

Ethics . . . And the Quest for Excellence in the Profession

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This issue of the *Journal of Dental Education* is thematic. The articles focus on ethics in dentistry. In 1983, Omicron Kappa Upsilon, the national honor society of dentistry, conducted a symposium, "Human Values and Ethics Education in Dentistry," as a pre-session to the American Association of Dental Schools meeting in Cincinnati. The society's purpose in so doing was to help fulfill its constitutional commitment to the profession by "promoting scholarship and character. . . ." The symposium was evaluated favorably by the participants and a sequel was offered in Dallas at the 1984 annual session, "Professional Ethics in Dental Medicine." Four distinguished ethicists addressed the group, and the substance of their remarks are contained in articles in this issue.

Ethics is concerned with ends and means. Tristram Engelhardt in "Humanism and the Profession(al)" calls attention to ideas that can direct our humanness to good ends for the profession. The subsequent three papers from the symposium deal with means in achieving our mission. Robert Veatch directs our attention to the "Relationship of the Profession(al) to Society." "Principles of Ethics" provides a basis for determining right action by the profession(al). Tom Beauchamp discusses three primary principles in his article. Finally, Laurence McCullough sketches "A Framework for Moral Responsibility in Dental Practice" using the "ethics workup."

Individual colleges of dentistry are also working to raise the profession's awareness of ethical issues. Pre-dating most activities, and noteworthy in its achievement, has been the University of Minnesota's "Professional Responsibility Curriculum." Muriel Bebeau has led the development and implementation of this curric-

ulum. Her articles are based on the current program at Minnesota. Realizing the need for a bibliography of articles on the subject of ethics in dentistry, David Ozar of Loyola University assumed leadership in establishing a Professional Ethics in Dentistry Network (PED-NET). The results of his efforts, included in this issue, provide a valuable resource to those working in the discipline.

The purpose of this paper is to define ethics in such a manner as to enable dental educators to sense the centrality of this branch of philosophy to what we do as human beings existentially and as educators professionally. The discussion emphasizes the ethics of ends or goals, as a way of establishing the imperativeness of ethics.

Ethics . . .

Human beings are philosophical animals. Our ability to reflect on our existence, its purpose and its meaning, is what distinguishes us from beasts. Mortimer Adler, the contemporary philosopher, said, "Philosophy is everybody's business. The human being is endowed with the proclivity to philosophize."¹ We each engage in philosophical thought during the course of every day. Philosophy is literally the "love of wisdom." Philosophy is "reflection on" . . . "wondering about." Ethics is reflection on the ultimate good, the *summum bonum*. Ethics as a discipline concerns itself with goodness and badness, rightness and wrongness, virtue and vice, approval and disapproval; with the merits of actions, with means, with ends, and with the state of affairs. Ethics is concerned with judgments of value and judgments of obligation. Ethics concentrates on the goals or aims of living and the actions or means of achieving those ends. Ethics is contemplative but practical. It is applicable to all, for it is pondering the nature and essence of life. Samuel Johnson suggested the universality of ethics when he said, "We are all moralists perpetually, geometers (or dentists) only by chance."²

Ethics is a concern for everyone as it forces the questions of what one should do and why. What goals do

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we establish for ourselves and how do we pursue these goals in the context of being one in a large community of others pursuing their goals. Paul Tillich, the eminent theologian/philosopher, advances the ethical imperative in his *Morality and Beyond*. An individual is morally obliged "to be what one is potentially, a person, in a community of persons."³ Ethics probes the question of how individuals pursue the realization of their personhood, the actualization of their potential, their highest good, while living in a society of others attempting to do the same.

Concern for the ultimate good and the means of attaining it has been a consuming theme of humanity since ancient times. Few have improved upon or challenged Aristotle's expression of the goal of life as *eudaimonia*, translated sometimes "happiness," sometimes "well-being." In *The Nicomachean Ethics* he defined happiness as "a complete life, lived in accordance with virtue and attended by a moderate supply of external goods." The Greek word translated virtue, *arete*, literally means excellence.⁴ Aristotelian ethics argues for well-being as the goal of one's life, with this happiness consisting in living the life of excellence.

