

The future of ethics

Daniel L Ritchie

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All over the world there is a perception that ethical behaviour is on the decline. Corruption and dishonesty are an increasing problem, it seems, across the globe. I am most familiar, of course, with the problem in my own country, the United States. We recently have had large and unprecedented problems in our business community. Massive frauds in Enron and WorldCom have made these names infamous around the world. A US Roper survey reports that 72% of respondents believe that wrongdoing is widespread in industry. Only 2% feel that leaders of large firms are “very trustworthy”.

Leaders in our Congress have been convicted of crimes. We have two million people in prison, convicted of crimes.

The United States is not alone. In the widely followed corruption index published by Transparency International, the USA at 16th is rated less corrupt than Germany at 18th and France at 25th. People in 48 of the 69 countries covered by the annual Global Corruption Barometer survey said that corruption had risen over the past three years. In 13 countries more than 50% of respondents said that corruption had increased a lot over the past three years.

To put the seriousness of this issue in perspective, I would like to quote from the United Nations' Global Programme against Corruption:

Corruption undermines democratic institutions, retards economic development and contributes to government instability. Corruption attacks the foundation of democratic institutions by distorting electoral processes, perverting the rule of law, and creating bureaucratic quagmires whose only reason for existence is the soliciting of bribes. Economic development is stunted because outside direct investment is discouraged and small businesses within the country often find it impossible to overcome the “start-up costs” required because of corruption.

Equally alarming to me, because of what it may portend for the future, is the worldwide rise in school cheating. According to a survey of 50,000 college and 15,000 high school students by Duke University's Center for Academic Integrity, 70% of college and high school students are cheaters. That is 26% higher than it was in 1993. Countries, including Australia, China, England, France, India and South Korea, have recently recorded similar problems. China and South Korea have punished cheaters with prison sentences from several months to seven years.

In the last few years, it appears that cheating is accelerating, perhaps in part due to the fact that technology is making it easier. There are now websites available such as Cheater.com, schoolsucks.com, CheatHouse.com, LazyStudents.com, geniuspapers.com, netcheats.com and many, many more. In another study, students called cheating “routine”. One student is quoted as saying that “honour seems like it's a concept of the past. Something like chivalry and knights and maybe a Victorian passé thing that no one really believes in any more”. The student also blames a high school culture where grades and test

scores are more important than integrity. Interestingly, 46% of high-achieving students named declining social and moral values as the biggest problem facing their generation.

I think the evidence is quite persuasive that unethical behaviour is becoming an increasing and pervasive problem throughout our interconnected world. Many people have asked “Why is this happening?” There are various theories as to why. One is that it’s just human nature and there is nothing we can do about it. The theory that it’s just “baked into our genes” is belied, I believe, by the fact that in different times and different places we have had quite ethical cultures. Scandinavia today is a pretty good example of an ethical culture, and it hasn’t always been so. We also know from research that if an individual moves from a culture of corruption to a more ethical one, that person tends to adopt and conform to the new norm.

Another theory is the pendulum theory. Over time, we, in the western world, at least, swing from morality, as in the Victorian era, to immorality. Then, when it gets bad enough, we swing back again.

Many would blame the media: radio, television and motion pictures—media that are now really global. There is a reasonable case to be made that it promotes unethical behaviour and glorifies violence. Media moguls have learned that bad guys and mayhem attract eyeballs, and therefore more money than good guys and ethical behaviour. If you compare the movies of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s with today’s crop, the contrast is stark. And then, of course, there are video games and the Internet, parts of which make the traditional media seem wholesome.

Then there is the view that our educational system is at fault. Much of early education in the West, and indeed in South and East Asia, as well as in Africa, was largely based on religion. Virtually all of the early universities were founded and led by religious people. At all levels the teaching of how to lead a virtuous life was central to the curriculum. Even as public, non-sectarian education developed and flourished, in the beginning it also emphasized how one should behave. Over the years, however, that behavioural mission has been eroded in favour of the disciplines, which, for shorthand, I would call “reading, writing and arithmetic”.

However you apportion blame, it’s clear that we have a significant societal problem, the long term consequences of which may be severe. It is also clear that our educational system has certainly contributed to the problem. We should be and can be leaders in addressing the problem.

Ethics is indeed a very complex subject about which there is much agreement, but also disagreement. Many distinguished and thoughtful philosophers over thousands of years have debated the subject. Not infrequently there are conflicts between desirable outcomes. In today’s world we also have to consider and understand many cultures with long and strong traditions that differ significantly from one another. Is ethics really something with which we should get involved? Maybe we should just stick to “reading, writing, and arithmetic” after all.

My answer is that we must get involved. The world and our educational system, in particular, have a huge problem which we have helped create. Who better than we in education to lead the way towards a more ethical and mutually respectful world? I believe the time is ripe to begin an ethical renaissance. As reflected in the recent UN Global Programme against Corruption that I quoted earlier, people around the world are beginning to understand the consequences of an ethically deficient society.

