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Reviewing *Ethics at the Heart of Higher Education*

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Ethics at the Heart of Higher Education. By C. R. Crespo and Rita Kirk, eds. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publishing, 2020. 206 pp. ISBN 13: 978-1-5326-9049-5 (HARDCOVER) \$45

Through the format of the book, *Ethics at the Heart of Higher Education*, editors C.R. Crespo and Rita Kirk attempt to discover how the subject of ethics fits in the college curriculum today by present the contributions of various experts in the field. Particularly, the editors want to know if ethics can be taught in the secular college even though ethics often tends to be relegated to the field of religious studies. “What should an ethics course seek to do?” they ask (p. xvii). In a world of expansive and boundlessly available information at the touch of a button, people think that answers to ethical problems should be instantly solved, even when tied to recognizably complex situations. These issues and potential solutions still confront us, perhaps in even increasingly SO.

However, Crespo and Kirk assert that although we have seen changes in cultural language and communication, life demands that we discuss a foundational awareness of ethical behavior and its justification with others. Expert David Brooks reveals that our culture is “morally inarticulate” (p. xix). Crespo and Kirk believe that we must become morally intelligent to rescue ourselves from moral destruction and future cultural destruction. So to answer the first major question of the book, they assert that, yes, ethics must be taught in both secular and religious institutions of higher education.

Nine chapters (with twelve different authors) investigate disparate topics involved in the search for answers to the main research question proposed by Crespo and Kirk. In chapter 1, “Can Ethics Be Taught? Connecting the Classroom to Everyday Life,” Stephen Long unveils the fundamental, age-long question that appears in all cultures historically and in modern times: What is the good life? All human cultures in our history have sought to answer that question with their cultural wisdom, rules, and mores. Thus students who come to an institution of higher

education bring with them a learned system of recognition of the definition of moral good and evil. Colleges and universities generally seem reluctant to present the various possibilities of ethical behavior for fear of significant and intense conflicts (secular and religious) such a study might bring. Long suggests that the proper collegiate approach should be a required study with an assessment of the foundations by each student of his or her personal ethic and answer to the fundamental question, Aristotle's *Eudaimonia*.

Robert Howell, in chapter 2, "Should Ethics Be Taught? Ethics in the Secular University," believes that "teaching ethics and ethical thinking might be the single most important contribution contemporary universities can make" (p. 25). The university's challenge is to determine if ethics comes from religion or cultural preferences. The secular institution appears to desire a complete separation from all things religious. It has not generally identified how to accomplish that task without offense to one segment or the other of American social culture. Hence the fear of virulent conflict on the campus. However, Howell's premise is that ethics is a necessary field of study for all students since it will contribute significantly to their lives: "As universities, we pride ourselves on developing the next generation of leaders. It is hard to imagine a more irresponsible goal than to produce a generation of leaders who have not been taught how to think about what they should be leading others to do" (p. 38).

How does Christian ethics relate to the academy and human society? This question is the focus of Charles Curran's essay in chapter 3, "Christian Ethics, the University, and the Broader Human Society." All people are required to live morally, says Curran (p. 40). Because religion is such a powerful and important element in many people's lives, the university should include religious studies in the curriculum. However, the program must seek to explain rather than proselytize. Christian ethics, though, does bring to the table the special aspect of questions of "ultimate human meaning such as the purpose of life, the realities of evil, suffering, and death" (p. 43). Curran illustrates his point with short histories of the Social Gospel Movement of the early 20th century, Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian realism advocating using power to oppose injustice and evil during World War II, and Vatican Council

II's emphasis on ecumenism, religious liberty, and the freedom in democracy. Later in the 20th century, the conservative and traditional Religious Right emerged in American social and civil culture, and Liberation Theology proposed to free oppressed Latin Americans, Blacks, and women. These and other international movements illustrate the need for Christian ethics to be taught in the university since Christians are involved in applying ethics throughout the world.

In chapter 4, "STEM as a Calling," Richard Mason uses the story of Frankenstein to illustrate the need for ethics to be taught to STEM students in the university. Although science and mathematics students have a specified and dedicated curriculum, the consequences of using powerful science and math technologies and procedures cannot be predicted precisely. There will be errors and some new problems no one imagined, and these will create many ethical issues for STEM professions. The techniques and philosophies of the STEM professions can be applied to societies and cultures in many ways for either good or ill, so there must be recognition that ethical understanding necessarily will be involved in the use and application of scientific knowledge.

Schools of both law and medicine promote the professional Codes of Ethics connected to the practice of these careers. Thomas Mayo, in chapter 5, "Using the Humanities to Explore Professionalism in Medical and Law Schools," asserts that there must be a connection of an understood application of professionalism, defined as "the values that responsible practitioners bring to their relationships with patients, clients, families, and society," to the functions of these professions. Because these professions perform such vital and visible service to society, the knowledge and application of ethics in the performance of law and medicine for the good of society must be paramount. Mayo chooses to use literature from the humanities to promote the teaching of ethics in law and medicine curricula and accuses these professions of "a tendency to be self-protective of their autonomy and financial security" (p. 94). As such, they need to be alert to the importance of ethical principles and their applications.

Rather than being segregated into distinct courses, electives, and modules, ethics education should be embedded in other [basic] courses, training, and foci of interests. This arrangement sends the message

that “ethics is part of the everyday practice of medicine” (p. 98). Camp, Cole, and Sadler, in chapter 6, “Embedded Ethics in Medical Education,” insist that teaching ethics is the best way to help medical students become the “humanistic, morally thoughtful clinicians” desired by the public (p. 100). To ensure that the importance of ethics contributes to the best practice of medicine, the authors advise that ethical certainties be realized in both the clinical portions of curricula and in the “hidden curriculum” that appears through the instructors’ personalities and personal approaches.

Where can students of all ages safely express ideas, some strange or traditional or investigative? In chapter 7, “Sacred Spaces for Ethical Inquiry: Communicating Ideas on University Campuses,” C. R. Crespo and Rita Kirk point to the academy as the appropriate location, an identity that is ancient and treasured by learners from then and now. Today the problem has accelerated in a world of confusing social and political misinformation, online or public embarrassment, and too much information (false and true) available to anyone. The classroom in the university should be the place where students can safely expose their questions and, with the aid of fellow students, investigate the truths or falsehoods of all kinds of ideas without censorship or ridicule. “Ethics is indeed at the heart, or soul, of higher education” (p. 127), and the academy must do four things to bring about the necessary ideal: (1) address ethical issues continually, since every year brings a new class of truth seekers; (2) “ethics must be modeled” (p. 127), from the president to dormitory staff with no exemptions; (3) the university must allow students to see the problems, interpret the data, thoroughly investigate the issues, and learn to make wise decisions; and (4) the academy must create and protect “sacred spaces of ethical inquiry” (p. 128) on campus and in classrooms for the exercise of such intellectual development.

Chapters 8, “The Founding of an Ethics Center” by William May, and 9, “Higher Education and Public Moral discourse” by Robin Lovin, reiterate the public responsibility to engage in the safe and free debate of the most pressing personal and social issues, with ethics at the forefront. Past academic opportunities to do so in the university have been an immense strength of American education, which is now threatened

by the “market-smart” institutions more concerned about student numbers, annual and future income, and accreditation reputation than the development of wisdom in students.

The solution to the problems described in all nine chapters of *Ethics at the Heart of Higher Education* is an emphasis on the intense study of ethics, both theoretical and applied, modeled by university faculty and personnel. This book clearly states the problem and a solution, but not all the possible ways to make it happen in the current economic and political atmosphere.

REFERENCES

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