For Aristotle there were two kinds of excellence for humans: moral and intellectual. Moral virtue consists of rationally controlling one's behavior. Aristotle understood that restraint and blunting of one's self-interest were necessary for individuals to live in society—that constraints are necessary to community. Yet the human drive for self-assertion and dominance continually involves individuals in violation of the moral interdicts established by humanity to obtund this self-interest. Among the moral virtues Aristotle described were: courage, self-respect, justice, temperance, and liberality. He argued that none of these moral virtues arises in us by nature. Humanity becomes morally excellent by practicing these virtues until they become established as habits. His "Golden Mean" defines the moral virtues as being rationally determined means between the extremes of excess and deficiency. Courage is the mean between the vice of cowardice (excess fear) and the vice of rashness (deficient fear). Moral excellence, then, is a state of being; "the state apt to exercise deliberate choice, being in the relative mean, determined by reason, and as the man of practical wisdom would determine."

The second category of ethical excellence discerned by Aristotle was intellectual virtue, the pursuit and contemplation of truth. Since happiness exists in fulfilling one's nature, a dimension of happiness must include the noblest aspect of human nature, rationality. The life of contemplation of truth was for Aristotle humanity's ultimate good. Here we see remnants in Aristotle of his teacher Plato, "The unexamined life is not worth living."

Supplements of and alternatives to Aristotle's ethics of excellence have been advanced through the centuries. Immanuel Kant emphasized one's duty to keep

the natural moral laws. John Stuart Mill adopted Aristotle's goal of happiness, but argued it was attained by the utilitarian calculus, the greatest good for the greatest number. These major streams of ethical theory are all helpful in that they all offer different emphases. However, Alastair MacIntyre in his recent book *After Virtue*⁵ theorizes that the development of the virtues, moral and intellectual, is fundamental to ethical behavior.

... And the Quest for Excellence

Ethics conceptually underscores our efforts to excel. Ethics provides an intellectual platform from which to issue the call to excellence. The contemporary emphasis on ethics is not a flourish, but a movement of merit.

Humanity is on a quest for excellence. Becker⁶ argues that humanity is driven by a need to both be a part of something and to stick out. Humans need to be conforming members of winning teams and yet stand out as stars. Today, there is a virtual litany of seminars and symposia in every realm of human endeavor teaching us "how to" excel. Bookstores and libraries are replete with a literature of excelling. We want to excel professionally. We want quality relationships with our spouses, our children, and the significant others in our lives. Madison Avenue and Nautilus cater to our desire for quality in our personal appearance. Not only do we establish standards of excellence for ourselves in our personal performance, but we have also honed and refined our esthetic tastes and technological demands. Glick⁷ suggests we seek high fidelity audio-visual equipment with sound and visual refinements beyond our senses' ability to detect, gourmet foods and quality wines whose bouquets are beyond our capabilities to identify. Even those who never manage to come on time to any event insist on watches accurate to the millisecond. The standard of performance demanded by us in many areas of endeavor far outstrips our legitimate needs. Yet the continual striving for improvement and excellence seems inherent in our constitution, and has much to commend it.

Analysis of our behavior, and that of the organized groups in which we associate, documents discrepancies between performance and potential. Such analyses may be accomplished under the various rubrics of evaluation, assessment, critique, or self-study; but all have as their goals decreasing the gap between our performance and our potential—the achievement of excellence. Thus, we launch programs of professional development, organizational development, and personal development in an attempt to enhance quality, to achieve excellence.

To excel in Abraham Maslow's words is "to be what it is one can be. It is a need we have to actualize our potential. It can be phrased as the need we have to become more and more what we are—to become everything we are capable of becoming."⁸ John Rawls, the

distinguished ethicist at Harvard, argues in his *The Theory of Justice*,⁹ for what he calls the Aristotelian Principle. Rawls explains that while not elaborated by Aristotle, it appears synchronous with his view of the nexus between performance and well-being. "Human beings enjoy the exercise of their realized capacities, and this enjoyment increases the more the capacity is realized, or the greater its capacity." He goes on to say, "The excellences (moral and intellectual) are conditions of human flourishing; they are goods from everyone else's point of view. The virtues are excellences . . . the lack of them will tend to undermine our self-esteem and that our associates have for us."

To fail to actualize our potential is to be mediocre, to be of moderate or low quality. Mediocrity is an aversion. Psychologically it is inharmonious with our need to "stand out." The movie "Amadeus" portrayed the destructiveness of a sensed mediocrity in the life of the composer Salieri and his quest for the excellence of Mozart. Salieri's quest turned pathologic for he failed to recognize the excellence of his performance; he had achieved his potential. His error came in coveting the potential of another.

The revulsion from mediocrity and the craving for quality is underscored by a variety of societal trends. American business, faced with declining profits and prestige, is rediscovering the competitive advantages of excellence in performance. Public education, confronted with declining standardized test scores and ill-equipped graduates, is searching for ways to restore quality to the classroom. Public officials, stung with Watergate and a loss of confidence of their constituencies, are appealing for moral excellence in the corridors of government.

