

Introducing C.S. Lewis to the Business Ethics Student

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ABSTRACT: There is a tendency to compartmentalize morality which prevents consistent application of moral principles in business and personal life. To effectively teach business ethics from a Christian perspective, a morality informed by a Christian worldview must be integrated into all facets of the students' lives. The idea that there are morals for business and morals for the rest of life must be shown to be false. One way to do this is to introduce students to C.S. Lewis' writings on the "Law of Right and Wrong" to show the students that morality is real and is not relative. The purpose is not to turn a business ethics class into a class on Lewis but to introduce Lewis' simple, but profound, ideas to the students in order to lay a foundation regarding the "Law of Right and Wrong" as students begin a discussion of business and morality.

INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, students in a business ethics course I was teaching were assigned to read and write a review on the book *In His Steps* by Charles Sheldon. This is Sheldon's well-known story of a church in which the members decide to preface every action and every major decision with the question, "What would Jesus do?" (Sheldon, 1993). It was the source of the WWJD fashion trend that was seen several years ago among many high school and college students. There was a student in that business ethics class who made me question whether the WWJD movement was more about outward apparel and less about internalization of its message.

In writing his review of the book, one young man presented a critique of what he believed to be an error in the worship practice of this fictional church. The fictional church used an organ and the student was a proponent of only acappella singing in worship. That he was extremely indignant about the matter was evident from the passion with which he wrote. However, it was what that young man did later in the semester which really got my atten-

tion. A few weeks after writing the review, this same student, in a subsequent class discussion, expressed his dissatisfaction with the campus cable television system because he was prevented from watching Howard Stern's television program. The seeming disconnect between his zeal for doctrinal purity and his blatant disregard for common decency in wanting to watch what can only be described as extreme indecency was eye-opening to me.

This incident served as a catalyst in my thinking about how we are able to fence off certain areas from moral codes we use in other areas. For instance, the young man would never dream of letting a Howard Stern monologue serve as a sermon alongside his acappella singing. Yet, in his heart, he had found room for both Howard Stern and a concern for doctrinal purity in worship practices.

ETHICS IN BUSINESS AND ETHICS IN LIFE

One activity in which I had my business ethics students engage was an exercise that required them to draw the line on eavesdropping on a competitor's conversation. The exercise is designed to be one of "progressive snoop-

ing" in which the eavesdropping becomes more and more blatant. While nearly all students draw the line at some point, they can all justify their eavesdropping at points prior. Inevitably, one of the justifications given is the idea that "this is business." In other words, the perception seems to be that some behaviors are fair in business that might not be fair in other areas of life.

A famous article that contributes to the idea of compartmentalizing moral behavior from a business context compares the rules of business to the rules of poker. In 1968, Albert Carr claimed that business was like a game and had rules that were a "far cry from those of private life." Carr likened the business world to a game of poker in which no one is expected to be truthful, but, instead, expectations demand that one bluff and deceive others within its own "special ethics" (Carr, 1968). The underlying thesis of the article is that there is right and wrong in a business context and right and wrong in other spheres. All is moral as long as one is in compliance with the law.

Carr's article is highly regarded for good reasons. He raises valid points that are still discussed today by those who study business ethics. Obviously, one cannot enter a sensitive negotiation and lay everything on the table and expect a favorable outcome. The withholding of information by one party to create uncertainty on the part of the other party is crucial to negotiations. However, there is a point at which Carr's position becomes the proverbial slippery slope. As Fritz Allhof has pointed out, one cannot argue that what is legal is necessarily moral, and, in doing so, one violates a long-standing principle of moral philosophy that one cannot reason from what is to what should be (Allhof, 2003). Slavery was once legal but certainly was never moral.

However, this idea that what is legal is moral could be argued to pervade business ethics. How often have we heard that as long as a business "plays by the rules," they should do whatever they need to do to make the largest profit possible? If playing by the rules is defined as the letter of the law, it opens the door to a company like Enron which used the "three percent rule" in a way to keep the contingent liabilities related to special purpose entities off of its balance sheet. Using a law or an accounting standard in such a way as to deceive others is immoral whether it is legal or not. Compartmentalization of morality and similar rationalizations can have significant implications as the Enron story so clearly reveals.

