



Ethics education and leadership

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This issue of the journal features two interesting articles about the connection of ethics and leadership. How can ethics teaching help to develop and design best practices of leadership in universities? This question is explored by Asamoah in his study of effective leadership in two universities in Ghana (Asamoah 2023). He argues that leaders need to advocate appropriate ethical behavior; they are role models and exemplify good social relations. They therefore need to show honesty, transparency, fairness, respect, integrity and trustworthiness in order to accomplish the goals and performance of their educational institution. There clearly is a contribution of ethics education to improve leadership. The second article of Contreras describes a leadership program, offered by a non-governmental organization to young women students in the Philippines, and aimed at character formation (Contreras 2023). It shows that ethics education not only takes place in formal settings such as academia and professional training but also, and perhaps even more in informal learning environments. The aspiration of the teaching is the same as pointed out in the previous article: how to cultivate virtues of character in persons who will be leading persons in the future?

Connecting leadership with ethics is important in a time when trust is in decline. A Gallup poll in the United States for example indicates that average confidence in major institutions has decreased in 2021. Only one in three adults has confidence in the medical system, public schools, small business, organized religion, and banks (Brenan 2021). Perhaps the recent Covid-19 pandemic, and the numerous crises that became apparent in its aftermath (war in Ukraine, inflation, energy shortages, ecological disasters, food insecurity, migration) have reinforced ideas that leaders at multiple national and international levels are corrupt, unreliable, dishonest, and self-interested. Examples of good leaders demonstrating virtues such as integrity, compassion, honesty, justice, and responsibility are relatively scarce. Yet, as Contreras (2023) emphasizes, leaders are not born but they develop qualities through education and practice.

The role of ethics education in regard to leadership raises the question of objectives. What do we hope to achieve with ethics education? In most of the scholarly

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literature distinctions are made between three types of objectives: knowledge, skills and attitudes. Ethics education is most often focused on providing and expanding knowledge. It should transmit information about best practices and standards of conduct. For example, medical students should know the concept of informed consent and what it entails for communication in practice. They should be able to explain why it is important, and why it is crucial for establishing relationships with patients and research subjects. But they should also learn how to apply it in practice. This brings in the second type of objective: skills, nowadays more often labelled as competencies. Ethical teaching is not merely theoretical but requires application as well. An essential skills component related to the first objective is that of learning to recognize ethical issues. In most professional activities, scientific expertise is associated with value judgments. Because moral concerns are inseparable from technical concerns it is not always easy to identify the normative dimension of decisions and practices. Students should therefore learn how to identify which aspects of decisions and practices are technical in nature and which are ethical, and they should be able to assess how technical and ethical aspects are related to each other. Other skills that are often mentioned are formal and analytical. Skills should be developed in identifying relevant moral principles, analyzing the normative dimension of intended acts and decisions, critically analyzing moral arguments, or justifying personal decisions regarding ethical issues. Skills can also focus on critical reflection and self-criticism. The third type of objective of ethics education claims that the attitudes of students should be influenced. This education should make them more sensitive to ethical questions, and especially the values of stakeholders, clients or patients, to elicit a sense of moral obligation and personal responsibility, to tolerate ambiguity, and to respect different moral views. In elaborating this objective virtue theories play a significant role, as exemplified in the two contributions on ethics and leadership in this issue.

In reality, it seems that the majority of ethics teaching programs (at least those collected in the Unesco Global Ethics Observatory) are focused on the first type of objective: providing knowledge and information as well as identification of moral issues. Skills objectives are also important, ranging in frequency from (1) analysis and reasoning to (2) understanding and explaining to (3) justification and argumentation. Influencing attitudes is less common but still half of the programs aim at producing good conduct. The emphasis on distinct objectives reflects two diverging views of ethics education. The pragmatic view regards ethics teaching as a way of learning skills for analyzing and resolving the ethical dilemmas that will confront professionals in their future practices. The role of ethics education therefore is limited. It should focus on what is practical and measurable. In this modest educational philosophy it is not realistic to expect that ethics education can create morally better professionals and scientists. After all, how can a limited number of courses bring about a change in behavior or character? The primary objective therefore is to teach competencies or skills so that it will ultimately lead to better professional decisions and practices. The other view is broader and bolder. It is expressed in a notable statement of the Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno (1864–1936): doing well is not enough, you have to be good. In this view, ethics education is not merely focused on skills to improve decision-making but is basically a long-term effort to

create better, more sensitive and humane professionals and scientists. It is aimed at character formation, integrity, and professional virtues. Rather than enhancing professional skills it intends to improve the professional him- or herself. Only in this way can ethics teaching contribute to enhancing the quality of professional work. This broader view is motivated by the fact that ethics education is often introduced and promoted to counteract dehumanizing and objectifying tendencies in contemporary practices. It is not just there to facilitate professional decision-making, but it should contribute to making professional activity more humane. This view is even more clear in ethical education in connection to leadership. We expect our leaders, at whatever level they are operating, to demonstrate good conduct and action. This is what ethics education should train and nourish.

Data Availability There are no data provided in this article.

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