Chapters

Conveying Ideas and Values in Education!

Challenges in Teaching Military Ethics

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In view of human history and looking at what is going on in the world right now, one is tempted to ask whether ethics has ever been taught, indeed, can it even be taught? And if it can, what practical effect does it have, where does it show? What is the link between a possible ethical insight and its practical application in human activity? Because, after all, ethics attempts to connect norms and behavior, thus aiming at meaningful arrangement of human coexistence.

Does the source of morality lie in being and character, rather than in rationality and erudition? Or was Plato right already that immorality is simply ignorance, a lack of instruction and knowledge? Or, if morality constitutes a synthesis of both, what are the possibilities and limitations to ethical instruction? And what about ethics and ethical instruction in a social environment that features moral relativism and radical tolerance? When “anything goes”, why ought we be moral after all and how could we possibly determine what is moral? Consequently, does individual moral responsibility perhaps exhaust itself by merely following the laws and abiding by the legal framework instituted by legislative institutions of society and state?

The challenges bedeviling the question of ethics and teaching ethics appear manifold and sheer limitless. They become even more intricate when it comes to the military world and the question of soldiering, where many argue that the nature of the organization with its strict hierarchy and implicit and unquestionable obedience leaves no room for individual freedom and morality, and thus renders the issue of ethics irrelevant.

These introductory remarks already hint at the intricate and most profound nature of ethics that defies easy and simple answers in the sense of a mere empirical and pragmatic approach. Ethics, like philosophy itself, does not represent a clearly defined and delimited subject area as most scientific disciplines do. This is why the ethicist as a practical philosopher, while instructing on terminology and the history of ideas of ethics, has to teach and foster how to think and judge properly rather than conveying a closed doctrine or a certain school of thought. Ethics touches upon the deepest grounds of being human and cannot be grasped without proper foundation in ontology and
philosophical anthropology, thus necessitating comprehensive metaphysical reflection. This is consistent with Immanuel Kant’s dictum: “[...] pure philosophy (metaphysics) must precede; without it there can be no moral philosophy at all.” (I. Kant, Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals, Preface [390]). Consequently, the area of political and military ethics cannot be grasped without proper foundation in comprehensive political and military philosophy.

If humans are free to act, then the subject of ethics is the reality of human acting as it ‘ought’ to be. Ethics represents an ideal science that considers proper acting in the modality of theoretical reasoning, and is thus clearly distinguished from any concrete and practical ethos. This distinction points at the essential methodological difference between the two major approaches of how to teach ethics: Should ethics be taught on the basis of comprehensive grounding in abstract theory, or should it be promoted by a pragmatic ethos-approach that features empirical examples and draws recipes for ethical behavior from experience and historical precedence? The latter approach attempts to minimize any intellectualization of ethical instruction and features the concept of virtue ethics and character building by following the principle that ethics should be “caught” rather than “taught”.

While examples and illustrations always help to understand theoretical concepts and norms, a mere pragmatic focus neglects the truly metaphysical and thus philosophical nature of the subject matter of ethics. Only the comprehensive foundation of ethics will potentially generate a self-reliant individual morality that allows for responsible decisions under circumstances that are unique and are not covered by precedent and case study. The methodological reduction to case examples and discourse studies might generate workable results on an interim and superficial level, however, at the cost of forfeiting the qualitatively profound comprehension of ethics. Due to its ubiquitous tendency to control individual behavior and tie it to established rules and regulations, the military organization generally features the pragmatic approach and it will require concerted and determined efforts to overcome these limitations.

If we put the pragmatic approach to teaching ethics with its attempt to provide prescribed recipes for moral behavior in a broader cultural context, we encounter the calamitous path political modernity has walked as it undertook the attempt of ethicizing human existence and terminating individual morality. Individual morality was dissolved into collective ethics, thus reducing personal and individual responsibility to compliance with precepts and regulations that were considered reasonable and whose retention was acknowledged as desirable. The “moral law within myself”, true morality as it were, of which