

**Submission
No 203**

INQUIRY INTO EDUCATION AMENDMENT (ETHICS CLASSES REPEAL) BILL 2011

Organisation: Plunkett Centre for Ethics

Date received: 23/02/2012

Plunkett Centre for Ethics

A joint centre of Australian Catholic University and St Vincents & Mater Health Sydney

**Submission into Inquiry into the
Education Amendment (Ethics Classes Repeal) Bill 2011
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1. Will ‘special education in ethics’ contribute to the ethical development of young people?

We all want our young people to develop into ethically mature people. That is, we all want them to develop the three aspects of moral maturity:

- (1) knowledge of what is right and wrong and understanding of why it matters that they do what is right and avoid what is wrong,
- (2) the range of emotional responses of a good person, and
- (3) the habits of motivation to do what is right even when that goes against the grain.

In order to determine whether the ‘special education in ethics’ program being conducted in State schools will make a useful contribution to the process by which a young person becomes an ethically mature person, we need an account of (a) ethical development and (b) the place in it of the study of ethics.

2. The contribution of ethical study to ethical development.

2.1 On my view (which I take from Aristotle) ethical development comes in stages. The young person must first learn to behave well. That is to say: he or she must first acquire the character traits of honesty, generosity, fairness, kindness, friendliness, ambition, etc. He or she must learn to behave as would an honest person, a generous person, a fair person, a kind person, a friendly person, a person with ambition, etc. This is already a great step. It involves not only doing the right thing but also doing it for the right reason. We would hardly call a person honest if he did the right thing only because he feared being caught doing otherwise. We would hardly call a person generous if he did the right thing only to impress others. So acquiring these qualities of character is a complex, less than fully-rational, achievement which depends crucially on the young person’s earliest informal education in the home. The school environment should support that informal education. Teachers as exemplars are important. The ethos of the school is important. But parents, the first educators, are critical.

2.2 Only when the young person has acquired settled habits of behaviour is he or she in a position to benefit from a study of ethics. That is to say, only when she is firm in her

understanding of the wrongness of stealing is she in a position to benefit from reflecting on the significance of doing the right thing and doing the wrong thing; for the point of the study is to deepen her understanding of what she already knows. The point of a study in ethics is not to teach a young person right and wrong. The point of a study in ethics is to deepen a young person's existing sense of right and wrong. Of course, it will involve a certain amount of correcting around the edges what the young person has already learned, for it is unlikely that his early education will have been perfect: he will need to acquire good judgment about stealing and being fair and about all the other forms of rightness and wrongness. But the main point of a study of ethics will be deepening the young person's understanding of what he already knows. There are less and more mature understandings of the wrongness of stealing. There are less and more mature understandings of the goodness of generosity. That's what a study of ethics should be directed at... a more mature understanding of what the young person already knows about right and wrong.

2.3 Once a young person has acquired these character traits, he will be in a position to think about why he should so act. He will be in a position to deepen his less than fully-rational grasp of ethics. Let me explain, giving one example of doing the wrong thing and one example of doing the right thing. **Stealing.** First a young person need to learn that he ought not to steal what belongs to others. And he needs to learn that he ought not to steal not because he will likely get into trouble but because stealing will make him feel ashamed of himself. He needs to learn to internalize the wrongness of stealing so thoroughly that, were he to succumb to temptation (and most of us succumb to such temptations at some points in our lives), he would regret his behaviour. He would feel remorse. Only when he has learned that stealing is wrong in this strong sense is he well placed to reflect on why he ought not steal. Only when he has what Aristotle calls the 'learner's virtue' of shame is he well placed to deepen his understanding of the wrongness of stealing. **Being generous.** First a young person needs to learn that she ought (for example) to share her belongings with others and to be taught to do so in such a way that she comes to taste the pleasure of so acting. Only when she has acquired a taste for acting in that way, only when she has acquired that quality of character, that 'virtue', is she ready to reflect on why he should so act.

2.4 So the two stages of any education in ethics are acquired by habituation and then by reflection. First, learning to behave ethically. Second, learning to deepen one's understanding of the point or goal or justification for behaving ethically. Learning to behave ethically, that is, to do the right thing is a less than fully-rational process. It is a matter of acquiring certain habits of feeling and acting. Learning to understand why one should behave ethics, deepening one's understanding by reflection, discussion, study,

etc, is a matter of making more precise one's knowledge and deepening one's understanding.

3 The role for studying ethics

3.1 The study of ethics can be defined as a systematic reflection on our ethical/moral beliefs, attitudes, habits, choices and reasoning. (It is properly thought of as the second stage, after the young person has been habituated to do the right thing and avoid the wrong thing. The study of ethics will be 'objective' in the sense that we can give reasons for our ethical beliefs, judgements, choices, habits, reasons. Though we can be mistaken in our ethical beliefs and judgements, we aim at ethical beliefs and judgements that are universally true. Just as there are scientific facts, so there are ethical facts. So the study of ethics should address the denials of the 'cognitive status' of ethics – that it involves reasoning - found in individual subjectivism, cultural relativism. A good study will point out the little bit of the truth contained in both individual subjectivism and cultural relativism. But it will demonstrate why these are mistaken theories about the nature of ethics.¹

