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Student Section



A Case for Ethics as a General Education Requirement

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Much attention is given to educational focus in both secondary and post-secondary school systems. A primary concern is balancing between generalized education to provide a rigorous liberal arts foundation and specialized education to provide students with a particular field of expertise. Another concern applies specifically to generalized education, namely, attempting to determine the proper courses which construct a rigorous liberal arts foundation. Generally speaking, post-secondary education is focused on fashioning students who are literate in linguistic arts, communication skills, and basic math knowledge. While all of these particular areas are important, the vast majority of secondary schools and colleges around the world are missing a key component to producing effective and educated people to fill out the workforce: ethics. The education system should require education in the field of ethics to at least a basic level of understanding. To explain why this is the case, I will examine the benefits of ethics education, the application of ethics, and the problems facing those without an understanding of ethics.

The benefits of ethics are far-reaching. Ethics is not only a lifelong skill, but it is also formative in nature, and self-reflective in practice. Students who gain an understanding of ethics do not just learn different systems of thought regarding moral matters, but they also gain a sense of empathy towards other forms of ethics that they may not follow. Beyond the classroom, this can be a valuable tool since both the workplace and the public sphere are becoming more and more diverse. The skills and education a student receives in an ethics class will help her become a more informed person regarding how the world views social interaction, politics, law, and personal matters. In this sense, ethical realization will pay dividends throughout one's life, rather than just long enough to receive a diploma.

Further, ethics is a formative discipline that challenges students to seriously evaluate the way they interact socially, and the way they process judgments internally. There is no specialized education path (i.e. college major) that will not benefit to some extent from a firm understanding of ethics; indeed, education in the field of ethics is almost certainly more useful than other more commonly elevated disciplines on the general level. This is because of the many applications ethics has.

Ethics is applied in a number of ways: practice, evaluation, and improvement. When a person has an understanding of how ethics impacts the world, and how others make moral judgments, they are able to put into practice what they have learned. A student who knows the fundamentals of consequentialism vs. justice will be able to make moral decisions according to each system, and understanding the methodology involved.

This leads to evaluation of one's actions. When a person looks at their past motives for actions, or acts in a certain moral way, and when one has an appropriate amount of training in ethics, he is able to properly analyze and determine particular outcomes. With this analysis comes the knowledge not only *that* certain actions worked or did not work, but *why* those actions worked or did not work. For instance if a student has no understanding of ethics, she may not be able to fully grasp why when she uses people as mere means, she is rejected by them.

While a basic understanding is generally self-evident, a deep understanding of such phenomena comes only through a greater understanding of various ethical theories. It is through this understanding that one is able to make improvements to one's own moral character. With ethical knowledge comes the possibility to become a more ethical person. Understanding ethics will provide students with the capability to combine particular aspects of ethical theories that work into a moral framework that is not only functional for their own purposes, but interactive and consistent. A lack of ethical training could make such self-improvement very difficult. Though a lack of ethical understanding can lead to a lack of self-improvement, it can come with many other problems as well.

Students who lack basic ethical training will often not even have an ethical theory. When faced with a moral decision, a common answer is "I don't know," or "I'd have to think about that." The problem here is that if one does not know what to do in a difficult decision, they often cannot be reasonably relied upon to make a difficult moral decision, and those who need time to think about difficult moral decisions often cannot when they are pressed to do so. With a requirement to take an ethics class, students will not have these types of problems. With the knowledge of various ethical theories, a student cannot hide behind a lack of knowledge, and if they indeed need time to think about moral decisions, they will have to tools to allow them to do so. Similarly, many students who do not lack an ethical theory have very poor ones. A common belief for young adults in today's world is that each person should be left to do what they think is right. When pressed, though, most of them would object to someone doing anything to harm them, even if the individual felt it was the right thing to do. A lack of ethical education leads students to have no answer or one based on ignorance rather than understanding. And with the current standards for general education, when students are backed into an ethical corner, all the math and communication skills in the world will not help them figure out a proper action.

