teaching different ethical theories and positions; discussing about the basic values in life and connect these outcomes to the student’s own fledging attempt at business performance is a big challenge. In doing this, one of the main values that needs application in classes is the notion of ‘responsibility’. As every human being lives in relation with other people, with nature, we always respond. If we do not respond, we isolate ourselves and become ‘relation-less’. Most of the students agree upon the fact that we are responsible for our own life. But are we also responsible for other people in our business, for nature, for our environment etc.? If we do agree upon the fact that we are living in relations with people around us, with the nature we live in, we cannot close our eyes. Relational ethics (cf. Levinas’ theory of the Other) appears to be a bridge in connecting biblical and secular notions of responsibility and compassion. This is one of the reasons that the business department of the CHE adopted this notion of

responsibility as one of the fundamental for core competences in our curriculum. We therefore regard the practical outcome of teaching business ethics in the mastering of personal responsibility the prime manifestation of the stance of personal responsibility.

Training Personal Responsibility

That brings us back again to the second question: how to create a study environment in which the above mentioned steps - to create an environment in which the students reflect on their moral decisions; to derive consequences of their philosophy of life for their moral action in their profession and the confrontation of the students moral opinion in a hostile environment – can be taught and trained? Competence based education can offer such a context in which students are trained in their moral competency. At the Business Department of the CHE Christian University of Applied Sciences a set of nine competences has been developed. The first one is called *Personal Responsibility*. Training this competence is one of the major goals in the course business ethics. Below a full description is given.

Personal Responsibility: You are able to take personal responsibility at work and within (the) society. You are accountable for it and you can reflect critically on your own actions.

Foundation course	You have to be accountable for the choices you make, based on your personal view
Bachelor Major	In situations of opposing interests you keep on to your own track based on () well-considered and well-argued choices
Professional Master	You are prepared to make sacrifices if situations with great pressure ask to repudiate your personal conviction

Display 1. The Competence Formulation of Personal Responsibility

Though it might seem that this competence is a very subjective one – based on your *personal view*; keep in to *your own track* – the notion of personal responsibility is closely connected to Christian Social Thought (Dijk, 2005). Personal responsibility refers to the fact that a human being is not only responsible for his or her own acts and choices, but he or she should also take into account the interest of the community. A human being cannot close his/her eyes for the consequences of his/her acting on others. This also accounts for the field of Business. Organizations are not neutral and managers are not autonomous individuals, but they serve customers and employees. Therefore students should recognize that the objective of an enterprise is not only profit making, but also contributing to human society (Verkerk, 2004).

Personal Responsibility is a crucial competence in the whole education and above all in coaching settings. In the following we only focus on the way we train this competence in the

course business ethics at the Business Department of the CHE Christian University of applied sciences.

Personal Moral Method

An illustration of how moral knowledge, skills are exercised and reflected on regarding personal responsibility can be given.

The course business ethics contains 5 ECTS¹ and is taught to a mixed group of both Dutch and international students. The course is given to senior Bachelor students. This gives them the opportunity to reflect on their own experiences during their internship period the previous year. Therefore we start the lessons by asking the students to write down a moral dilemma they have faced in their internship. Moreover, we invite them to reflect on the decision they made. As with many of us, the moral choices the students make, are mostly based upon their intuition. Some critical questions about the decisions they've made, will more often than not raise an awareness of the complexity of moral dilemmas. This starting point is needed for motivating the students in critically thinking about the choices they make in their profession, since many of them come to the conclusion that they have to show more humility when it comes to moral opinions. After teaching them different approaches in trying to come to a moral correctness, we apply these theories on business cases. Striking for our students is that in many cases these different perspectives in considering moral dilemmas end up with the similar conclusions on what to do.

After having taught them the main ethical theories, having discussed the values that lie underneath it, and having applied these theories to some business cases, we then ask the student to write their own personal moral method. This method should also be applied to a moral business case. The idea behind this is that the students are forced to extensively reflect on possible steps that could be taken before a final moral decision is made.

Below a simple example of a Personal Moral Method is given:

- What is your first intuition
- Define the ethical problem
- What are the facts
- What principles and values are at stake
- Confront these values with your philosophy of life (e.g. Christianity)
- Who are the different stakeholders and what is their interest
- List the alternative actions

¹ European Credit Transfer System: 1 ECTS is 28 study hours

- Confront the possible actions with ethical theories
- What decision will you make and argue your position, taking into account the interest of the different stakeholders
- Will you do it?

The assessment criteria for such a Personal Moral Method focuses on the accurate application on a moral business case, the correct use of theory, completeness and consistency. As mentioned above, the prove of the pudding would be the eating: the confrontation of the student's moral decision with other opinions and mutually reflecting on that.

Critical Dialogue

The following step is that the students analyze and treat a moral business dilemma in a mixed group of about four students (Dutch and international). One of the trainers is the chair of the meeting and the other trainer focuses on observing the students. At the beginning of the meeting, students are given a moral business case. They have some 5 – 10 minutes to reflect on that dilemma, using their personal moral method. Having done that, each student briefly clarifies his or her position in this case. Most of the times there will be no initial agreement among the students, so a discussion will start in which each student can criticize and try to convince the other ones. This dispute will take a maximum 25 minutes. The goal of the conversation is to come to a solution – meaning that one student attempts to convince the others by successfully arguing his/her position, or else a reasonable consensus is found. The trainer who chairs the meeting will participate in the discussing if needed. At the end of the dialogue, an evaluation and reflection of the debate is made. The second trainer who observed the conversation assessed the students on argumentation skills, clearness of communication, verbal and non-verbal persuasion, listening skills – empathic ability and a constructive contribution to the process. Of course, the setting is fictive, but we hope that working on a personal moral method and by defending one's own position in a critical dialogue, the student will become stimulated to take personal responsibility in his or her professional career.

Manifestation of the gift within us

Teaching ethics will always be a little artificial, since it is the confrontation with reality that counts. A student might write a wonderful personal moral method and defend his or her position with flair, but in real life the pressure of the global market and demanding managers might change the positive convictions of the student. Therefore, a personal moral method should not be an instrument to justify one's actions. It should be more than that; teaching moral methods should have an end in training the competence of personal responsibility. Our challenge is that students will be able to take personal responsibility at

work and within (the) society. That students are accountable for their deeds and that they you can reflect critically on their own actions.

It would be my wish to meet these students as alumni after some years again and to confront them with their personal moral methods. Maybe some of them were able to manifest something of the gift of love that is in everyone of us and made a difference in this not best of all possible worlds.

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