TEACHING ETHICS AND THE ETHICS OF TEACHING: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Globally, formal education is an important vehicle for the transmission of Buddhist and other ethical codes to future generations. In a world of rapidly increasing interconnectivity and ethical complexity, a population with the capacity to engage in sophisticated moral analyses has never been more important. Recent decades have seen an unprecedented expansion in the number of people able to attend university, including students in and from Buddhist countries, with many studying overseas. This has not resulted in a commensurate growth in the ethical sophistication of the world's population. Changes in the motivations of students and institutions of higher education are fundamental causes of the stagnation of ethical erudition. Buddhist leaders and parisas may play a constructive role in enhancing the ethical sophistication of university graduates.

While recent decades have seen a dramatic increase in the number of university graduates, the role of ethics in university curricula has tended to decline. Transformations in the perceived role of universities, and associated changes to motivations for students and universities, have been key drivers. University attendance has expanded in part because university degrees are seen as prerequisites for an expanding

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proportion of jobs. As a result, post-graduation employment has become increasingly seen by students and universities as the most important goal of a university education. The aim of universities has shifted from shaping good people to creating good workers. The formation of well-rounded people, who have religious, social and familial dimensions, has necessarily been de-emphasised. So too has the weight of ethics in the curriculum. To the extent that the teaching of ethics endures, in many Western countries, it has shifted towards a legal framework, which is seen as being more relevant to future professionals. A diminished ethical curriculum communicates to students and the broader society that ethics are unimportant. This shift itself has moral consequences and should be understood from that perspective.

Universities are increasingly being run as businesses, with a focus on economic performance. This business-like management may shift the culture away from one which emphasises ethical behaviour and ethical instruction. If business imperatives nudge universities to become less ethical, for instance through admitting students likely to fail or graduating students without adequate skills, it erodes the universities' credibility as institutions at which ethics can be learned.

Buddhism has a long tradition of teaching ethics, and is a natural supporter of enhancing ethics teaching and learning in higher education. The sophisticated ethical frameworks developed over millennia of Buddhist thought remain important tools for navigating today's ethical challenges. Students and graduates today would benefit from increased understanding of Buddhist concepts such as anatta, impermanence and dependent origination. Integration of Buddhist frameworks and core concepts into higher education could reinvigorate ethical instruction. Buddhist-influenced universities which prepare lay people for a wide range of ethical occupations could play a crucial role.

1. THE IMPORTANCE OF BUDDHIST ETHICS IN FORMAL EDUCATION

Formal education is an important method for transmitting cultural values, including an ethical framework such as that provided by Buddhism, from one generation to the next. A clear understanding of ethics is increasingly important in today's rapidly changing world. Increased connectivity allows cross-cultural

communication as never before. Economic and environmental interconnection means that an increasing proportion of human activity has consequences for people on the other side of the planet (Bowles et al., 2014a, Butler et al., 2014, Bowles, 2014, Bowles et al., 2014b). Global trends in the consumption of material goods may have environmental consequences which are felt by all, such as climate change. This context inhibits right understanding and right action. Rapid change means that practitioners will be confronted with new situations that they will need to navigate through application of their ethical framework. As the pace of change increases, people will be exposed to more situations which they've never previously encountered. This will increase the need for people being able to intelligently apply ethical frameworks to new situations.

In many countries, the importance of formal education in transmitting ethical understanding has grown over time. In the last few centuries, formal education has become near-universal in many countries. More recently, work commitments outside of the home have increased in many countries, especially for mothers. Together, these trends have resulted in children having reduced opportunity for instruction by their parents. Conversely, there is an increasing number of parents who feel that teaching their children is properly done within school, and that they have comparatively little responsibility in this regard.

The number and proportion of people globally attending higher education has grown at an unprecedented rate in recent decades. Between 2000 and 2014, the number of university students more than doubled, from 100 million to 206 million (UNESCO, 2017). This reflects a longer term trend in growth, with the number of students growing from 33 million in 1970 to 182 million in 2011, with much of this growth in Asia (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2014). There is little evidence to suggest, however, that there has been commensurate growth in the ethical sophistication of the world's population. While this is likely due to a number of factors, some of which are outside of the control of universities. This chapter focuses on factors over which universities have control or influence, and how Buddhism might assist. Factors discussed

include demotion of ethics as a share of curricula; equation of law with ethics in curricula; changing university cultures to meet business imperatives.

