

# **Is moral education the universities' business ?**

**Some synthetic considerations and personal reflections  
on the 6<sup>th</sup> Ethical Forum of the University Foundation  
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*"It is uncontroversially part of a university's job to equip its students with the high skills the labour market requires. And it is arguably part of its job to inculcate the critical competence and attitude which a thriving democracy needs. But is it also part of its job to teach its students the ethical values that should guide their professional life, whether as doctors or as engineers, as managers or as lawyers, as teachers or as journalists or in any other professional capacity?*

*If so, how should the job be done? Just by teaching the codes of deontology of the professions our students are likely to exercise? By taking and defending a stance in case studies? By preaching by example?*

*If not, does it mean that we are capitulating to the dictates of the market ? And what is then left of the values that allegedly define the identities of at least some of our universities and are eagerly invoked in our universities' charters, on their websites and at their most pompous ceremonies? Sheer empty rhetoric irrelevant to our students' future professional conduct, if not shameless hypocrisy ?".*

These were the questions submitted to the speakers and participants of the 6<sup>th</sup> Ethical Forum of the University Foundation, with a request to go straight for the difficult and delicate issues. Not easy, it turned out, and even more difficult to integrate the insights I gained from the Forum into a coherent picture. Here is an attempt.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The text below is an edited and expanded version of the Forum's concluding remarks, largely inspired by the presentations that provided the Forum with its substance and the discussions to which they gave rise. Presentations were made by Andris BARBLAN (Secretary General of the Magna Charta Observatory on the Universities' Fundamental Values and Rights, Bologna, and former secretary general of the European University Association), Jean-Pierre RICHER (Université du Québec à Montréal), Emmanuelle DANBLON (ULB), Bart PATTYN (KuLeuven), Robert RUBENS (UGent), Yves THIRAN (RTBf & UCL), Nigel ROOME (ULB & Tilburg University), Boudewijn BOUCKAERT (UGent). The dense presentations and the lively debates they triggered were obviously far richer than what could be incorporated or even simply alluded to in the present remarks. Nor do these aim to express a consensus among participants. On the contrary, I endeavoured to mobilize what I learned from, or understood thanks to, some of the

## 1. *Libre examen* as the ethics of truth seeking

As regards the substance of the values that universities have the right and duty to transmit to their students, one answer emerged quickly as uncontroversial. Much of what a university is about is the transmission of what we believe to be true knowledge, for many of us combined with what is commonly called research, i.e. the attempt to generate more true knowledge. Such an enterprise cannot hope to be successful in the absence of a commitment to the uninhibited search for truth, be it against our individual or collective interests, against conventions and prejudices, and against any externally imposed authority, whether religious or secular. *Libre examen*, in its narrow interpretation, can be interpreted as referring to precisely this value commitment. And the critique of Louvain's failure to live up to it played a central role in the creation, by 19<sup>th</sup> century liberals, of the Université libre de Belgique (later the University libre de Bruxelles and later still the ULB/VUB) — ironically in the Hotel Granvelle, the palace of the first Archbishop of Malines-Brussels — and in the way its heirs kept defining their specific identity ever since.

There is definitely nothing passé about this commitment. Indeed, far from capturing the uniqueness of one of our universities, it has become the object of a consensus that gathers them all. As UCL physics professor Jean Bricmont put it "*Le catholicisme ne s'est pas ouvert à la laïcité, il a été vaincu par elle, ce qui est tout différent. Pour reprendre la devise de l'ULB, la science a vaincu les ténèbres, du moins en Belgique et aujourd'hui. Il vaut toujours mieux avoir le triomphe modeste, mais il ne faut pas pour autant confondre vainqueurs et vaincus.*"<sup>2</sup> This sounds pretty blunt, but is not fundamentally different from what was memorably expressed, shortly before his death, by the KuLeuven's first Rector Pieter De Somer, on the occasion of Pope John Paul II's visit: "*The Catholic University of Leuven has a duty constantly to question inherited truths and to adapt if necessary to modern language and thought... Whatever their discipline, researchers must have the freedom to chart that unknown, to elaborate working hypotheses and to put them to the test, to integrate new findings with the already known, or to draw new conclusions about what went before. They must also have the right to be mistaken, that is one of the essential conditions for them to exercise their function as researchers, and for the university to carry out its proper institutional function.*"<sup>3</sup>

*Libre examen* in this sense is no doubt a value, and one that we feel we can and indeed must teach to all those of our students who may go into research themselves, but also more broadly to all our students, whatever their future careers, and indeed to anyone we might hope to influence. We

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interventions, in order to shape, alter or refine my own views on the issues that proved most contentious. A synopsis of most of the presentations is available on [www.fondationuniversitaire.be/en/forum.php](http://www.fondationuniversitaire.be/en/forum.php).

<sup>2</sup> J. Bricmont, "Pourquoi nous ne sommes plus catholiques", in dossier *ULB-UCL même combat?*, *Bulletin du Cercle du libre examen* 42, octobre 2006, 15-18.

