Much of what a university is about, is the transmission of what we believe to be true knowledge, often combined with research: the attempt to generate more true knowledge. But is it also part of a university’s job to teach its students the ethical values that should guide their professional life?

Is moral education the universities’ business?

A reflection on libre examen and the codes of deontology

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In November 2007, an explosive debate was agitating the Université libre de Bruxelles on what its proclaimed ideals of libre examen and laïcité implied in terms of the values the university had the mission of transmitting to its students. At the same time, some doubts were being expressed with increased intensity within Belgium’s two big catholic universities about what, if anything, their ‘catholic’ character still meant as regards the education they wanted to provide. In both cases, strong calls were heard for dropping the adjective ‘catholic’ altogether, and in both cases a compromise was eventually struck, with the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven becoming KU Leuven in 2011, and the Université catholique de Louvain becoming UCLouvain in 2018. In 2007, as both the ‘free thinkers’ and the ‘catholics’ were pondering and arguing about their (possible) moral mission, the Brussels-based University Foundation gathered some of them to discuss without taboo the following issues:

‘It is uncontroversially part of a university’s job to equip its students with the high skills the labour market requires. And it is arguably part of its job to inculcate the critical competence and attitude which a thriving democracy needs. But is it also part of its job to teach its students the ethical values that should guide their professional life, whether as doctors or as engineers, as managers or as lawyers, as teachers or as journalists or in any other professional capacity? If so, how should the job be done? Just by teaching the codes of deontology of the professions our students are likely to exercise? By taking and defending a stance in case studies? By preaching by example? If not, does it mean that we are capitulating to the dictates of the market? And what is then left of the values that allegedly define the identities of at least some of our universities and are eagerly invoked in our universities’ charters, on their websites and at their most pompous ceremonies? Sheer empty rhetoric irrelevant to our students’ future professional conduct, if not shameless hypocrisy?’

The lessons that emerged from this exchange may be of interest far beyond the time at which and the place in which the latter took place.

What did the ‘catholic’ character mean for the education they wanted to provide?


Maatschappelijke oefenplaatsen

Libre examen as the ethics of truth seeking

As regards the substance of the values that universities have the right and duty to transmit to their students, one answer emerged quickly as uncontroversial. Much of what a university is about, is the transmission of what we believe to be true knowledge, for many of us combined with what is commonly called research, i.e. the attempt to generate more true knowledge. Such an enterprise cannot hope to be successful in the absence of a commitment to the uninhibited search for truth, be it against our individual or collective interests, against conventions and prejudices, and against any externally imposed authority, whether religious or secular.

Libre examen, in its narrow interpretation, can be interpreted as referring to precisely this value commitment. The critique of Louvain's failure to live up to it played a central role in the creation, in 1834, shortly after Belgium's independence from the Netherlands, of the Université libre de Belgique (due to become in 1842 the Université libre de Bruxelles, and in 1969 also the institutionally separate Vrije Universiteit Brussel) — ironically in the Hotel Granvelle, in the 16th century the palace of the first Archbishop of Mechelen-Brussels. And this attitude, which inspired the liberal founders of the University of Brussels, is still very much the way in which their heirs characterise their specific identity.

There is definitely nothing passé about this commitment. Indeed, far from capturing the uniqueness of one of our universities, it has become the object of a consensus that gathers them all. As UCLouvain physics professor Jean Bricmont put it, 'Catholicism has not opened itself to laïcité, it has been defeated by it, which is quite different. To use the motto of the Free University of Brussels, Scienza Vincere Tenebras. It is always better not to boast about one's triumph, but one should not confuse the victors and the vanquished.'