The benefits of requiring ethics courses to be taken can be clearly seen by examining the benefits and application of ethics. Furthermore, these benefits are elevated by looking at the problems students can face without an education on morality. While many generalized education courses are highly useful, not all of them can apply to each and every specialized field of study, whereas ethics can. A proper understanding of ethics can help students make moral decisions, analyze actions as moral or immoral, improve one's own view on ethics, and provide answers when difficult questions arise. As such, a requirement for ethics education to be included in the general education requirements for secondary and post-secondary institutions will not only generate better students, but it will form better people in society.

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What is a Good Life?

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Introduction

To have a good life is the objective goal of all people, yet for many, how to live a good life is a question to which they do not have an answer. Every individual person has a life that is unique from every other person on Earth, but although, every person is unique, I assert that there are objective desires all people possess that lead to a good life. Within these objective desires, lies the opportunity for subjective expression of these desires that is in control of the individual. This paper will describe what influences every person's life, the outcomes of those influences, what is necessary for a good life, what most people objectively desire to fulfill in life, and how one can do so using examples from my own life. By the end, everyone should have the ability to apply these principles to their own lives so that they may develop an understanding for what leads to and what is actually living a good life.

The experience of a good life lies within the mind. Throughout life, from birth even, a person's mind is influenced by a number of sources that are both internal and external. Regardless of the outside environment, throughout life the human mind and body go through many phases. It changes and thinks differently as a person ages. This is due to natural processes, for example, the heightened vulnerability to sexual arousal that teens and young adults experience because of the hormones released by the brain at the ages where reproductive ability is at its peak. This is normal, and although it may cause discomfort, it should not be considered unhealthy. Its function is to influence the individual to continue the human species. Also, the way a person thinks is affected by a person's genetic make-up. This determines what a person is naturally attracted to and repulsed by in terms of activities, people, entertainment, desires, etc. There are also internal influences that can negatively affect the mind through no fault of the individual. Both mental illness and physically harming internal sources, such as cancer, can have an effect on how a person's mind functions, the way they perceive reality, and the way they feel. Understanding internal influences is important because it gives insight into who "I" am, and why "I" am this way naturally. This understanding relates to external sources of influence on the mind.

Again, from birth, a person is not only influenced by what is going on inside his or her body but the messages he or she is receiving from outside sources. Multiple areas and levels of a person's personality and function can be and are affected by the environment she lives in. These influences that can shape a person's mind include but are not limited to parents, family, peers, community, society, education, media or lack thereof the previously listed. These influences can be both negative and positive. An example of a negative influence and its effects is that studies have shown that child neglect especially from a younger age can lead to lasting personality flaws that include

low self-esteem, inability to communicate effectively, and inability to empathize with others. A positive example could be simple reinforcing words of encouragement to “try new things” from parents, teachers, peers, etc. Again, it is important to understand external influences on our minds because it provides further insight into who we are and why we are this way. At a certain level of maturity we could start to put together connections of why we perceive and respond to different situations the way we do.

External and internal sources affect the way I perceived myself and the world before I had the ability to critically analyze them. I am currently developing the ability where I start to realize these influences and their effects. It is important for me to decipher what is in sync with reality and what causes a distorted view. This is a key step in living a good life that includes seeing and accepting reality as it is and accepting who and what makes up me as a whole as well as what I can change. I cannot control what has influenced me in the past to be the person I am today, but I can control how I respond to the sum of the events that leads up to my current state in life.

What is Necessary for a Good Life?

Next, I will discuss what is necessary in order for a life to be good. From basic to more abstract, the needs of an individual listed in Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs must be met until they can reach the ultimate level of living a good life that is self-actualization. Each level has to function properly for the next more complex level to function properly. First, the physiological needs of an individual must be met which include clean air to breathe, adequate food, water, sleep, and shelter. Some claim there are other basic needs such as sex, but I will not include them for simplicity purposes. Security and safety are on the next level of needs. Safe environment for one’s body and security in employment, resources, and property are included. The next level Maslow includes is “Love”. This level includes intimacy with the people closest to the individual. In order for a person to receive love or care from others they must also care for others, which is difficult when basic physiological and security needs are not obtainable. The next level of needs determines the positive way an individual feels about himself. Self-esteem, confidence, achievement, respect for others, and respect from others are all on this level. Finally, when all of these needs are fulfilled, a person has the opportunity to self-actualize which means to act in accordance with the standards that are necessary to reach the goals the individual sets for himself. That which lies within these unique goals are the living out of desires to exercise creativity, seek knowledge and truth, accept reality as it is, respect others, be respected by others, and accomplishing self-set goals.