3.2 The study of ethics should deepen a person's understanding of the great universal ethical truths. So it ought not focus on ethical or moral 'dilemmas', complexities, exceptions, etc, but on why the ways of acting that we all recognize as ethical (eg being fair in our dealings with others), being a friend to (some) others) are ethical, on why the ways of acting that we all recognize as unethical (eg stealing, bullying, cheating) are unethical. Focussing on 'dilemmas', 'exceptions', etc, is likely to foster the idea that there is no such thing as ethical knowledge and understanding. Focussing on them is likely to foster the idea that there is no such thing as an ethical or moral mistake. It is likely to foster the idea that ethics is a matter of individual feeling.²

3.4 The study of ethics should deepen one's understanding of the fact that some ways of acting are wrong in and of themselves, regardless of their consequences: stealing, cheating, lying, torture, killing the innocent, causing unnecessary pain, honour killings, suttee, slavery. So the study ought not encourage the idea that the rightness and wrongness are to be determined simply by working out what way of acting will 'maximize good consequences', as though the end justified the means, as though ethical evaluation concerned ends and not means. Utilitarianism (and other forms of consequentialism) claim that only one thing is right (maximizing good consequences ('utility') and only one thing is wrong in itself (not maximizing good consequences). The study ought to foster an understanding of what it means to say that some ways of acting are wrong in and of themselves. For instance, it

¹ See appendix 1 on Individual Subjectivism, Cultural Relativism, Ethical Objectivism.

² See appendix 2:

Gerald Gleeson. Why children should not study ethics, *Bioethics Outlook*, 21.4. December 2010;
Simon Longstaff. Should we teach ethics to children. A reply, *Bioethics Outlook*, 22.2. June 2011;
Gerald Gleeson. A reply to Simon Longstaff. *Bioethics Outlook*, 22.2. June 2011;
Simon Longstaff. A further reply to Gerald Gleeson, *Bioethics Outlook*, 22.3. September 2011.

should clarify and emphasize the impact of his or her conduct on the person who acts this way. It should foster an understanding of the ethical significance of motive, intention, the act itself, the surrounding circumstances, etc... as well as the likely consequences. And it should do this without derogating one iota from the recognition that there are great moral truths to be known and understood.

3.5 So, the study of ethics ought to clarify the connection between good conduct and human fulfilment, bad conduct and human diminishment. It ought to foster a serious conception of what Aristotle argued was the point of good conduct, that human beings flourish in so far as they act 'in accordance with virtue', and are diminished in so far as they fail in this achievement. That is to say: it should foster an understanding of the impact of acting well and acting badly on the person who so acts.

3.6 And the study of ethics ought to be open to the possibility of insights deriving from religious traditions. It ought to reveal the religious source of some of the greatest ideas about ethics. The story of the Good Samaritan conveys a profound ethical teaching about human goodness and evil. The study of ethics ought to explain why it is that so many people think that only a foundation in something absolutely good ('God') can ultimately explain the force of ethical or moral principles. And it should explain why crude forms of religious relativism are themselves mistaken.

4 An evaluation of the stated objectives, curriculum, implementation, effectiveness, etc, of 'special education in ethics'.

4.1 There are some admirable features of the Framework, in particular its attempts to convey the idea that when we engage in moral reflection we are truly reasoning and not just emoting or expressing cultural conventions. Unlike others, I do not criticize it for endorsing either individual subjectivism or cultural convention.

4.2 I am not so sanguine, however, about the understanding of ethics of those who have offered to teach the program. Tellingly, a supporter of the 'special ethics education' program said in a letter to the *Sydney Morning Herald*: 'In ethics, there are no right answers.'

4.2 The Framework itself is not sufficiently attentive to the structure of moral development. It focuses too much on ethical or moral 'dilemmas', on 'exceptions' to ethical 'rules' and not enough on an appreciation of the great ethical truths. So it is likely to encourage either scepticism about ethics (the idea that truth is not at stake when you are doing ethics) or utilitarianism ('consequentialism') in ethics (the idea that truth is at stake but that there is only one ethical truth: you should always do whatever will 'maximize good consequences').

An illustration: The discussion of lying in Year 4 will address whether lying is always wrong. On the view of moral development I have set out above, one needs already

to have the motivational resources of a truthful person (that is, a person who would be seriously ashamed of herself if she lied) before one is well placed to discuss such an extremely difficult question: the likely result of such a discussion among young people in contemporary culture is scepticism with regard to the wrongness of lying or consequentialism about how to decide particular cases of lying.

Another illustration. The discussion of stealing in Year 5 will consider 'whether stealing is morally wrong in all circumstances'. Again, one needs already to have the motivational resources of a just person (that is, a person who would be seriously ashamed of herself were she to steal) before one could profitably think about these questions: once again the likely result of the discussion by children in our culture is scepticism about the moral wrongness of stealing or consequentialism about how to decide particular cases... or (even more likely) an incoherent mix of scepticism and consequentialism! (Again, will the teachers be aware of the contradiction between saying 'in ethics there are no right answers' and 'in ethics you should try to maximize good consequences'?)

4.3 The Framework should make more explicit its connections with the important role that schools teachers have in exemplifying ('modelling') good conduct, good motivation, good constancy in the face of temptation. It should make explicit the crucial importance of the 'ethos' of the school in supporting and reinforcing conduct that is ethically praiseworthy.