2. ETHICS IN CURRICULA

One clear reason for the lack of progress in ethical education is the decline in the value placed on ethics in higher education curricula. In turn, this is caused by a change in the role of universities and the ambitions of their students. In previous centuries, a much larger fraction of those attending university were there to learn about religion or to develop themselves as whole people. Today, many of the oldest universities are religious institutions or have clear marks of their early religious focus. University was available only to a relatively small, wealthy portion of the population, and it was not always seen as a prerequisite for continued prosperity.

The workforce has undergone a series of revolutions in the last century. Jobs which once needed humans to perform them can now be done more efficiently and less expensively by machines. For instance, in many parts of the world, small family farms which employed many people have been replaced with giant, industrial farms in which large farm equipment has greatly reduced the number of people employed. A similar story could be told in many industries. The demand for skilled labor has increased, and the two trends together create an increasing perception that higher education improves one's life chances (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2014).

The increase of university students therefore has important benefits, not least of which is an opportunity to attend for those who are not rich or in wealthy countries. Conversely, this change has meant that attendance at university is seen as essential to maintaining or improving one's financial status. This has shifted the role of most universities away from religious instruction or the development of whole people toward developing future professionals. This shift has seen a decline in the importance of ethics in curricula. For privately owned companies, a firm understanding of ethics is not required in most employees, as long as they don't steal from the company. Indeed, publicly listed companies are legally vulnerable

if they make ethical decisions which fail to maximise profit to shareholders. For many roles, both within and beyond the private sector, employees are valued for their technical skills rather than ethical understanding. As a result, many degrees no longer have any requirement for ethical learning, and at best limited opportunities for students who seek it. Similarly, the proportion of students explicitly studying ethics or religion has decreased.

To the extent which ethics are formally taught, they are often combined with, (and subsumed by) legal teaching. This is another response to the shift in university roles and goals. In many courses, the ethics portion of the curriculum is dominated by the legal requirements for the profession. This is problematic for at least two reasons. While the law is meant to reflect a society's agreed ethical framework, it often fails to do so. This is sometimes due to the legislation, which may have been unduly influenced by special interest groups or may simply be an imperfect reflection of shared ethical values. It also has inherent limitations in that the subtleties of ethical considerations are reduced to binary judgements of legal versus illegal or liable versus not liable. This simplification to binary decisions is exacerbated in work contexts where financial considerations are prioritised. The second major limitation is that such education is focused on professional roles alone. It therefore neglects roles outside of work, including in relationships with family, neighbours and those in the Sangha or other religious communities.

The reduced presence of ethics in curricula, and the primacy of legal frameworks in place of ethical frameworks, is unlikely to be lost on students. Together, they send a message which devalues the importance of ethics or indicates that ethical considerations are so straightforward that they do not require education.

3. TEACHING ETHICS AS A BUSINESS

Another factor in the diminishment of universities' teaching of ethics is due to the movement towards running universities as businesses. The increase in the number of students has meant that some countries which subsidised citizens to attend can no longer do so at the same level per student. Developing countries which are rapidly expanding their university infrastructure and number

of enrolments are also challenged to fully subsidise each student. International students are virtually never subsidised, but must pay the university directly, and the number of international students is increasing. As a result, universities must charge students or their families. Effectively, universities are selling education, and this has led to universities being subject to market forces and being managed similarly to businesses.

The financial imperatives of this situation can predispose institutional structures to making choices with negative ethical implications. For instance, economies of scale are often important for universities, which means building and maintaining a large student body is often critical for financial viability. This pressure can result in universities accepting students into courses for which they are ill prepared. This could be due to poor prior education or innate cognitive limitations. International students are at particular risk. They may have inadequate grasp of the language of instruction, or may be accustomed to a style or standard of education unlike those of the university. At the same time, international students have fewer local supports and may experience culture shock. Their international education may represent a substantial familial investment, increasing pressure to perform adequately.