Education is central to the quest for excellence. Whatever contributes to the development of the person or the fulfillment of potential must be regarded as education. Neither intellectual nor moral virtue are endowments at birth and as a consequence are under the canopy of education. The ultimate goal of those who would be educators is the use of the strategies of instruction to facilitate the student's development of the ethical excellences . . . their full potential. One philosopher sums up our quest for excellence by saying, "Don't scream at death when you realize you were not all you could have been."

In the Profession

Challenge and change are apt descriptors of the profession of dentistry. We are challenged by a host of environmental and intraprofessional forces that are forcing change. Our change must be developmental, it must improve the quality of the profession; or our future is jeopardized. After analyzing the factors influencing the quality of dental education and the challenges for the future, Alvin Morris¹⁰ concluded a recent article:

One cannot discover what makes a dental school *bad, better, or best* by reading the catalogue or studying the curriculum. What distinguishes one school from another are those often subtle, perhaps invisible *qualities* that reflect the basic *character* of the faculty. Only we ourselves know whether we have been involved in a *quality* education effort. If the answer is yes, it is not a reflection or result of any pedagogical innovation or education gimmickry. *Quality* resulted because we *cared* about our students, *placed their interests before our own*, and *gave them the best* we had to offer. (Emphases added.)

The emphases added reflect Morris' conclusion that quality of education in dentistry turns on issues of ethics. Without justice, courage, self-respect, liberality, and honesty, our efforts to educate a professional will be to little avail. Without the thirst for truth, quality will not prevail.

In the early part of the twentieth century, Abraham Flexner, a reformer of medical education, delineated the cardinal characteristics of a profession.¹¹ These qualities can be summarized into three: service to humanity, education beyond the usual level, and self-improvement. Characteristically, health professionals profess a technical competence in medicine based on advanced learning and for which they will be morally accountable in placing this expertise in the service of humanity. In the ethics of Aristotle, Flexner is saying: professionals are individuals who live lives of well-being by the continuous development of moral and intellectual excellences in the context of their specific professional abilities. Flexner went on to say, "Professional groups tend to view themselves as organs contrived for the achievement of social ends rather than as bodies formed to stand together for the assertion of their rights or the protection of their interests." Harry Bruce said of dentistry, "We now find ourselves accused, rightly or wrongly, of using our licenses to exact exorbitant fees, of not caring for the needy and the elderly, and in general of having lost much of our humanism."¹² Flexner stated that the advancement of common social interest was the obligation of a profession. Dr. Bruce expressed it: "Professionalism represents a quality of conduct that not only requires superior knowledge, skill, and judgment, but requires that those be used for the benefit of others in a society, prior to any consideration of self-interest. As professionals our primary interest is the dental health of the public we serve." Many are suggesting today that the fabric of the profession is being rent by the lack of ethical virtue. Our professional morality is deficient in that the benefiting of others has been subjugated to self-interest. Edmund Pellegrino in *Humanism and the Physician*¹³ says:

The need for a recasting of the profession is implicit in the disquietude expressed by many patients who call for a more humanistic profession . . . a profession with a spirit of sincere concern for the centrality of human values in every aspect of professional activity. A concern that focuses on respect for the freedom, dignity, worth and belief systems of the individual person, and a sensitive, non-humiliating and empathetic way of helping.

It is incumbent upon our community of educators to increase our efforts and become more vigorous "overseers" of the professional socialization of future generations of practitioners. We must emphasize by our words and in our actions that our profession holds a public trust and a trust for which we must be accountable, individually and collectively. Those who enter the profession under our tutelage must be made cognizant of the demands of ethics on their lives, both as participants in the human enterprise and as dentists. Bloom¹⁴ suggests that values are best taught by "modeling" desired attitudes and corresponding behaviors. Dr. Bruce said, "Call it 'hero worship' if you will, but admiration and emulation play an important role in the shaping of the professional. If each dentist (or professor) were to act as though he or she were the role model for another practitioner (student), the future of the profession would be secure." Faculty must be ethical and committed to the ethical life of the profession. We must come to view our commitment to the dental health of the public as that which helps provide ultimate meaning for our existence.

Human existence is fundamentally a striving for happiness. It is most appropriate for dental educators, who play such a critical role in the formation of the character of the profession, to direct the attention of our students, by our lives and through our words, to dentistry

as a way of meaningfully expressing our existence in accord with excellence.

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