Is it possible that this compartmentalization reached its apex in the 1990s when we were told over and over that a man's private indiscretions have no bearing upon his job performance? In writing of the oval office occupant during

the 1990s, columnist Mary McGrory wrote "the simple truth that has been apparent to the man and woman in the street from day one: reprehensible is not impeachable" (Bennett, 1998). Such a statement is a perfection of the compartmentalization of morality. While it is possible to acknowledge a violation of a moral concept and even use a word like reprehensible in doing so, we can safely rope off the violation and segregate it so that it has no bearing at all in judging, in this case, a person's suitability for office. It is exactly the same type of thinking used by the doctrinally correct Howard Stern fan who insisted on acappella music on Sunday morning and Howard Stern late at night. That type of thinking seems to lead to the conclusion if one keeps the rules (in this case the doctrinal rules), then one need not worry as much about the character of the rule-keeper.

As a final note in this section, it is important to point out that while morality is not relative, context can matter and may help explain our tendency towards compartmentalization. For instance, appropriate dress for the beach may not be appropriate dress for a worship service. The underlying moral standards of modesty and respect for others still exist. However, the undeniable confusion that comes into play when one tries to tease out manners and modesty from underlying morality may contribute to the thinking that standards of morality shift depending upon context.

ETHICS AND MORALITY

In an article appearing in the November 2003 issue of *The CPA Journal*, editor Robert H. Colson correctly points out that mere rules are not enough to enforce good standards of behavior on accountants. He says that the significance of standards depends upon their source of authority and that ethical systems will rarely produce the desired results if they are only constituted by a set of rules that must be followed. He then makes a statement which, if misinterpreted, can contribute to the compartmentalization of morality from other aspects of life. He says, "Morality is personal and subjective, whereas, professional ethics are associated with a group and are usually objective" (Colson, 2003). While it is true that professional rules of ethics are not the same thing as abiding standards of morality, standards of ethics should always be consistent with morality and not in conflict with it. Morality is not personal and subjective. The prophet Isaiah long ago condemned the moral sophistry of a shifting morality: "Ah, you who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light, who put

bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! Ah, you who are wise in your own eyes, and shrewd in your own sight" (Isaiah 5:20-21). There are moral laws in the universe that are fixed and imposed upon all humans by the Creator. The idea that God's moral law is not fixed is as old as the Garden of Eden when the serpent says, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?'" Man has always been given the choice between the truth of God and a lie. In his letter to the Romans, Paul condemns those who would suppress the truth and, while claiming wisdom, exchange the truth of God for a lie.

We err if we attempt to disassociate ethics with the moral base from which ethical codes derive their authority. Colson seems to do this in presenting a case of conflicting loyalties in which a person's "morals" come into conflict with "professional ethics" when CPA confidentiality rules prevent an accountant from blowing the whistle on morally repugnant behavior. This is not a conflict between morality and ethics as much as it is a conflict between one moral principal (keeping one's confidence) and another (a duty to expose corrupt behavior) created by conflicting loyalties. While this may seem like merely a semantic argument, it is more than that. In essence, a very simple view of morality and business ethics may be in order. A study of business ethics is predominantly a study of morality in a business context. John Maxwell made the case in the book *There's No Such Thing as Business Ethics* that one standard of morality applies to both life in general and business in particular (Maxwell, 2003).

Distinctions between ethics and morality are often created by a discomfort with the idea that we might actually be imposing morality on anyone. It is generally acceptable to impose ethics, but it is politically incorrect in modern society to insist on morality. However, is there any real difference if one says lying is unethical and another says it is immoral? While there are some purely practical reasons for codes of ethics, they largely function as an imposition of morality upon a group of people. As Robert Bork once stated when presented with the protestation that you cannot legislate morality, "We legislate very little else" (Bork, 1990).

ETHICS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE MORAL LAW

Morality has too much of a religious tinge to it for the secularist. While the secularist will take safe haven in an argument of the ethical, he begins to get uncomfortable with the idea of the moral. Charles Colson was invited to

speak at Harvard in 1991. His speech was titled "Why Harvard Can't Teach Ethics." His thesis was that Harvard is unable to teach ethics because they have given up on the idea of moral absolutes. In going back to the original meanings of the words "ethics" and "morals," Colson pointed out that ethos literally meant a stall or hiding place; a place that was secure and immovable. Mores, from which we get morality, means that which is always changing (Colson, 2000). Ironically, the popular meanings today seem reversed as corporations are constantly revising their codes of ethics while the concept of morality seems associated with an authoritarian, fixed code now bypassed by postmodern thought too enlightened to be constrained by such. While it is the case that codes of ethics need to be revised in order to keep up with changing circumstances, underlying moral standards do not change. For instance, the field of biotechnology is faced with what may seem to be new ethical issues each passing year as technology advances, but the underlying morality springing from the fact that man is made in the image of God does not change.