5 The Parliament should not repeal the Education Amendment (Ethics) Act 2010.

5.1 This submission proposes an account of ethical development and the place of the study of ethics in that development. It suggests ways in which the objectives, curriculum, implementation, etc of the 'special education in ethics' program could and should be improved. It does not suggest that the Amendment which permits this program to be offered in state schools should be repealed.

5.2 However, it is a pity that this program is an 'alternative' to 'special religious education': that is likely to convey the idea that the best of secular ethics is in competition with, is an alternative to, the best of religious ethics. This is not the case.

5.3 For this reason, amongst others, the Parliament should ensure that there is no special support given to this program by the State or state schools which disadvantages the 'special religious education' program. The Parliament should ensure that those who provide this program are subject to exactly the same arrangements as are those who provide the 'special religious education' programs.

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Appendix 1

Individual Subjectivism is the view that *ethical beliefs and judgements are just the expression of the individual's feelings, attitudes, desires or preferences. It says that what makes a belief or judgement morally right or wrong, good or evil, is subjective approval or disapproval of the individual – what is right for me or wrong for me.* It says that when I say 'The sexual abuse of children is a grave moral evil', I really mean, 'I disapprove of it', or 'I hate it', or just 'Boo to the sexual abuse of children.' I'm just emoting. Though an ethically mature person has acquired certain patterns of feelings and motivational response, and though there is an essentially individual aspect about mature morality (I must make up my own mind), subjectivism ought to be rejected because it has no place for the idea that anyone could be *wrong or mistaken* in their moral beliefs and judgements.

Cultural Relativism is the view that *that ethical beliefs and judgements are social conventions, that what makes a belief or judgement morally right or wrong is the approval or disapproval of the community. Cultural relativism treats moral beliefs and judgements like social conventions like eating with a knife and fork as opposed to eating with chopsticks or your hands.'* However, Cultural Relativism doesn't take account of agreements between societies: all societies value courage and truthfulness and respect their dead; no societies value lazy individual who sponges off others or cheats or who breaks promises to gain wealth and power. It implies there are no *grounds* for arguing against the perceived evils of other societies, like the honour killings of women in Northern Pakistan, or against the perceived evils of our own community, like our treatment of Aboriginal people; that there are no grounds for saying that another society or our own is *mistaken* or *wrong* in its moral practice. It run risk of contradiction: if relativists say that we should *tolerate* the moral conventions of other societies or groups, they imply that tolerance is not just a convention of a community but a universal moral principle. And it runs risk of self-refutation: if all forms of judgement and belief are merely social conventions, then we can ask whether *that judgement* – that all judgements are conventional – is itself only a convention.

Ethical Objectivism is the view that, so long as the judgment of a community, or of an individual, implies the question, '*This is so isn't it?*', it is an objective belief or judgment. Many Australians now look upon our past treatment of aboriginal people as shameful. This recognition is a matter of a *deepened understanding and appreciation* of the Aboriginal way of life. It includes emotional responses, such as being moved by the Aboriginal sense of the land as sacred, but is not just a matter of blind feeling like loving the taste of vegemite. Nor is it a matter of a change of social convention that can be simply explained in sociological terms. Those who now see our past treatment of Aboriginal people as shameful are implicitly asking: Were not our response to Aborigines in the past contemptuous? This critical reflection leads to a further question: *what is the ethical truth of the matter here?* Objectivists hold that we can be mistaken in our moral beliefs just as we were once mistaken in our factual belief that the earth is flat. We once believed that slavery was morally justified, but we now think that we were mistaken. Hence for Objectivists, *there can be moral knowledge and moral facts just as there can be scientific knowledge and scientific facts*; and our moral understanding can *develop*, not simply change, just as our scientific understanding can.

Bioethics Outlook

Plunkett Centre for Ethics

A joint centre of Australian Catholic University and St Vincents & Mater Health Sydney

Volume 21, No 4

December 2010

Why children should not study ethics

Gerald Gleeson

When the NSW Government completes its evaluation of a pilot programme for ethics in schools, I hope it will ponder Aristotle's claim that ethics should not be studied by young people. Aristotle's views are relevant because he was the founder of 'ethics' as we know it. He learnt from his own teachers, Plato and Socrates, who posed the wider question whether ethics could be taught to anyone at all, not just children. These days, however, professional ethicists and many in the general public are no longer troubled by such difficult questions. Ethics has been normalised as an aspect of doing business: companies and government departments boast of their ethical credentials, complete with mission statements and key performance indicators. Indeed, if teaching ethics were to become part of the school curriculum it would be a nice business for someone.

Aristotle was the first systematic ethicist and the first philosopher of education. He thought children should study music and mathematics, subjects that would stretch and occupy their minds while they grew up and gained sufficient experience in life to be able to benefit from the study of ethics. In saying children should not *study* ethics, Aristotle was not saying that children should not be taught to *behave* ethically. On the contrary, he proposed the first theory of moral development, arguing that from a young age, people need to be trained to act rightly. They need mentors – parents and teachers – to show them what it is to act fairly, to speak truthfully, to be moderate in one's desires, to courageously face difficulties, and so on. Only later, when young people have developed the right habits or virtues of character, and have experience of living among other moral agents, will they be ready to understand *why* some actions are good for us and others are not.