Once a student who is not prepared for a course is admitted, individual lecturers are placed in a situation with only bad options. They typically do not have spare capacity to spend a substantial amount of time with struggling students. In rare instances when they do have adequate time to help struggling students, it may be difficult to identify these students, as many struggling students do not make themselves known. Further, they need to consider issues of equity between the students.

A second option is to fail the students. This can affect students' future careers, and potentially their familial relations and community standing. The morality of such a decision is complicated because students who are admitted to a course and invest their money and time in it have a reasonable expectation that they will be able to pass that course if they apply themselves. In instances where this isn't the case, the fault lies at least in part with the institutions which admitted them, but the worst consequences are borne by the students.

The third option is to pass the students, effectively distributing the resulting harms, including by lowering the standards of the university. The network of people affected is large, though the level of harm to each one typically small. One group negatively affected is employers of graduates who are not fully competent. Supervisors and colleagues may need to undertake additional work to make up for the lack of competence. Users of employees' work may also be affected. For instance, if the new employee makes an error when designing a public health campaign, people's health might be harmed.

The negative effects also occur because of an overall trend to graduate some students who are not fully competent. This erodes the value of a degree to employers, who learn that it does not guarantee competence. This disadvantages graduates who are competent. They may need to undertake further study to prove competence. Before this, their original course may have been tailored at a level below one optimal for their learning to allow poorer students to pass. Together, these factors cause competent students to spend more time undertaking higher education to learn what is required and prove their ability to prospective employers. At a societal level, this reduces the time that competent students spend in the workforce. Overall productivity is therefore reduced.

In summary, universities may be, or appear to be, ethically compromised because of the need to respond to market imperatives. This reduces their standing as institutions qualified to teach ethics. This may reduce enthusiasm for professors and others to teach ethics, and reduce student receptiveness to such lessons. These trends would likely reinforce each other.

4. A ROLE FOR BUDDHISM

Buddhism has a long history of prioritising ethical thought and actions, reflected in an emphasis on teaching ethics through millennia. Buddhists have an obvious stake in the quality of ethical instruction that all people receive, whether Buddhist or not. While socio-economic and political conditions are very different than they were during the birth of Buddhism, the ethical frameworks of Buddhism's past are still useful tools for people to engage with ethical challenges.

Students and graduates would benefit from Buddhist ethical instruction, including core concepts such as anatta, impermanence and dependent origination. Integration of these concepts and Buddhist ethical frameworks could enliven ethical instruction at universities, including in countries without Buddhist majorities.

Despite these benefits, secular Western universities face impediments to integrating Buddhist ethical instruction. Cultural factors, including a tendency to quarantine religious matters, are an impediment. These could be at least partially overcome by teaching many of the concepts in a secular manner, enabling wider access to Buddhist wisdom. More important impediments, however, are the perceived role of higher education and market forces discussed earlier in this chapter. These likely preclude a system-level change of Western higher education in the near future.

The Sangha is therefore well-served by taking primary responsibility for the transmission of Buddhist ethical wisdom. In particular, Buddhist and Buddhist-influenced universities have an important role to play. Beyond providing religious instruction, offering secular courses in which Buddhist ethics are a key component which expands the number of students learning about Buddhist ethics. The number of students undertaking a degree focused on Buddhist religion might be small and difficult to substantially increase. By offering a wider range of educational options which prepare students for a range of ethical secular jobs, Buddhist universities can pay an important role enhancing the ethical capacity of the future workforce.

Higher education is accessed only by a fraction of the population, and only for a limited portion of their lives. Improving global understanding of Buddhist ethics should therefore not rely exclusively on higher education. Deliberate efforts to teach Buddhist ethics, including from parents to children, is therefore also critically important.

5. CONCLUSION

Increasing social, economic and political complexity require a high level of ethical sophistication. Universities traditionally played an important role in enhancing ethical understanding, and

attendance at universities is expanding as never before. Despite this, the population's ethical understanding has not kept pace with requirements. This is partly due to a change in the perceived role of university education and the need for many universities to respond to market forces. Inclusion of Buddhist ethical thought in curricula has the potential to improve this situation, especially in Buddhist institutions offering degrees in preparation for secular careers. The Sangha can further improve global ethical instruction outside of higher education.

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