Now that I have determined life influences and what is included in a good life, I will state my central thesis and explain how a good life is attainable.

Central Thesis

As a human being alone, regardless of my genetic make-up and internal and external influences, at the very least, I need to meet my own physiological needs in order to function properly and healthily. As I move up each level on Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, my life gets better as long as I sustain each level of needs.¹ For example, my relationships with people I feel I love cannot function properly if I do not have access to adequate nutrition. In order to self-actualize, I must first have a basic feeling of self-

¹ These conclusions apply to all persons.

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esteem, confidence, and the belief in the opportunity to achieve goals. These feelings and beliefs allow me to have the courage and ability to realize my own potential and act upon that realization which is in essence self-actualization. Self-actualization is made up of many different parts and motives that I want to fulfill including creativity, seeking knowledge and truth, the acceptance of reality as it is, respecting others, being respected by others, and pursuing goals I set for myself as was stated previously. These are motives that every person has, but the way I fulfill these desires is what makes my life my own. The way in which I desire to do so has been affected by the natural and internal influences such as my genes and male-based brain structure, for example, as well as the external influences such as the way my parents raised me, taught me morals and disciplined me as further examples. There is a countless number of influences that have affected the way I view life and perceive reality, and it is my duty and responsibility at this time and level of maturity to critically analyze these influences, reflect on how they have shaped my mind and identity, and determine which will and will not help me find truth in life alongside helping me fulfill the desires within self-actualization. By definition, a good life is one that provides the opportunity for happiness and satisfaction by meeting the levels of needs listed in Maslow's Hierarchy thereby allowing me to self-actualize as much as possible. Not only this, but within the opportunity to self-actualize I can act in accordance with the standards of my goals that are unique to my personality, desires, and overall character that make my life different from all other people. Next, I will go into more detail on how each motive of self-actualization can be attained individually and how I can do this specifically in my life.

An overall theme in attempting to fulfill each motive is challenging myself in each specific area. To be creative is actually to be artistic, although, it may not be in the popular idea of what art is in some situations. To be creative and artistic is to take inspiration from a certain number of external and internal sources, putting them together, and working out and developing a product. This can be as simple as settling an argument between friends, for example. I may not need to find a solution to settle a particular argument, necessarily, but in order to exercise my creative ability, I do so anyway. First, I listen to both sides, draw from past experience, critically analyze this information, and develop a reasonable compromise with which to present each side. It is the taking on of challenges such as this that provides opportunities for creative ability.

In another way to exercise creativity, I participate in an activity which I consider to be art. I play football, and not only do I play football, but the reason I consider it to be art is that I continuously find ways to develop and progress as a player whether it is building and strengthening my physical body, practicing repetitions, or watching film to get mental repetitions. I love challenging myself to get better and attempting to reach my full potential. I have this inclination to express myself through participating in football, because my genes provided me desirable football attributes such as speed and quickness, but also because I grew up in an environment where everyone enjoyed the game and respected those who played it. I have analyzed these influences and determined that they have positively influenced me to behave the way I do today in my football participation, so I will continue playing and exercising my creative ability in this way.

In seeking knowledge and truth, I must challenge myself to allow myself to see, consider, and entertain ideas through reason and critical analysis. Based on the influences from previous times in my life, I will already have differing biases toward

certain topics, ideas, thoughts, etc. In order to truly seek knowledge and truth I must remove these biases or at least suppress them while retaining information, and compare and contrast opposing ideas using purely rational thought. An example of exercising this in my life would be analyzing different religious texts for morality and wisdom. I realize I have a bias and an inclination to dismiss the theories and ideologies within the Bible, for example, because of my experience with many believers using the Bible to promote their own agendas and skewing what is said in it. In order to challenge myself to find knowledge and truth in this example, I must remove my personal experiences from the objective study of what is actually being said and what the message is that the author was trying to convey. This way I can obtain knowledge objectively and not just the viewpoint I already agree with.