Should public schools teach ethics? Yes, in the sense, that teachers, like parents, have a crucial role in showing young people right from wrong, and ensuring they act accordingly. Don't be lazy, tell the truth, be fair to others, respect your parents, etc. We expect schools to inculcate these moral principles in our children, and to reinforce the moral habits we hope children are acquiring in their families.

So what's wrong with ethics classes for the young? Plato and Aristotle would suggest that these classes tend to promote moral scepticism, rather than ethical conduct. Discussion alone and the sharing of moral opinions do not transform a person's moral character. This is why company 'codes of ethics' are notoriously ineffectual. Let me explain.

Short ethics courses like those proposed for our schools typically use case studies or scenarios that involve competing moral principles, and prior to the discussion students are told, "there's no right answer – tell us what *you* think". The various opinions that surface usually correlate with rival ethical theories, like Utilitarianism, or Kantianism, or Contractarianism, or Divine Command theory, and so on. The implicit, take-home message from such discussions is that when it comes to ethics, people may opt for whichever theory and answer they prefer. Of course, with time and moral maturity, one could engage in serious philosophical debate about all these theories and develop one's own considered approach – but that is a task for later in life, not for primary school.

There are other problematic aspects of purporting to teach ethics to children from a secular perspective.

First: Are there really moral dilemmas in life – the kind of dilemmas that ethics courses love to dwell on, or are our so-called dilemmas more apparent than real? Are our 'dilemmas' in fact mostly cases in which we find it hard to do what we know is right? As Alasdair MacIntyre has argued, it is particular ethical theories that create moral dilemmas, not pre-existing dilemmas that require theoretical resolution. So which theory will a school ethics programme presuppose? How will parents know which theory their children are being taught in these courses, and by whom? (To have no ethical theory is also to have a theory!) Do parents really want their children to be taught that there are no right answers to ethical questions?

Secondly: Are there any kinds of human conduct that are *always* wrong? A colleague once remarked that this is the only interesting question in ethics! We all know that lying, stealing, murder and adultery are *generally* wrong – but are they always wrong? If they are always wrong, why? If they are not always wrong, then what ethical theory justifies the exceptions, and does that theory stand up to critical examination? Notice how this question is linked to the previous question whether

there are genuine moral dilemmas. If it is always wrong for a doctor to lie to her patient, then no true dilemma ever arises, but only the challenge of discerning when, in what circumstances, and to what extent, a patient should be told the truth. In meeting this challenge, there is no substitute for experience and practical wisdom.

Thirdly, the biggest question of all: Does ethics need a basis in God? To an important extent, ethics is clearly independent of religion: there are many good people who are not religious, and those who try to be religious often act badly. But religion is not the issue. We don't necessarily require religion to tell us right from wrong (though it normally helps). On the other hand, the ultimate basis for right and wrong does lie beyond our human resources. The power of ethical values and standards to tell me *what I ought to do* – contrary to what I feel like doing – along with the reason why some kinds of conduct are *always* wrong, can't be explained merely by human choices or commitments, agreements or cultural customs. The existence of ethical obligation raises a question it cannot answer, but which would be answered by a God who is the source of all existence, meaning and value.

This point also explains why it is wrong for a school ethics course to compete with religious education classes – because it implies that "modern secular ethics" is a viable, self-contained, and self-supporting enterprise. That claim is no longer credible – witness the interminable moral debates of our time, which "post-modernism" now declares to be inevitable, and which in part motivate the reactive, religious fundamentalism that appeals to many today. The only way forward is through a genuine dialogue in which religion respects, and at times is challenged by, the (limited) autonomy of the ethical and the ethical recognises its source in a transcendent absolute whom people call God. Ethics and religion should not compete, they need each other.

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Should we teach ethics to children?

A reply to Gerald Gleeson

Simon Longstaff

We are all indebted to Fr. Gerry Gleeson for his reasonable, informed and nuanced critique of the proposal that children be offered the option of participating in 'philosophical ethics' classes where the choice has already been made not to attend classes in Special Religious Education (SRE or 'scripture') at NSW State Primary Schools. I sincerely wish that Fr. Gleeson's had been the dominant voice of our opponents in the debate that has simmered (and occasionally raged) for the eight years since this issue was first raised as a matter of concern by parents (1).

Fr. Gleeson offers three arguments for not allowing children who have 'opted out' of scripture to participate in ethics classes. First, he sides with Aristotle in the latter's view that active, structured deliberation about ethical issues should be reserved for relatively mature moral agents who have become habituated to a life of virtue by following the example of older mentors. Second, he argues that the use of scenarios that pose supposed dilemmas is faulty mostly as a result of the dilemmas being more perceived than real (a problem exacerbated, he suggests, because of the influence of 'post modernism'). Third and finally, Fr. Gleeson argues that ethical discourse is unable to explain the basis for moral obligation without recourse to a transcendent, non-human source of authority for what is ultimately (or fundamentally) 'right' and/or 'good' - an ultimate reality that can be given the name 'God'. I would like to offer a response to each of these arguments.