I recently spoke at Tsinghua University in Beijing with a speech entitled *Ethics and the University*. Understanding that Chinese culture is, in many ways, quite different from my own, I was a bit nervous. I

was considerably relieved, however, to see the president of the university and the dean of the business school smiling and taking notes.

An ethical renaissance would take us back to the earliest roots of education. I would like to quote from a speech given last fall in Athens by Monique Seefried. I was about to write something similar to this when I discovered how succinctly and well she had written this passage:

Aristotle, who authored the *Nichomachean Ethics*, believed the study of ethics was necessary in order to improve our lives. In his view as well as in the views of his teacher, Plato, the supreme goal in life was a good life. The two of them regarded ethical virtues as a mix of complex emotional, social and rational skills. The study of ethics was meant to improve our lives, and therefore was primarily concerned with our well-being.

In Aristotle's views, the methodology of ethical study, whose subject is good action, must respect the fact that, in this field, generalizations cannot always be accepted.

There is a wonderful article called "The Ethical Mind" in the March 2007 *Harvard Business Review* by a star faculty member of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Howard Gardner. After discussing other mindsets, Gardner goes on to say:

Yet another kind of mind, less purely cognitive in flavor than the first three, is the respectful mind: the kind of open mind that tries to understand and form relationships with other human beings. A person with a respectful mind enjoys being exposed to different types of people. While not forgiving of all, she gives others the benefit of the doubt.

An ethical mind broadens respect for others into something more abstract. A person with an ethical mind asks herself, "What kind of a person, worker and citizen do I want to be? If all workers in my profession adopted the mindset I have, or if everyone did what I do, what would the world be like?"

While there are certainly differences between the western ethical traditions and those in other parts of the world, we have a surprising amount in common. As I pointed out in my Beijing speech, our golden rule, "Do unto others what you would have them do unto you", has a lot in common with Confucius's "Don't do unto others what you would not have them do unto you". Moreover, the study of and the understanding of the cultural differences are worthwhile objectives in themselves.

To give you some encouragement that an ethics renaissance is possible, I would like to share with you something of our experience at the University of Denver. Almost 20 years ago now, we initiated efforts, led by our faculty, starting in our Daniels College of Business, to change the attitudes and behaviour of our students. In time, on their own initiative, our students adopted an honour code, and recently *The Wall Street Journal*, after a broad survey of college recruiters, named us among the top four universities in the world on the ethics of our graduates. We are applying these principles across the university and to pre-collegiate programmes, including an early childhood education centre.

Let me share with you some of what we have learned. First of all, students need to understand why ethics is important for their future and the future of our society. Ethics is not just something that is nice; it is essential for a happy life and a healthy society.

We do not just give a course in ethics, we integrate it across the curriculum. There are plenty of useful examples in every discipline, and students need to see many examples. They need to get into the habit of thinking about the ethical questions in many different situations. They will not always come out at the

same place in each situation and, of course, there are frequently conflicting, desirable outcomes. Service learning, especially when integrated with the classroom, can provide students with practical experience in applying ethical principles and dealing with ethical dilemmas.

But for students to adopt and fully own the concepts, the faculty, administration and, indeed, the institution itself must own them and consistently practise them. Also, in my experience, there must be consequences for academic ethical violations, such as, for example, plagiarism.

We have found that bringing in successful, ethical leaders to speak to the university community provides a powerful reinforcement. I should add that I very much believe in sunshine. Openness, transparency and honesty can cure a lot of ills.

As a footnote, the University led in organizing what is now called the Colorado Ethics in Business Alliance. The alliance annually recognizes individuals, non-profits and companies that are operating ethically in Colorado. The concept has spread to at least four other states in the USA where organizations have been created, based on our model.

The International Baccalaureate Organization is one of the most influential educational organizations in the world today, with a unique global reach. You have the opportunity to play a leading role in a renaissance that the world desperately needs and, I believe, is ready for. You are motivated by a mission to create a better world through education. You also promote intercultural understanding and respect, not as an alternative to a sense of cultural and national identity, but as an essential part of life in the 21st century. Because you currently directly touch the lives of over 500,000 students, you are in an ideal position to influence the ethical values of those students by integrating tools like your learner profile across your programmes. You already have demonstrated the ability to accomplish value-based thinking by the manner in which you have been able to integrate concepts like international-mindedness across your curriculum. You must be mindful to “walk the talk”, however, by also ensuring that your management and governance structures reflect these same high ethical principles, and that you scrupulously build in mechanisms to minimize or eliminate conflicts of interest within your own structures, as we have tried to do at the University of Denver.

The internationally renowned children’s advocate, Marian Wright Edelman, has famously defined the purpose of education: “Education is for improving the lives of others and for leaving your community and world better than you found it”. We in education have an enormous opportunity to do just that. To improve the lives of our children and to lead the way to a better world.

Thank you.