Relating to removing biases whilst seeking knowledge and truth, I must remove developed biases in order to accept reality as it truly is. The easy and cheaply ego-boosting way to view reality is, quite simply, to be ignorant. Every person develops biases throughout their life based on, again, a number of internal and external influences. It builds cheap confidence to live in a perception of reality in which you are doing things “the right way” while others are not because they are too lazy to do it your way, for example. It is even easier when one shares this perception with like-minded peers. It may be comforting, but it is only comforting in the same way that one believes covering themselves with their blanket will keep an intruder from murdering them. It is fulfilling to understand and experience what is real and what is not. In the same way I attempt to retain knowledge, I need to be critical of the sources that are giving me a perception of the world and especially the world which I am not directly experiencing. Just as I have preconceived biases, it is probable that those relaying information to me will as well, whether they are knowingly or unknowingly presenting it with their own bias. Being aware of this is the first part. The next step is to compare. Because I am aware of these biases in myself and in others, it is not likely that I will find a source that will not spin stories in one way or another, although, some sources may do it more than others. To gain knowledge, I must compare the sources from as many points of view as I can and find truth this way, because unless I experience an event first-hand, I will never have the ability to know what is pure reality and what is not. In doing this, I will live as best as I can in a reality that simply “is.”

In order to respect others, I must listen to what they have to say, and empathize with them. This does not mean I have to believe everything I am told. In fact, I still need to use my critical analytical skills with every person, but I can still attempt to understand their situation without preconceived judgment. The ability to respect others stems from the understanding that all people have the same basic motives in life which are happiness and satisfaction. Because of this, whether or not I understand the reasons for why people behave or think the way they do, I can still empathize with their basic desires. The respect for others lies in the ability to see the value in every human life. I need to be aware that I cannot make judgments and determinations in every person’s situation, because I cannot completely understand the influences of their life in the past that molded them into who they are today. I can, however, control my attitude with every person I encounter to see their basic motivation to have a flourishing life whether I agree with, disagree with, understand, or do not understand their actions in trying to do so. This leads to receiving respect from others.

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In order to receive basic, genuine respect from others, I must first place the burden on myself to respect them first. The amount of respect I receive from that point depends on my actions. People genuinely appreciate not only those who respect them back, but those who stay true to their word, act in accordance with what they believe, and those who seek the objective truth in every situation. A person may not agree with what I believe, but they will respect that I am honest, I act according to my belief, and that I accept the truth regardless.

Finally, the exercising of creativity, seeking knowledge and truth, accepting reality as it is, respecting others, and being respected are included or relate to achieving my individual goals. For example, I want to make sport-related documentary movies eventually. This is an occupational goal, but it is mostly a desire to exercise my creativity on a larger scale: film documentaries. Documentaries should depict the reality of a situation as it truly is, and it should present the viewer with some kind of knowledge or different viewpoint they can leave with. To document and present situations is to empathize with the individuals involved to bring their reality to the eyes of the viewers, and to present the situations truthfully and genuinely in a meaningful manner demands respect. This desired goal comes from my natural creative tendencies, parents who promoted expression and value of the truth, natural love of competition, and countless other influences. I have determined that I can use these influences positively to attempt to achieve all the motives that lie within self-actualization. To do so in this way brings happiness, pleasure, and satisfaction, because I have the opportunity and ability to do it, and I can do it in a way that is unique to me.

A good life is a life of happiness and satisfaction. True happiness and satisfaction is attained through meeting the needs required to get to a level of self-actualization. What provides satisfaction for all individuals is to exercise creativity, seek knowledge and truth, discover and accept reality as it is, respect others, be respected by others, and to achieve self-set goals. The piece that provides true happiness is doing these things in a way that is unique to the positive things that compose me. A single event or multiple events do not determine a good life; a good life is a state of mind that I continuously live in, and if more people were taught and understood all the things that are necessary for truly living a happy and satisfying life, it seems that the world and societies might be benefitted through the individuals that make them up.

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