For reasons outlined below, I would wish to place a greater emphasis on Socrates' (and Plato's) role in defining the field of ethics than that of Aristotle. While Aristotle was undoubtedly a profoundly important thinker in this field - offering the first systematic account

of ethics, he was (to a considerable degree) responding to the ideas of his predecessors. It is worth noting that Plato ascribes to Socrates the credit for having posed the core question of ethics: "What ought one to do?". There is almost certainly a measure of historical licence on Plato's part (surely the question had been asked by others in advance of Socrates). Yet, much as he tries, Aristotle never really escapes the 'gravitational force' of Socrates and his question. Fr. Gleeson is correct in saying that Aristotle believed that ethics should not be taught to children. It is my understanding that Aristotle adopted this view as part of a larger, normative framework developed by him as the basis for moral education. However, I think that at least one of Aristotle's reasons for saying that ethics should not be taught to children is problematic. At the core of Aristotle's objection to the teaching of ethics to children is his belief that the intellects of children are insufficiently developed to learn about ethics. That is, I understand Aristotle to be saying that we should not teach children ethics because it is impossible for them to be taught (a prefiguring of Kant's notion that 'ought' implies 'can'). Thus, Aristotle argues that children should be exposed to the exemplary conduct of virtuous adults. By imitating such adults children can develop the habits of virtue. Eventually, when the intellect is sufficiently developed a child might mature into a virtuous adult capable of making sound, ethical decisions of their own.

In passing, it should also be noted that if Aristotle is correct, then the implications will be widespread. For example, In December 2010, Bishop Peter Ingham (of Wollongong) issued a statement on behalf of the Catholic Bishops affirming that the Catholic Church teaches children ethics as part of its classes in Special Religious Education (SRE). Beyond this, if children should not be taught ethics (because

they are not well enough developed to reflect on such matters), then what of the practice of teaching them spirituality and theology in SRE classes? In my experience, theological concepts are at least as nuanced and difficult as those arising in ethics.

But what if Aristotle's judgement about the capacity of children is mistaken? It would not be the first time that he was evidently mistaken in his judgement of such matters. While allowing for his many points of excellence, we should not forget that Aristotle is also infamous for his belief that ALL women are fundamentally deficient in reason and therefore incapable of developing practical wisdom at any age. The fact that Aristotle was mistaken in his estimation of the capacity of women does not necessarily mean that he was mistaken in his estimation of the capacity of children. It is just that Aristotle may not be the best source of guidance about who should / should not be taught ethics.

Socrates and Plato did not share Aristotle's mistaken view about the capacity of women. Nor do I think that Socrates (at least) was opposed to the practice of engaging in ethical deliberation with the young. Indeed, Socrates was condemned by the Athenian democracy for having committed two offences - impiety and corrupting the youth (which may also help explain Aristotle's cautious attitude to teaching ethics to the young). Admittedly, the youths that Socrates was supposed to have corrupted, with his ideas, were older than the typical primary school student - but not that much older. However, interesting as it may be to compare and contrast classical views about the education of children, perhaps the better approach would be to acknowledge that we can now draw on over 2,000 years of further work in this area - work that has led to considerable change in our understanding of what children are capable of learning, if we give them the opportunity. My understanding is that those who are expert in this field are confident that children can usefully be exposed to (and participate in) thinking about ethics. As I will argue below, the outcome of this need not be either moral confusion or the embrace of 'relativism'. Rather, I would argue that the

practice of ethical deliberation requires the adoption of substantive values and principles, modelled (in a manner that would attract Aristotle's approval) by those facilitating the discussion.

Fr. Gleeson challenges the validity of a pedagogy that makes use of ethical dilemmas by questioning whether dilemmas even exist. Arguing that ethical dilemmas are more apparent than real, Gleeson proposes that talk of dilemmas is really an excuse to evade responsibility for doing what we actually know to be right and good. It seems to me that, at this point, Fr. Gleeson is attempting to argue against one of the mysterious truths of human existence - a truth that has been at the heart of some of the greatest literature produced by human kind (including the Bible). Just as in physics two directly opposing forces can be equally strong, so it is that human beings can encounter situations when the choice is not between right or wrong / good or bad but between two 'goods' of equal value, etc. One can, for example, experience divided loyalties. One can have an abiding commitment to truth and an aversion to causing harm and yet know that to tell someone the truth will cause them grave distress. The whole point of stories like that of Abraham, when called to sacrifice Isaac is that Abraham's dilemma is agonisingly real. The significance of Abraham's choice is that he really could have chosen not to sacrifice Isaac - otherwise there is little point to the story. This is not to say that every choice is an ethical dilemma. In some cases there really is a choice between 'good' and 'bad' or 'right' and 'wrong'. Such cases might involve 'moral temptation' but no dilemma. However, it does not follow that because some choices do not involve dilemmas that dilemmas are not real as experienced by human beings from time to time.

My defending the reality of ethical dilemmas should not be taken to suggest that philosophical ethics classes deal with nothing else. The curriculum is more nuanced than that - also canvassing ethical issues where the force of argument, set within the context of each class and the school community, will tend towards a particular answer. For example, I

cannot conceive of a class where a child would be left to conclude that bullying is right. The whole way in which each class will be conducted will draw children away from that conclusion - partly through the example of the facilitator, partly through the way in which each person's view is listened to in a respectful manner, partly as a result of the quality of arguments explored in each class. That said, I think that it is appropriate that children explore reasons why bullying is wrong. The reasons explored might include that "it is against the rules". However, I would hope that the discussion would address the substance lying behind such a rule - including the flaws in arguments that bullies might put forward to justify their conduct. The fact that one is prepared critically to examine contending arguments does not amount to relativism. To do so is an expression of a substantive (non-relative) tradition of philosophical reflection.