This sounds pretty blunt, but it is not fundamentally different from what was memorably expressed, shortly before his death, by KU Leuven's first rector Pieter De Somer, on the occasion of Pope John Paul II's visit: The Catholic University of Leuven has a duty constantly to question inherited truths and to adapt if necessary to modern language and thought. (...) Whatever their discipline, researchers must have the freedom to chart that unknown, to elaborate working hypotheses and to put them to the test, to integrate new findings with the already known, or to draw new conclusions about what went before. They must also have the right to be mistaken, that is one of the essential conditions for them to exercise their function as researchers, and for the university to carry out its proper institutional function.

Libre examen in this sense is no doubt a value, and one that we feel we can and indeed must teach to all those of our students who may go into research themselves, but also more broadly to all our students, whatever their future careers, and indeed to anyone we might hope to influence. We often disagree, of course, on what the truth is, but we all agree that in settling our disagreements, we should have eye for nothing but empirical evidence and logical entailment and shield ourselves against the influence of prejudice and external authority. In this respect, we certainly do not want to go back to the European Universities of the Middle Age, however much we are indebted to them. Rather we want to consolidate and preserve the freedom from outside interference laboriously conquered, for example when the innovative humanism that prevailed, under Erasmus's influence, at the Universitas Lovaniensis induced Cardinal Granvelle to create another university in Douai, more receptive to the dictates of the Inquisition.

Deontology as a profession's ethos

Libre examen so conceived provides a first uncontroversial value or set of values which we feel we can and must teach our students. One aspect of it is more formalised than the rest: it is the deontology we need to teach to the subset of our students who will go into scientific research themselves. As a biochemist, you do not falsify your experimental results in order to vindicate interesting conjectures. As an historian, you do not embellish past events to enhance the prestige of your nation or subnation. The deontology of research, however, is just a small part of what can be regarded as a second set of values which universities are uncontroversially expected to transmit to their students. These are the values embodied in the various codes of deontology. We have no problem admitting that room should be made, in the training of doctors, journalists or lawyers, for the codes of deontology specific to the professions they are likely to exercise. Why have some codes been developed for some of the professions to which university prepares and not for others? Serious asymmetry of information between the providers of services — legal or medical, for example — and their customers is certainly part of the story. Also probably the risk of serious financial pressures — by advertisers on journalists, by drug manufacturers on doctors — that may hinder an exercise of the profession in the
The teaching of deontology does not reduce to the transmission of rules and the associated casuistry. It serves the best interests of the ‘consumer’ of information or health care. To preserve trust in the profession, it is therefore in the collective interest of professionals to subject themselves to a code of deontology, a body of soft law sometimes indirectly backed up by some hard law, typically when the exercise of a profession is legally restricted to members of a professional organisation, itself empowered to adopt a code of deontology and to exclude those who do not comply with it.

In this light, the teaching of deontology so understood looks closer to the teaching of law than to the teaching of moral values: a code of deontology is simply a set of rules whose shaping and enforcement are delegated by the legislator to specialised bodies, more aware of the problems to be addressed and more likely to possess the competence required to address them. However, the teaching of deontology does not reduce to the transmission of rules and the associated casuistry. It also consists in highlighting some values at the core of the ethos of the particular profession – say, the impartial provision of information by journalists, the health of the patient, today combined with the sustainability of institutionalised solidarity, for the medical and para-medical professions – and alerting students in this light to dilemmas or trade-offs they might have to face. This goes beyond the teaching of a body of soft law and enters the realm of values. It asserts a certain idea of the beauty of a profession one should be proud to exercise well. It protects a collective image which one should be ashamed of tarnishing, typically by letting base interests prevail or by getting engrossed in technical virtuosity while forgetting that one is dealing with human beings – not just dead flesh at the anatomy lesson, not just figures at the accountancy lesson.

