

A Professor's Duties

Peter J. Markie, *Rowman & Littlefield*

It would not be a misnomer to call the present age the Era of Ethics. This is not, of course, to say that we are progressing morally. Rather, since the late eighties, there seems to be a growing interest both among intellectuals and the general public in the moral dimension of social, political, and professional life. No doubt some of this interest issues from media exposure of corruption among televangelists, politicians in high places, and in the world of commerce and finance. Additionally, the litigious nature of our society has brought forward numerous, varied, and widely discussed cases dealing with rights and duties in parenting, employment, abortion, euthanasia, the environment, scientific research, medical practice, and most recently, the burgeoning field of telecommunications. At every turn, we seem beset with issues that are, at heart, of a moral nature. It is now commonplace for hospitals to have an Ethics advisory committee. Corporations seek the counsel of ethicists, and even Congress acts as if it were concerned with the ethics of its members. A former academic, now ethicist at large, Michael Josephson, has appeared often on commercial television and the popular press instructing, challenging, and entertaining audiences with his warning that society is becoming morally bankrupt. Another academic, James Wilson, has a recently published and widely read book titled *The Moral Sense*. This, along with the success of William Bennett's *Book of Virtues*, suggests that social consciousness, if not conscience, has awakened to the questions of ethics.

Understandably, the bulk of the literature exploring the normative aspect of ethical issues has come from philosophers, mainly professors who teach courses in Ethics. In recent years philosophy departments have added offerings in Business Ethics, Bioethics, Medical Ethics, and the Ethics of Law, to name but a few. Considerable attention has been given to the ethics of three professions: Law, Medicine, and Business. It is only fitting that the reviewers also examine their own profession. Peter J. Markie, professor of Philosophy at the University of Missouri-Columbia, has done just that.

In *A Professor's Duties*, Markie explores the ethical issues in college teaching. The book is divided into two parts. The first focuses on "the obligations of individual professors, primarily with regard to issues about what and how to teach." The second is a collection of essays by various thinkers on a wide range of questions concerning the ethics of teaching, from what is a good teacher to conflicts between scholarship and teaching.

Markie begins with a discussion of the role of the professor, observing that college teachers "take on a complex role when [they] walk into class and declare that [they] are the professor: the students' guide to the subject and the subject's representative to the students, representative of intellectual excellence and related virtues, certifier of student progress, academic advisor, and practitioner of an intellectual discipline." (p.5) Markie observes that with this role comes considerable power and autonomy, the exercise of which can have significant effect on the lives of students. There is, then, an ethical dimension to college teaching, which Markie believes many professors ignore or deny:

"We [professors] write a great deal on the ethical issues in other fields--law, medicine, business, engineering--but very little on ethical issues in our own. Indeed, we generally speak as though the issues we face in exercising our power and autonomy are matters of taste rather than ethics." (p. 7) The issues that Markie has in mind here include an array of matters which he addresses in detail in subsequent chapters. Indeed, the remainder of his contribution to the book is a discussion of the ethical duties that a professor has when he/she selects a text, criticizes a theory, assigns a paper, grades an examination, performs research, evaluates students, etc. According to Markie, the denial that there is an ethical dimension to teaching is supported by three arguments: 1) Teaching is an art and as such questions about what and how to teach are matters of personal taste. Markie dismisses this with the observation that there are clearly matters of the profession of teaching that require decisions more substantive than can be settled by personal preference. In other words, though teaching may to an extent be considered an art, it does not follow from this that teaching is free of moral concerns any more than medicine and law are, though these too can be seen as "arts." 2) College teaching, unlike the practice of medicine or law, is not a matter of life and death; at most, a professor's decision may result in the failure of a student. To which Markie responds that, though teaching may not involve dramatic and momentous decisions, a professor's actions on the lives of students can still be quite significant. This creates the ethical dimension of teaching. 3) A professor's obligations are spelled out by his/her contract with the college, and any matters not covered by the contract are matters of personal judgment and academic freedom. Markie counters this with the observation that professors make numerous professional decisions which are independent of the university's regulations but are nonetheless subject to ethical review. For example, a professor may act unethically by engaging in racist humor or sexual harassment, even if the university has no rules against such action. Further, academic freedom does not mean freedom from moral constraints; rather, with academic freedom come ethical duties. Markie concludes that professors do indeed have serious obligations. "We cannot slide out from under the fact by claiming that teaching is an art, that our decisions are unimportant, or that we are only obligated to do what our contract and the university regulations require. To acknowledge that we have important ethical obligations is the first step, to discover their content and source is the next...My concern in what follows is with the second step." (p. 11). And so Markie goes on to discuss the content and source of a professor's duties in teaching.

