

Symposium

Mearsheimer's Response: "Teaching Morality at the Margins"

John J. Mearsheimer

I appreciate the opportunity to reply to the responses to my Aims of Education Address. I am especially pleased to have a chance to expand on my claim that colleges and universities like the University of Chicago are fundamentally amoral institutions. I had no idea when I prepared my address that it would generate such controversy. But I am glad it did, because the subject is of central importance to the academy and it is certainly open to different perspectives. Indeed, I was impressed by the varied responses to my talk and intrigued to see how others think about universities and moral education. In the end, however, I remain convinced that teaching morality is a non-aim at Chicago as well as its peer institutions.

Let me begin by noting where I agree and disagree with my interlocutors. As noted in my address, I was mainly trying to describe how Chicago and other like-minded schools deal with ethics. I was not laying out my own thinking on whether and how universities should teach morality, a matter I leave for another day. Thus, I do not accept Daniel Gordon's assertion that I view "moral discourse as an outdated residue of theology--something that has no place in the modern university." I did not say that, and moreover, I do not believe it. Nor do I accept his claim that my "picture of the University of Chicago is nothing other than a projection into the educational sphere of [my] amoral vision of how politics operate." For what it's worth, I believe that morality has an important role to play in politics. But again, my aim was to describe Chicago as I saw it, not to offer my own views on what Chicago should look like in an ideal world.

Patrick Henry and Wayne Booth are obviously shocked by my claims about morality and the academy. Booth seems to think I have been living on the planet Mars for the past sixteen years. Yet the fact is that many students of the modern university share my viewpoint. At least one of the symposium participants, for example, appears to agree with me. Eva Brann writes: "Mearsheimer's exposition of the university's ethos . . . is so forthright and probably factual, that it seems misplaced to attack him for it. Isn't he accurately and candidly describing the trend at 'elite' universities?" Moreover, there is a substantial body of academic literature which makes my point about the separation of knowledge and morality at schools like Chicago. This is a central theme of Julie Reuben's *The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Morality* (University of Chicago Press, 1996), which is probably the best book on the subject. I would also note that more than a few of my colleagues at Chicago agree with my perspective, and not Booth's. None of this is to say I am right and my critics are wrong, but only to point out that I am not alone in my views.

Furthermore, I am *not* saying that universities are immoral institutions, but rather that they are basically amoral. Of course, there is an important distinction between those categories. Therefore, I do not agree with Eva Brann's claim that "an amorality that does not shade off into immorality" is probably unthinkable. This same kind of shading is present in Michael Hall's discussion of amorality, which is based largely on his experiences teaching Machiavelli to undergraduates. Although he emphasizes "the amorality of Machiavelli's advice" throughout his response, his opening sentence quotes Machiavelli's famous dictum that "a ruler must be prepared to act immorally when this becomes necessary." Thus, there is a blurring of amoral and immoral advice in Hall's discussion of Machiavelli. I want to disassociate myself from

Machiavelli's views about the necessity of immoral behavior, and emphasize again that I am not arguing that universities actively encourage it.

Finally, I fully agree with Tai Park's argument that societies only work well when their citizens possess strong moral beliefs. I also agree with his point that there is a moral deficit in contemporary American society, and that there is an urgent need to fix the problem. In short, I do not think I "sorely misunderstand the demands of our society," as he so eloquently describes them. My point is that universities, to include Chicago, are not likely to solve the problem, because providing moral guidance is no longer in their job description.

There are essentially three ways that universities can educate their students about ethics and morality. First, they can provide students with explicit moral guidance. They can lay out rules that identify acceptable and unacceptable forms of behavior, and penalize the latter. Second, universities can provide students with classes where moral issues are discussed in detail. However, the professors would not impose their views on the students, but instead would attempt to present all sides of a given issue and let the students make up their own minds. James O. Freedman, the president of Dartmouth College, points up a possible third route. He maintains that professors can promote moral virtue among their students by behaving virtuously. He writes, "Colleges do inevitably teach values, and they do so by example. Students learn values by observing how professors perform in the classroom and outside it." ¹ In short, professors are powerful role models that students will emulate. Thus, professors need only behave in a highly ethical fashion.