I think that Fr. Gleeson's most potent challenge comes with his argument that philosophical ethics needs to invoke God as the ultimate justification for any claim that we should live an ethical life. Gleeson leaves open the question of exactly what anyone might mean by 'God' - except to say that God is "the source of all existence, meaning and value". Although Fr. Gleeson does not say this, one is led to wonder if he also thinks that whatever is "the source of all existence, meaning and value" is what is meant by 'God'. If so, then it is pretty difficult to disentangle God from the equation. But not impossible.

I think that Fr. Gleeson too quickly dismisses the possibility of a 'this world' foundation for ethics. I would offer as one candidate, for this task, Socrates' claim that "the unexamined life is not worth living". I take it that Socrates was wanting to say something more than just that it is a practically useful thing to reflect on what one ought to do. Rather, I take Socrates to be making a claim about what is distinctive of our particular form of being (human being). While it may be possible for other kinds of beings to transcend the demands of instinct and desire (at present, I do not think that we know the answer to this question), we know as a fact that human beings do have this capacity. The fact that some people do not realise this capacity

might be acknowledged without taking away from the observation that the capacity to make conscious choices to do what we believe to be 'good' or 'right' is a general capacity of human beings. So it is that we have countless examples of human beings choosing not to act in conformance with instinct or desire - even when there is no risk of incurring a penalty for doing so. More positively, we have many examples of people choosing to act with moral courage - even though all of their instincts might lead them to avoid the negative consequences of acting in good conscience. Socrates' claim that the unexamined life is not worth living is based on the idea that the best kind of life that our kind might live is a fully human life - and that a failure to 'examine' one's life is to miss the opportunity to do what is distinctive of our form of being. In other words, the foundation for ethics may lie in an understanding of what it means to be human.

It should be noticed here that there is nothing in this account that absolutely requires reference to God. The description of human beings and their capacity to make conscious, ethical choices may simply be the description of a fact about the natural world - explained by reference to, say, the theory of evolution. Certainly, this is the kind of account offered by some socio-biologists. Then again, one could explain the existence of free will, in humans, by reference to a religious account of creation in which people are made in the (moral) image of God - as the original Hebrew version of the creation story suggests. Which type of account one chooses as the basis for free will is a matter of faith. The evidence for the existence of free will, as an attribute of human being, is not.

The 'Socratic Foundation' outlined above will not satisfy those who accept a religious foundation for life. However, it does show that one can develop a substantive foundation for ethics without a necessary reliance on God. Rather, the 'Socratic' answer to the question, "why live an ethical (examined) life?" may be that this is an essential element of our humanity.

One objection to the 'Socratic Foundation' might be that it provides too little guidance. By contrast, those who invoke God as the

foundation for ethics can draw on a range of ready-made moral frameworks complete with Commandments, revealed truths, exemplary lives, etc. While there is no doubt that religions provide ample moral guidance, the 'Socratic Foundation' does more work than initially may seem to be the case. For example, it states clearly that not all ways of living are equally good (an unexamined life is not worth living). That is, it is no friend to 'relativism'. Secondly, anyone committed to living an examined life will have to buy into a number of additional elements in the associated moral framework. These elements include: moral courage (including the courage to act on one's convictions), honesty, sincerity, respect for others, etc. It is for this reason that one can easily place Socrates alongside St Thomas Aquinas with his injunction always to act in accordance with a well-informed conscience. Socrates may not invoke Aquinas' notion that each person is invested with a spark of the

divine which illuminates their personal understanding of what is good and right. However, despite their different foundations (human being and God respectively), I suspect that the two would not have differed much in their views about how we ought to live.

None of the arguments outlined above is meant to prove that an appeal to God, as the foundation for ethics, is mistaken. Rather, I have simply wanted to show that such an appeal is not necessary and that there is a rich and coherent foundation for ethics that is entirely rooted in this world.

As noted from the outset, Fr. Gleeson's objections are reasonable. However, I hope that this response indicates why I do not think that Gleeson mounts a compelling argument against offering ethics classes to children whose parents have chosen for them not to attend classes in special religious education.

Reference

1. Gleeson, Gerald: Why Children should not study ethics. *Bioethics Outlook*, Volume 21, No 4. 1-2.

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Bioethics Outlook

A quarterly bulletin of the Plunkett Centre for Ethics

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Why Children Should not Study Ethics

A Reply to Simon Longstaff

Gerald Gleeson

I thank Simon Longstaff for his thoughtful engagement with issues I raised, somewhat provocatively, in my article, "Why Children Should not Study Ethics". I questioned the optimism, on the part of those promoting ethics in primary schools, about what is involved in "teaching ethics". I wanted to circumvent related issues that were being confused by both proponents and critics of ethics in schools. The presenting problem was said to be students wasting their time because they did not attend Special Religious Education classes. The proposed solution was a new curriculum in ethics. But since there are many other ways in which students might fruitfully spend a spare half hour each week, proponents of the ethics curriculum clearly thought their course had its own intrinsic merits. Thus many advocates of the ethics curriculum see it, not as a useful time-filler, but as positively preferable to SRE, competing for children's hearts and minds in the same intellectual and moral space. Hence the importance of the more fundamental issues I raised: In what sense can ethics be taught to children? Can ethics ultimately be independent of religious belief?