The teaching of corporate social responsibility to managers fits this pattern quite neatly, even though it is not commonly described as ‘managerial deontology’. It typically consists in drawing the students’ attention to the human consequences of the decisions that managers have to make in the course of their careers, whether routinely or in exceptional circumstances. But is there not a fundamental difference between consequentialist and deontological approaches? When invoked in this context, this worn out distinction is superficial and misleading. Sensible deontologies largely consist in requiring practitioners to pay attention to the consequences of their behaviour, and in particular to the consequences of generalising to the whole profession a particular pattern of behaviour. Even when it appears as a set of rules of thumb or procedures to be followed, all deontologies, whether for journalists or doctors, for lawyers or managers, ultimately are guided by a reflection on how their profession can best yield a useful contribution to society, and hence fit into a consequentialist framework.

Universities as value-shaping environments

Let us take stock. As far as the teaching of values is concerned, publicly funded 21st-century universities must feel perfectly comfortable, on the one hand propagating the ethos of truth seeking intrinsic to the scientific side of the academic profession and on the other hand inculcating to future professionals, in the long-term interest of both their professions and society, the ethos that underlies the specific deontology of their professions. It would be comfortable if we could stop here. But we cannot, for two reasons.

First of all, there are some values irreducible to truth seeking and deontology that unavoidably guide some choices university authorities make. Be it tacitly, about what can and cannot be done and said on campus, thereby shaping to some extent what students will regard as trivial or problematic for the rest of their lives. Some of these choices are being made in the vicinity of the university’s teaching activities. For example, the creation of a course in palliative care – a taboo subject up to not so long ago – or the advertising of an interdisciplinary programme on the environment with slogans emphasising our responsibilities towards future generations cannot exactly be claimed to be value-neutral. Other relevant choices operate at greater distance from the teaching activities. Think, for example, of the somewhat

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exotic case of the Christian fundamentalist Bob Jones University (South Carolina), where blacks and whites were not allowed to date together on campus. Much closer to home, think of the ban on places of worship on the campus of the University of Brussels, or of the allocation by UCLouvain of a university-owned kat communautaire to a project for gay students rather than to the local branch of Opus Dei.

By allowing or prohibiting, encouraging or discouraging some activities, decisions of this sort are hardly neutral in their inspiration, and even less neutral in terms of their impact on the normative convictions of students. Of course, some of these measures may prove counterproductive: discrimination against Opus Dei may prompt conversions, and environmental brainwashing may produce clima
toscepticism. But it can nevertheless be expected that having attended more or less assiduously an institution that tolerates or facilitates certain attitudes or conduct, while discriminating against others, will tend to make its students regard the former as self-evident and the latter as problematic for the rest of their lives. Within the constraints of what the law imposes and forbids, there is much university and its many organs can choose to do and not to do, to allow and to forbid.

True, the values implicitly taught by the environment thus shaped fall far short of a fully specified conception of justice or a full-fledged theology. They are also largely of such a nature that few, here and now, would dare to challenge them openly. But this does not prevent them from being values, nor from being taught at and by our universities, whether or not they like to admit it. The teaching of values does not reduce to the preaching of values. Hence, refraining from preaching values in ethics courses does not exonerate universities from thinking about which values they do and should teach their students through the overall environment they create by their decisions.

University teachers as senior siblings

Admitting this is not particularly comfortable, but there is worse to come. There is a second reason why universities cannot and should not confine the moral education they provide to the scientific ethos of truth telling and the ethos that underlies the deontological codes of various professions. The pedagogical relationship is at one at the same time, and inextricably, a transmission of savoir (knowledge), of savoir-faire (skills) but also of savoir-être, which includes unavoidably a moral dimension.

As regards the third one, it is certainly sobering for us university teachers to know that when some of our UCLouvain students were asked who they got their moral outlook from, their families, youth movement leaders and primary school teachers featured far more prominently in their answers than their university professors. Nonetheless, it is no doubt true for many of us that the admiration we nurtured for some of our professors related to their way of being no less than to how much they knew or how brilliantly they taught.