I focused on the first two perspectives in my address. Specifically, I argued that Chicago does not provide students with moral direction. Besides condemning plagiarism and other forms of academic fraud, it says little about what comprises ethical behavior. Furthermore, I said that there are few classes at Chicago where students have the opportunity to discuss moral issues in any detail. These two points were meant to underpin my overarching claim that Chicago and other schools like it are remarkably amoral institutions. I did not discuss the role model argument because of time constraints and because it strikes me as the least compelling way of providing moral education.

Let me elaborate my thinking about all three approaches.

Universities do not have a moral agenda and do not give students moral guidance, because that would involve preaching about values, and that is an enterprise that holds hardly any attraction for modern universities. Religious institutions and families are expected to provide their members with explicit advice about moral virtue, but universities are not. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a professor at a school like Chicago making the case that the faculty should devise a wide-ranging code of ethics for its students. Other faculty would probably think the poor soul had lost his or her mind. It is worth noting in this regard that at no point in Wayne Booth's remarks does he claim that Chicago promotes a particular set of moral values or that it should. In fact, he says very little about what moral precepts the University does teach or should teach, and instead emphasizes that "teaching about morality and how to think about moral issues goes on everywhere."

One might argue that although the university as a corporate body does not define the boundaries of correct moral behavior, individual faculty perform that service. However, I know of no example at Chicago, or any other university for that matter, where professors use the classroom as a pulpit for moral value infusion. This is not to deny that professors sometimes discuss ethics with their students, and even describe their own views on what constitutes proper ethical behavior. But faculty invariably leave it to students to figure out their own answers to important moral questions. They rarely seek to impose their own views on students, which is certainly the way it should be. Some of the responses support my point. For example, John Lyons writes, "I do not claim any authority as moral guide outside the area of academic integrity that Mearsheimer also accepts I try to help my students understand what the texts are saying about these moral issues I

do not claim to be morally superior to my students, to have a source of moral knowledge that they do not have, or to convince them of my authority as a teacher of ethics." It is also clear from Michael Hall's response that when he teaches Machiavelli he is careful not to force his own views on the students, but instead allow the students to reach their own conclusions about *The Prince*.

The main reason that universities do not provide moral guidance for their students is that doing so would violate their most important mission: teaching critical thinking. A code of ethics is a body of truths that students are expected to accept and follow. In essence, it is a series of correct answers to important moral questions. The Ten Commandments, for example, are not supposed to be open for debate. They represent received wisdom. However, critical thinking is not about telling students what to think, but how to think. Chicago does not provide its students with the truth about important issues, but instead trains them to figure out the truth for themselves. Our aim is to produce independent thinkers. Furthermore, we encourage students to challenge accepted truths when they think they are wrong. Thus, students are primed to question, not accept, any ethical rules that the University might offer. Of course, faculty would also challenge any university-sponsored moral code, and probably more fiercely than the students.

The obvious fallback position for universities is to pursue the much less ambitious goal of encouraging students to confront important moral questions and decide the answers for themselves. Patrick Henry seems to favor this approach, as he calls for "forcing students to do *critical moral thinking* and to come to terms with the concept of moral excellence and with what might constitute the attainment of the good." Universities could achieve this goal in two ways. First, they could mandate that faculty offer a substantial number of courses dealing explicitly with moral issues. Second, they could push departments to hire and promote faculty with the expertise to teach about ethics. However, it appears that Chicago does neither, and I would bet that it is no exception in this regard among its peer competitors.