I appealed to Aristotle's view that since ethics includes understanding *why* actions and people are good or bad it should begin with reflection on moral experience, not just any moral experience, but crucially on the experience of those with some maturity in living a good human life. Without the ("happy") experience of acting courageously and fairly, of needing to tell the truth and being moderate in one's desires, and so on, a person simply won't know what they are supposed to be studying. I assume children are capable to *some small extent* of beginning to understand the whys and wherefores of good human action; nonetheless, by and large they are still in the learning phase in which school plays an important part. Schools should *always* be training our children to know that bullying is wrong, that we should respect others, etc. – not during special 'ethics classes', but throughout the day, in the class room and on the playground.

Might ethics classes reinforce these principles, and help children to understand them better? If so, well and good. However, a non-directive teaching method that relies so much on apparent ethical dilemmas brings significant dangers. Dr Longstaff thinks moral dilemmas are real on the grounds that we often encounter choices between two goods of equal value, e.g. a commitment to the truth and an aversion to harming someone else. In these encounters he thinks we have to choose one good and "sacrifice" the other. But this formulation is ambiguous as to the critical issue of what it is to sacrifice a good.

I believe it is a mistake to think of moral choices as simply between two "goods". Moral choices concern, not goods directly, but different *ways of acting* in pursuit of some good. To suppose that "choices are between goods", is implicitly to adopt the utilitarian theory that only the outcomes of action matter. On this view, we should choose (*say it quickly*, "to do whatever will produce") the greater of two goods. By contrast, if choice is between different *ways of acting* then there is a significant difference between choosing *to lie* in order avoid harm to another, and choosing *to remain silent* in order to avoid harm to another. The action of lying *sacrifices* the truth, whereas the act of remaining silent *respects* the truth. A utilitarian ethical theory fails to recognise the distinction between these different kinds of action, and so manifests its inadequacy.

Much more needs to be said about utilitarian and non-utilitarian theories; my point is simply that here are two substantially different approaches to ethics, and hence to what is or isn't a genuine moral dilemma. This is why, as Alasdair MacIntyre has argued, the way we understand moral dilemmas presupposes a substantive judgment about the nature of ethics. I am confident that the proposed ethics in schools programme, and its "facilitators", will blithely assume the utilitarian approach and will teach children to learn happily "to sacrifice" one good for another – and if so, that's what I and others object to.

Thus the Ethics Curriculum document says that *"In this week and the next [students] are asked to make relative or "shades of grey" judgments. They will be dealing with a range of cases in which people have told a lie and they will be asked to judge to what extent that is acceptable or not and to try to figure out why one lie is either more acceptable or less acceptable than another."*

To be sure, some lies are worse than others. But many parents don't want their children to learn that it is right to tell even "little lies"! They want them to be creative, and to learn how to avoid harming other people *without having to tell lies at all.*

Recognition of the difference between these two ways of understanding ethics, and of what are good or bad choices, should lead us to reflect on another great difference between ethical theories over the relationship between ethics and God. Longstaff proposes a "this worldly" foundation for ethics in the idea of an examined life, in which people don't act on the basis of instincts or desires, but on "an understanding of what it means to be human". I agree that ethics depends on an understanding of what it means to be human (in traditional terms, "the natural moral law"). I also agree that to some extent human beings can work out for themselves what are the good and bad ways to act. This is why I argued for a mutually illuminating relationship between religion and ethics. *Yet, examinations presuppose standards.* When we probe the proposed standards against which human life is to be examined, we face a great divide between ethical approaches that are open to religious teachings and those which are not, i.e. those which assume a self-enclosed, secular or "this worldly" view of what it is to be human.

The fundamental issue here concerns creation: if human beings are created, known and loved by God, then presumably God knows what is good for us, and God's revelation will fill out the incomplete insights we may have about what it is to live a good human life. I have no objection to any attempt to formulate a "this worldly" ethics, provided it does not aggressively shut out the possibility of religious revelation. Intentionally or not, a school ethics course time-tabled alongside SRE is likely to be seen as a self-contained alternative to religion. While some of its proponents may sincerely see it that way, I don't see why the Churches should acquiesce in such a solution to the original problem of children with time on their hands.

Parents who choose to send their children to special religious education classes do so because of the teaching that will be given – the SRE courses follow a curriculum in line with the beliefs of the various churches or faiths presenting the courses. My criticism of the new "this worldly" ethics classes is not that they are "this worldly", but that they will either be resolutely non-directive – and hence tend to inculcate scepticism in the students, or (more likely) they will be informed by good old utilitarianism; and hence will inevitably tend to inculcate certain substantive moral opinions – presumably those of the facilitators – over which parents will have knowledge or control.

Should we teach children ethics?

A further response to Gerald Gleeson

Simon Longstaff

Fr. Gerald Gleeson has been kind enough to offer some further reflections on the issue of whether or not there are sufficient grounds to support the introduction of special ethics classes for children not attending classes in Special Religious Education (colloquially known as 'scripture') in NSW State Primary Schools. As usual, his points are well argued and I would be inclined to agree with many of them but for the fact that the subject of his most pointed criticism does not, in fact, exist.

