



Moral Regenerates

Local campuses hit by ethics outbreak

The ethics industry is booming. Once reserved for students of arcane academic subjects like medieval philosophy, ethics courses at local university campuses are suddenly in vogue. And, despite debate about the usefulness of such classes, instructors hope the growing student desire to grapple with difficult moral problems indicates that the long-overdue transition from the "me" generation to the "we" generation could finally be at hand.

At San Jose State, Santa Clara and Stanford Universities, students are standing in the aisles and filling waiting lists in hopes of occupying the limited number of classroom seats reserved for those who want to learn not what they should think, but how they should think.

At SJSU, even engineering and business students are once again asking the timeless questions that filled another, more socially-involved decade, the '60s: How could the Holocaust have happened? Was the bombing of Hiroshima a correct decision? Under what circumstances is it permissible to kill another person? Should it always be up to the buyer to beware?

In addition to contemplating the traditional moral dilemmas mentioned above which—along with the Vietnam War—helped lead an earlier generation of students into years of political activism and protest, the 1980s, of course, have brought with them a new set of pressing ethical concerns: How should we deal with the AIDS crisis? Should we be concerned that nearly 200 high-level members of the Reagan administration—including top law enforcement officials—have been accused of various forms of official misconduct? Was the US bombing of Libya morally justified?

According to those involved, the new focus on ethical questions is part of a national backlash against what has been termed the "pervasive money culture" by prominent New York investment banker Felix Rohatyn. After nearly eight years of the Reagan presidency and its acceptance of formerly spurned notions of business conduct, students and educators locally and across the country seem to agree that there's more to success than unrestrained greed, selfishness and taking care of number one.

"I think many of our students are looking for the tools which will help them make decisions they can be proud of," suggests San Jose State University Philosophy Professor Henrik Sahlqvist, whose always oversubscribed classes in Moral Issues and Critical Thinking feature many of the practical examples of moral dilemmas mentioned above.

"Unfortunately, although enthusiastic, most students I encounter are not well grounded in ethical decision-making," he laments.

"We should encourage greater emphasis on moral questions in the curricula of elementary and high schools," the SJSU prof argues, "in order to better prepare students to make the difficult choices commonplace in modern social situations. We try to make our students into better people," he says.

"The goal is a good one," he muses, "However, in some cases we may be too late."

Despite his worries that he occasionally may be fighting a losing battle, Sahlqvist remains convinced that the courses are useful. "It's important for people to outgrow the morally relativistic idea that all things are just a matter of taste," the popular professor says, adding that California's cultural milieu of alternative thinkers steeped in the zen of self-centeredness often makes

his in-class efforts as frustrating as they can be rewarding. Sahlqvist isn't deterred, though.

"My experience is that all students benefit from a broad exposure to ethical issues. They learn to distinguish between means and ends," Sahlqvist says.

Kevin Martin, a dean at the University of Chicago's business school, expresses even more skepticism than Sahlqvist about the ability of trained ethicists to make much of an impact on college-level students "You can't teach [students] morals when they're 26, 27 years old," he said during a recent swing through the Bay Area. "If you think that teaching an ethics course will change a person's morality, you're naive."

Nevertheless, a veritable chorus of other social and educational leaders—ranging from US Secretary of Education William Bennett to California schools chief Bill Honig—are hopping on the ethics bandwagon daily as the idea of equipping students with practical tools for making individual value judgments gains momentum.

"Among educators and deans and such there is a tremendous amount of effort going into deciding how their schools ought to better address the subject of ethics," reports Stanford School of Business lecturer Kirk Hanson, who instructs second-year business students in management ethics. Hanson echoes the popular "what goes around comes around" philosophy when asked why ethical behavior is an important part of everyday life. "If people continually strive for unfair advantages over others in business or in life in general, they will eventually find the tables turn on them," he says.

"My experience is that well over 95 percent of all ethical decisions also turn out to be good business decisions," he calculates, agreeing with SJSU's Sahlqvist about the need to incorporate a structured look at morality into every student's early education. "I'd like to see ethical subjects taken up in a variety of classes," he adds, unconvinced that any one-time exposure to ethical theories will have much of a lasting impact.

"Many individuals do develop a strong personal sense of morality outside of formal education," Sahlqvist admits. "However, it is unlikely that people will get to have their own views sufficiently challenged—or that they will be exposed to formal moral theories from Kant to Utilitarianism—without taking a structured ethics course."

Judging from the typical waiting list for Sahlqvist's classes, it seems that the demand for ethical guidance is outstripping the number of courses educators are willing to provide. That might be as good an indication as any of a change in attitudes among today's college students.

—Hal Plotkin