Colson went on in that speech to discuss how one book had completely changed the way he approached and lived life. The book was *Mere Christianity* by C. S. Lewis. In that book, Lewis argues that things we know are inherently right and wrong give us clues as to the meaning of the universe and the being behind the universe. In short, Lewis shows what he calls the "Law of Right and Wrong" is powerful evidence for the Lawgiver. As such, *Mere Christianity* becomes a viable vehicle to underscore to today's students the idea that morality is real.

D'Souza says, "Morality is both natural and universal. It is discoverable without religion, yet its source is ultimately divine" (D'Souza, 2007). When one fully realizes there is a "moral law" and that law is as fixed as are the "physical laws" of the universe, it becomes more likely that knowledge of such law will permeate one's views of all aspects of life. In an attempt to get business students to realize the importance of doing the right thing, it is crucial to get them to realize there is a power greater than themselves who is actually concerned with their actions. Lewis takes this path in his apologetic. His argument progresses from the inherent knowledge of the moral law, to the law-giver, to God, and, finally, to Jesus Christ (Lewis, 2001). Therefore, I believe introducing business ethics students to this argument creates a good "launch pad," if you will, into discussions of business and morality.

IMPLICATIONS FOR OUR STUDENTS

In his forward to the book, Lewis makes clear that his purpose was not to help one make doctrinal distinctions among Christian denominations. His purpose was far more basic than that. He believed taking such a path would have indeed undermined his message to his intended audience.

“. . . I think we must admit that the discussion of these disputed points has no tendency at all to bring an outsider into the Christian fold. So long as we write and talk about them we are much more likely to deter him from entering any Christian communion than to draw him to our own. Our divisions should never be discussed except in the presence of those who have already come to believe that there is one God and that Jesus Christ is His only Son” (Lewis, 2001).

Whether you agree with such sentiments or not, it brought to mind a parallel issue regarding our Christian college students. Many have been exposed to disputed points over “worship wars” all of their lives. Could it be, whether they come from a traditional or non-traditional congregation, that too much energy has been spent on these disputed points to the neglect of basic right and wrong? Could that have anything to do with the mindset of the doctrinally strict Howard Stern fan? Is it also possible that in a non-traditional congregation’s desire to be relevant, trendy, and cutting edge, it has failed to instill notions of right and wrong? Could these things have any relevance to the failure to permeate all areas of our lives with right and wrong? While it is possible to find congregations on both sides of these disputes which adequately address basic issues of morality, it is also true that time and energy spent in one area by necessity limits time and energy spent in another.

A colleague recently told me of someone he knew who was filling in for a professor in a Christian business ethics class. The substitute went into the classroom and said, “I am so damned tired; I had a hell of a night last night.” Students, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, were shocked to hear this from a Christian professor. This wise professor then asked them why they were so shocked when it was tame compared to what they hear in the movies they choose to attend and even the conversations they have among themselves. It was a brilliant illustration of moral relativism and how we are experts at taking a standard of behavior that is unacceptable in one situation and being perfectly comfortable with it in another. If vulgar and coarse talk is wrong in the classroom at a Christian college, then it should be wrong in the den with the television or in conversation with friends. However, that is a distinction

we have long since forgotten how to make.

Over the last several years, I have noticed this same disconnect among Christian college students. A survey of the Facebook pages on a Christian college network can reveal some interesting finds. For instance, a quick browse through some students’ pages will reveal those who proudly proclaim their faith and allegiance to Jesus Christ right above a section in which they display a favorite quote or two that is laced with profanity. Of course, not all do this, but many do. A former student’s Facebook page displayed one of her interests as “feeling close to God” while her profile picture on the same page displayed how close she was getting to the male dancer performing a lap dance. Another student managed to combine “reverence” for God with profanity by proudly displaying the following quote on her page from a rapper named Lil Kim: “Besides God, what the f___ should I fear? The only one that can stop me is the girl in the mirror.” Could any quote better illustrate how comfortable we have become in mixing the holy with the profane? Colson (1999) says the “church’s singular failure in recent decades has been the failure to see Christianity as a life system, or worldview, that covers every area of existence.”

While it may be tempting to suggest the business ethics professor and Lil Kim are each playing the same game of using a juxtaposition of the sacred and profane to get attention for a more important point, I do not believe this to be a fair comparison. Lil Kim is in no way making a case against the acceptance of filthy talk. However, that is at least part of what the professor is doing. Lil Kim, so far as I know, is not making any theological claims as to why mixing the sacred and the profane is a bad idea. The professor is making such a claim by showing the class how far they have gone with this idea of moral compartmentalization.