This problem arises from an evident misunderstanding of the philosophical foundations for the ethics classes. I must take some responsibility for this misunderstanding for it is evident that I have not communicated clearly enough. However, there are some assumptions made by Fr. Gleeson that are entirely his own. I am hoping that some greater clarity from me will help on both fronts.

I want to begin by clearing away a few misconceptions. First, the ethics classes developed for children not attending SRE are being offered without particular regard to their reasons for not attending 'scripture'. As it happens, we know that many of the children attending the ethics classes come from devout families who belong to faith groups not able to offer SRE or who prefer to deal with matters of religion within the family environment. While some parents choose for their children not to attend SRE because they are not at all religious, it would be mistaken to believe that this is true of all (or even of most). As such, the ethics classes are not set up in opposition to a religious world view. Rather, it does not accord religious perspectives a privileged position - as they would typically enjoy within a 'scripture' class.

Second, the program is not based on, nor does it promote, utilitarian philosophy or consequentialism more

generally. I mention this because Fr. Gleeson seems to be operating from this belief when he says, "I am confident that the proposed ethics in schools programme, and its 'facilitators', will blithely assume the utilitarian approach and will teach children to learn happily "to sacrifice" one good for another – and if so, that's what I and others object to.". Fr. Gleeson's confident assertion is, in fact, misplaced. While children will be introduced to ethical theories based on an assessment of consequences, they will also be taught to consider and apply frameworks based on the idea of duty (deontological), virtue, rights, etc. Indeed, at the end of the program they will be familiar with the broad spectrum of moral frameworks developed over time to answer the core question of ethics, "What ought one to do?"

Fr. Gleeson's confident (but mistaken) assertion seems to have arisen out of his response to my argument about the reality of ethical dilemmas. I argued that there are occasions when, in reality and as a matter of principle, a person might find themselves on the horns of a dilemma - faced with a choice in which values or principles or duties 'compete' with equal weight. The most devoutly religious person can similarly find

themselves in a real dilemma (the story of Abraham and Isaac only has force if Abraham recognises the dilemma inherent in obeying a divine command to kill his son). The need to make a choice between competing values, principles or duties does not necessarily lead to consequentialism. Nothing in my argument presupposes this.

Now, it might be objected that a program of classes that introduces children to a range of ethical theories is a product of ethical relativism. This is not so. As I argued in my earlier response to Fr. Gleeson, the program is based on a solid (absolute) foundation, being the Socratic observation that 'the unexamined life is not worth living'. I argued that this claim is based on the observation that human being (the form of being in which humans participate) is defined by our capacity to transcend instinct and desire and make conscious (conscientious) ethical decisions. I pointed out that this fact could be accounted for by a religious explanation (Man made in the image of God, endowed with free will, etc.). However, I also observed that this aspect of human being might be explained by a socio-biological account. Or it might be taken simply as a brute fact about the human

condition without need of further explanation. Starting at this point, the 'this worldly' point, allows people of all faiths (and none) to engage with the ethics classes if they are minded to do so. Starting at this point does not deny the religious perspective - but nor does it accord it a privileged place.

Fr. Gleeson quotes a section from the curriculum document that says: "In this week and the next [students] are asked to make relative or "shades of grey" judgments. They will be dealing with a range of cases in which people have told a lie and they will be asked to judge to what extent that is acceptable or not and to try to figure out why one lie is either more acceptable or less acceptable than another." I think that Fr. Gleeson assumes that this instruction is inviting children to conclude that lying is sometimes 'right'. But this is not what the instruction actually says. Rather, it invites children to consider what might be *"acceptable or not and to try to figure out why one lie is either more acceptable or less acceptable than another."* This is very much in the same vein as argued by Fr. Gleeson who observes that "To be sure, some lies are worse than others."

Like Fr. Gleeson, we would prefer children to "be creative, and to learn how to avoid harming other people without having to tell lies at all." However, we do not think we will get there without children being exposed to the spur to creativity that lies in recognising the reality of the dilemmas in which people find themselves. It's easy enough to tell people that it is wrong to steal. But what of the person whose family is starving and so takes fruit left rotting on the ground of an orchard owned by a man with a full belly and a coarse indifference to the fate of his starving neighbour? Is this stealing? Does the man with the full belly 'own' the fruit left to rot on the ground? Is it wrong for a person to feed their starving family by such means? Discussing such questions illuminates what we might mean by saying that "stealing is wrong".

The development of special ethics classes is not (and never has been) a response to a perceived weakness in the mainstream curriculum taught within NSW State Primary Schools. The State's teachers do much to promote critical thinking and to establish a solid ethical foundation amongst the children attending their schools. We are not trying to correct a deficit - but to

reinforce and extend good work amongst those children not attending SRE. This is the same approach taken by SRE providers who have made it clear that, amongst other things, they teach ethics. Our task has not been to draw children away from SRE but to provide a course for children who, until recently, were denied an opportunity to do something meaningful (not merely useful) during the time when others attend SRE. This may have good consequences - but lest Fr. Gleeson

spot latent consequentialist tendencies, let me also be clear that it is the just, right and proper thing to do.

Sincere thanks to Gerry for a stimulating discussion.

Dr Simon Longstaff is Executive Director of St James Ethics Centre. Previous articles in this exchange can be found in Bioethics Outlook, December 2010, March 2011 and June 2011.

Bioethics Outlook

A quarterly bulletin of the Plunkett Centre for Ethics
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Vincent's & Mater Health

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