What follows from this, is far more general than expecting all those who teach subjects with some policy relevance to stick their necks out and indicate, based on what they think they know and on explicit value judgements, what they believe must be done. What follows, far more generally, is that university teachers, along with all other teachers, should not shy away from being “judgemental”, from asserting that not everything is equivalent. Given that there is no way of squeezing the moral message out of the teaching relation, deliberate moral abstention can too easily be interpreted as amounting to a commitment to equivalence. The latter is not a morally neutral position. It is a morally untenable position. Compared to all other civil servants – whether firemen or tax collectors, judges or social workers – there is arguably, in this respect, something very special about us teachers – from the kindergarten all the way to the doctoral programmes – that makes us somewhat like older brothers and sisters to our pupils and students. We are unavoidably, interminably, in the business of helping them to grow up, and the acquisition of sound values is part of growing up.

Note, however, that the most direct and obvious ways of teaching what we believe are sound values can easily be counterproductive. When I was a student at Louvain’s Philosophy Institute in the 1970s, there was a course in Questions de morale spéciale taught by some reactionary Monsigneur. It smacked so much of moral indoctrination that we campaigned to scrap it from the programme. We failed miserably, and fifteen years later, I was appointed to teach it. Unsurprisingly, I hurried to redesign it thoroughly, with the purpose of encouraging students to think by themselves and, after the creation of the Hoover Chair, relabelled it Ethique économique et sociale. After two decades of teaching it, however, I reluctantly realised that there was something more legitimate than I thought in the idea, central in the Questions de morale spéciale I wanted scrapped, that moral education is part of what we owe to our students.
For the young adults entrusted to us, we are also something like older siblings.

Of course, in the world our students inhabit, we (fortunately) cannot hope to accomplish this task by requiring them to learn some sort of catechism, nor by drawing up an index autorum (or oratorium) prohibitorum. On the contrary, students should be exposed to read and listen to the most diverse, indeed the most extreme positions, however politically incorrect, and to discuss with people who hold them. Effective moral education cannot and must not bank on anything like a cordon sanitaire of the word. If there is any chance for it to exist, it will be thanks to our not shying away from expressing our own moral convictions, tactfully but firmly, if and when opportunities arise; thanks also to our living up to the convictions we profess in that (typically very small) part of our lives which our students are made to share; and thanks to our creating occasions for our students to meet and interact with personalities we admire not just for their intellectual qualities but also for their moral commitments.

This is then the second not so comfortable (and not so uncontroversial) sense in which it seems to me unavoidable and right for universities to teach their students what is right and wrong. Not only do university decisions collectively create a value-laden and value-shaping environment, in addition, each of us individually must be aware of the moral education component of his or her role. For the young adults entrusted to us, we are not just knowledge transmitters and skill teachers, we are also something like older siblings, who do not step out of their roles by expressing a certain conception of what constitutes a good life, discreetly rather than pompously, by deed no less than by word, and never by making the evaluation of students depend on the moral rectitude of their convictions or behaviour.

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Notes
1 See http://www.fondationuniversitaire.be/en/content/third-forum for the programme of this Ethical Forum and some of the contributions. The present text is a revised and updated version of the personal conclusions presented on that occasion. It incorporates the insights I gained from a debate I moderated, also at the University Foundation, on 26 January 2017 between rector Didier Voiclis (Université libre de Bruxelles) and Marc Waser (KU Leuven) on the question ‘All neutral? Is there still a philosophical difference between Belgian universities – and must there be one?’
4 The University Foundation devoted its 16th Ethical Forum to the role of academics in the so-called post-truth era. See http://www.fondationuniversitaire.be/en/content/mi- sixteenth-ethical-forum for several contributions and my personal conclusion.
6 Needless to say, I am leaving many questions open here, for example as regards the extent to which teachers’ moral convictions should be allowed to influence what they say in class and how they say it, or about whether the hiring and firing of teachers can legitimately be affected by moral concerns. I discuss some of these questions in ‘Liberté académique et ethos universitaire’ (in La liberté académique menacée, Vanessa Frangouille & Aude Merlin eds, Brussels: Editions de l’ULB, 2019).