As I emphasized in my address, there are few classes at Chicago where students discuss ethics or morality in any detail. Wayne Booth admits that "it is certainly true that our course titles reveal only a few references to 'moral' or 'morality,' and only a few more to 'ethics' and 'ethical,'" but he falls back on the argument that almost every subject taught at Chicago has a moral dimension, which means that nearly every course deals with morality in one way or another. For example, he maintains that I am teaching about morality when I lecture students on how best to create peaceful security arrangements in post-Cold War Europe. This broadbrush approach allows him to argue that teaching about moral issues goes on everywhere at Chicago, even if there are only a few courses that explicitly deal with the subject.

There is no question that the subject matter taught in virtually all classes at Chicago has at least a remote implication for some important moral issue. For example, a course in nuclear physics is likely to say something about making nuclear weapons, and we all know there are important moral issues associated with weapons of mass destruction. Similarly, an economics course that explores the causes and consequences of industrialization would surely touch on issues with an ethical dimension, such as income distribution and the proper role of the state in the marketplace. And there is no doubt that my lectures on how to avoid war in Europe brush up against weighty ethical issues.

These indirect linkages notwithstanding, professors rarely deal directly with the relevant moral issues. Rather we tend either to ignore them or make a few off the cuff remarks about them. Ethical questions are rarely a distinct subject of inquiry. To use myself as an example, I do not teach courses about ethics and international politics and I do not pay much attention to moral questions in my courses. I am much more concerned with teaching students about the basics of international relations theory or deterrence theory. I do not think I am unusual in this regard, which is why there are only a handful of courses offered at Chicago that deal explicitly with ethical issues. I venture to say that ethical issues are almost entirely absent from the multitude of courses in the physical and biological sciences, mathematics, foreign languages, and economics.

With regard to faculty selection, expertise about moral issues is rarely a criterion for either hiring or promoting professors at major universities, which is hardly surprising since we teach so few courses that require such knowledge. As for Chicago, there are two other pieces of evidence that indicate it does not pay much attention to moral education. First, the University recently published a book containing twelve previous Aims of Education addresses, including Wayne Booth's own talk, which he gave in 1970. Although all are inspiring and filled with important insights, no author argues that teaching morality is an aim of a Chicago education. Indeed, ethics and morality are hardly mentioned in any of the twelve talks, including Booth's. However, Geoffrey Stone, the Provost of the University, did point out in his 1995 address that the notion that "the worth of an idea must be judged by its *moral* value . . . is, quite simply, anathema to intellectual inquiry."² Second, Chicago is presently in the midst of revamping its Common Core requirements for undergraduate students. I have followed the proceedings carefully and talked with individuals deeply involved in the process. It appears that there has been no discussion of including a moral component in the new curriculum, and there is certainly no such component in the existing one.

Finally, there is the argument that professors can teach moral values to their students by setting good examples with their own behavior. This claim is predicated on the assumption that most professors invariably behave virtuously inside and outside of the classroom, and are therefore well-suited to be role models for their students. Although this picture surely fits with the self-image of many academics, it does not square with reality. For sure, professors are probably no more venal than members of any other profession, but neither are they more virtuous, as academic administrators know all too well.

It is hardly surprising that professors are not paragons of moral virtue. After all, they are hired and promoted mainly on the basis of their scholarship, not their moral character. Indeed, little attention is paid to a scholar's ethical profile in personnel decisions. Furthermore, graduate schools rarely encourage prospective professors to think about professional ethics, much less offer courses on the subject. So, we should not expect academics to be especially virtuous, which they usually are not, but we should expect them to be especially smart and insightful, which they usually are.

For all these reasons I stand by my original claim that the University of Chicago--and other major colleges and universities--are remarkably amoral institutions. We all might wish that this were not the case, but universities would have to undergo far-reaching structural changes for moral education to become central to their mission.

University of Chicago

John J. Mearsheimer is the R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor in the Department of Political Science and the College at the University of Chicago

Notes

1. James O. Freedman, "The Teaching of Values," *The Boston Globe*, September 12, 1997.
2. The College of the University of Chicago, *The Aims of Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1997), p. 242.