As a final note in this section, we also err if we assume our students share church backgrounds similar to our own. In a recent discussion with a student about some minor dispute, I jokingly asked her if the point upon which she was insisting was “in the Bible.” She immediately replied in a very serious tone, “I don’t know, I’ve never read the Bible.” Once again I was faced with the truth that my assumptions as a professor at a Christian college often do not line up with reality.

INTRODUCING LEWIS TO BUSINESS ETHICS STUDENTS

Because of noting the moral inconsistencies in my own life as well as the lives of others, I searched for something that would be personal as well as foundational for a

study of business ethics. While it is easy to ask why not simply take them to the Bible, the Bible may be something some of our students have not even seriously considered. My intent was to get them to see things from another perspective; indeed, to even see the Bible and God from another perspective. Lewis' *Mere Christianity* fills that role quite nicely.

Lewis begins his case for Christianity with an appeal to acknowledge what we all intuitively know is true — there is a right and a wrong. He points out that in virtually every activity we undertake, at some point we quarrel about what is right and wrong. He says that when these quarrels occur, you very seldom hear someone say “to hell with your standard.” Instead, one party attempts to justify his position by explaining that what he has done does not actually violate this standard. However, the fact that the quarrel is able to proceed at all is because both parties do indeed have in mind some sort of standard which Lewis refers to as the “Law of Right and Wrong” (Lewis, 2001).

While such an argument by Lewis may seem deceptively simple, it is really a very powerful point. The fact that humans are able to quarrel about right and wrong is very strong evidence that right and wrong actually exist. He says there would be no sense in a footballer arguing he had not committed a foul unless there was some agreement about the rules of football (Lewis, 2001). Likewise, there is no sense in arguing about right and wrong in any context if there is not some acknowledgement that right and wrong actually exist.

This acknowledgement that right and wrong actually exist is the first step away from the idea of moral relativism and situational ethics. Although his argument is simple and basic in its application, it is usually something students have never considered in quite that way. After spending a lifetime of being exposed through the media to the idea that morality is shifting and changing, an argument that puts forth the idea that morality is real and not simply the rules of a particular game or relevant only in a particular context is a new concept to many. Lewis concludes this argument with two points:

“First, that human beings, all over the earth, have this curious idea that they ought to behave in a certain way, and cannot really get rid of it. Secondly, that they do not in fact behave in that way. They know the Law of Nature and they break it. These two facts are the foundation of all clear thinking about ourselves and the universe we live in” (Lewis, 2001).

This can be seen in the defenses put forth in the high-profile business fraud cases in the earlier part of this decade. You would not be able to find one defense of any

of the accused that is totally dismissive of the moral standards upon which all criminal charges were based. To do so would be an incredibly silly legal defense, but it would be silly only because there is “this curious idea that they ought to behave in a certain way” (Lewis, 2001), and they are unable to get away from it at a time when it would be most convenient for them to do so. Indeed, today’s most famous and widely-published atheists want others to know that they themselves are moral (D’Souza, 2007). It is not an insignificant point that those who believe the universe is totally random and totally without meaning cannot resist to invoke the language of morality. If they truly believe they live in such a universe, it is remarkable they insist upon having a license to use the language of morals and ethics. And yet, that is exactly what they do.

It is this simple idea presented by Lewis that I believe can become a powerful motivating force if we can get our students to fully grasp it. I believe it is a mistake to downplay the significance to students’ exposure to this. Many students who read Lewis’ ideas about right and wrong told me something to the effect, “Wow! I never thought about it like that.” And, given today’s cultural influences, why would we expect the response to be any different? With today’s college students, such a basic idea emphasized in the classroom is neither too simplistic nor inadequate. Postmodern culture is telling our students that all truth claims are equal, all beliefs and lifestyles should be praised as equally valid, there is no right to judge another’s views or behaviors, and truth is whatever is right for you. However, truth demands an acknowledgment that right and wrong actually exist. They are real. They are more than human constructs that are only appropriate in a particular culture and place in history. Morality, what Lewis calls this “Law of Nature,” does not change when one leaves the Sunday school class and enters the boardroom or the executive suite. The idea that it does is as pernicious an idea as has ever been. Moral relativism is an especially tempting idea when coupled with the prospect of monetary gain. Therefore, as teachers whose students will no doubt one day face such temptations, we should pay special heed to the words Paul gave to Timothy:

“Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with

many pains. But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses" (I Timothy 6:6-12).

The pursuit of righteousness must take precedence over the pursuit of things. After all, that promise of eternal life is why we believe in the value of Christian education. "Educating for eternity" is more than a mere slogan; it is at the very heart of integrating faith and learning and should be the core mission of every Christian teacher.

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