In his chapter on what to teach, Markie observes that there is, and ought to be, considerable discretion given to teachers. He points out that academic freedom "enables [professors] to represent the truth as [they] see it..." (p. 15) rather than as others with power to control the curriculum might direct. This freedom, however, does not guide the teacher in deciding what to teach, and such decisions fall within the ethical domain. In other words, though a professor has academic freedom, s/he may abuse that freedom, or violate sound pedagogical principles and thereby do wrong. A professor is obligated to consider the students' knowledge and abilities, and adjust accordingly. Additionally, each course ought to be designed so as to "fit the educational purpose assigned to it within the curriculum in general." (p.19) Professors are obligated to guide their students to truth, intellectual excellence, and knowledge within the discipline. This implies, according to Markie, that the professor knows the standards for truth and/or excellence within his/her discipline. This obligation to guide students to knowledge of what is true and excellent must "honor

the intended purpose of the course and the abilities of [the] students" as well as to teach certain intellectual values and skills (p. 25).

In subsequent chapters, Markie expands on the basic view established in his first chapter. He goes on to discuss issues that arise when asking how one ought to teach. For example, what are a professor's duties when representing the works of others? How extensive is the obligation to promote intellectual inquiry? What is appropriate, given that classroom interaction and the exploration of knowledge may offend students of particular beliefs, values, backgrounds? Ought teachers remain neutral when teaching controversial material? What are the basic duties of a professor in examining and grading students? Where ought a professor draw the line when matters of confidentiality regarding students is an issue? For each of these questions, Markie explores opposing views, and then takes a stand. He concludes his discussion by examining a professor's obligations beyond the classroom. Here he addresses the propriety of personal relationships with students, and offers the general principle that "we must forsake any relationship with students that detracts from our ability to honor our obligations as their professors..." (p. 70). From this principle he derives the conclusion that a professor ought not be friends with his/her students. Markie brings his discussion of obligations beyond the classroom to a conclusion with a brief examination of the ethics of scholarship. Here he argues that a professor ought to engage in scholarship to keep informed of developments within his/her field in order to remain knowledgeable about what he/she teaches. The professor is also obligated to do scholarly work in order to be a scholarly role model for students, though this obligation applies primarily to instructors of doctoral students, he argues. What Markie does not address, perhaps because it is not related to scholarship as such or to teaching specifically, are ethical issues arising in the editing, reviewing, and publishing of academic work. For example, the anonymous review process, despite some measure of justification, invites considerable abuse. Reviewers are often unreasonably tardy in response; reports may consist of arbitrary, unsubstantiated assertions about the merits of the submissions; and the refereeing process itself is sometimes perceived as loaded by the editor's selection of people who they know will look unfavorably upon work that the editor personally disfavors. Though there is a distinction between scholarly ethics and the ethics of dealing with scholars, I think Markie would have done well to at least introduce this aspect of the profession in his book, since the ethics of academic publishing is a part of most professors' lives.

Markie's treatment of the issues, though far from deep, is admirably well balanced. He presents opposing arguments fairly and effectively before offering his own perspective. There is, at nearly every point, room for debate, as evidenced by his ample citing of conflicting views from fellow professors. Markie's own position on each question is arrived at by applying the familiar Aristotelian principle that one's ends ought to determine one's means. Markie thus reasons soundly that a professor's duties are inherent in the activity of teaching itself, the end of which is the intellectual independence and awakened humanity of the student. And so, where there is dispute, or where deliberation is called for, it is with the means, not ends. Markie answers the various questions about what a professor ought to do by appealing to the ends of teaching, and he justifies his answers in terms of those ends. It is up to the reader to decide how compelling Markie's own answers are to the questions that he raises. The second part of the book, a collection of essays by

various thinkers (including a cameo piece by Sidney Hook on what it is to be a good teacher), introduces material not specifically addressed by Markie's discussion, as well as more in-depth explorations of a few issues introduced in the first section.

I think a great merit of this book is its brevity. Markie gives the reader just enough intelligent and provocative material to stimulate response, without losing the reader in extended, detailed discussion and analysis. He has left it up to the intellectual community to flesh out his sparse treatment. And that is how it should be: it is the job of professors themselves to engage in the dialogue and debate that this book ought to evoke, a dialogue long overdue in the professorial community. *A Professor's Duties* is timely, as so many universities and colleges are now undergoing the painful process of restructuring, or redesign, a process that begins with the questions: what have we been doing, why have we been doing it, and how ought it be done? For these questions, this book is an excellent primer.

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