<sup>3</sup> May 10, 1985. Quoted by Bart Pattyn, "The Debate at the KuLeuven", [www.fondationuniversitaire.be/en/forum6.php](http://www.fondationuniversitaire.be/en/forum6.php).

often disagree, of course, on what the truth is, but we all agree that in settling our disagreements, we should have eye for nothing but empirical evidence and logical entailment and shield ourselves against the influence of prejudice and external authority. In this respect, we certainly do not want to go back to the European Universities of the Middle Ages — however much we are indebted to them, as rightfully stressed by Andris Barblan. Rather we want to consolidate and preserve the freedom from outside interference slowly conquered, not least during what was arguably the most glorious period of our university past, when the innovative humanism that prevailed at the *Universitas Lovaniensis* induced Cardinal Granvelle to create another university in Douai, more receptive to the dictates of the Inquisition.

## **2. Deontology as a profession's ethos**

*Libre examen* so conceived provides a first uncontroversial value or set of values which we feel we can and must teach our students. One aspect of it is more formalized than the rest: it is the deontology we need to teach to the subset of our students who will go into scientific research themselves. As a biochemist, you do not falsify your experimental results in order to vindicate interesting conjectures. As an historian, you do not embellish past events to enhance the prestige of your nation.

The deontology of research, however, is just a small part of what can be regarded as a second corpus of values which it is uncontroversially the university's task to transmit to its students. These are the values embodied in the various codes of deontology. We have no problem admitting that room should be made, in the training of doctors, journalists or lawyers, for the codes of deontology specific to the professions they are likely to exercise. Why have some codes developed for some of the professions to which university prepares and not for others? Serious asymmetry of information between the providers of services — legal or medical, for example — and their clients is certainly part of the story. Also probably the risk of serious financial pressures — by advertisers on journalists, by drug manufacturers on doctors — that may hinder an exercise of the profession in the best interest of the "consumer" of information or health care. To preserve trust in the profession, it is therefore in the collective interest of professionals to subject themselves to a code of deontology, a body of "soft law" sometimes indirectly backed up by some hard law, typically when the exercise of a profession is legally restricted to members of a professional organization, itself empowered to adopt a code of deontology and to exclude those who do not comply with it.

In this light, the teaching of deontology so understood looks closer to the teaching of law than to the teaching of moral values: a code of deontology is simply a set of rules whose shaping and enforcement is delegated by the legislator to specialized bodies, more aware of the problems to be addressed and more likely to possess the competence required to address them. However, the teaching of deontology does not reduce to the transmission of rules and the associated casuistry. It also consists in

highlighting some values at the core of the ethos of the particular profession — say, the impartial provision of information by journalists, the health of the patient, today combined with the sustainability of institutionalized solidarity, for the medical and para-medical professions — and alerting students in this light to dilemmas or trade offs they might have to face. This goes beyond the teaching of a body of soft law and enters the realm of values: a certain idea of the beauty of a profession one should be proud to exercise well and the image of which one should be ashamed of tarnishing, typically by letting base interests prevail or by getting engrossed in technical virtuosity while forgetting that one is dealing with human beings — not just dead flesh at the anatomy lesson, not just figures at the accountancy lesson.

The teaching of corporate social responsibility to managers fits this pattern quite neatly, even though it is not commonly described as “managerial deontology”. As illustrated by Graham Roome, it typically consists in drawing the students’ attention to the human consequences of the decisions which managers have to make in the course of their careers, whether routinely or in exceptional circumstances. Is there not a fundamental difference between consequentialist and deontological approaches? When appealed to in this context, this worn out distinction is superficial and misleading. Sensible deontologies largely consist in requiring practitioners to pay attention to the consequences of their behaviour, and in particular to the consequences of generalizing to the whole profession a particular pattern of behaviour. Even when it appears as a set of rules of thumb or procedures to be followed, all deontologies, whether for journalists or doctors, for lawyers or managers, ultimately fit into a reflection on how their profession can best yield a useful contribution to society, and hence into a consequentialist framework.

### **3. Ethics courses as courses in culture and reasoning**

Let us take stock. As far as the teaching of values are concerned, publicly funded 21<sup>st</sup> century universities must feel perfectly comfortable on the one hand propagating the ethos of truth seeking intrinsic to the scientific side of the academic profession and on the other hand inculcating to future professionals, in the long-term interest of both their professions and society, the ethos that underlies the specific deontology of their professions.

Next to these two ways in which they can allow themselves to teach values, universities can no doubt also offer courses in ethics, or moral and political philosophy, and they do so quite massively far beyond their philosophy programmes. But such courses are arguably aimed, not at teaching students the “true” values or substantive ethical views they should adopt, but rather at introducing them impartially to the existing corpus of thought in these fields — not just a history of the classics, also current controversies — and at teaching them how to argue rigorously on ethical matters. Emmanuelle Danblon’s observation about “scientific” *libre examen* creating no problem, while philosophical *libre examen* being at risk of being dogmatic, and hence problematic, and Bart Pattyn’s remark that universities

should not teach their students a particular ideology seem to endorse this self-limitation, this confinement to an ethically neutral stance in the teaching of ethics.

#### **4. Universities as value-shaping environments**

It would be comfortable if we could stop here. But two aspects of the discussions that took place at the Ethical Forum suggest that we cannot. First of all, there are some values irreducible to truth seeking and deontology that unavoidably guide some choices university authorities make, be it tacitly, about what can and cannot be done and said on campus, thereby shaping to some extent what students will regard as trivial or problematic for the rest of their lives.

Some of these choices are being made in the vicinity of the university's teaching activities. For example, the creation of a course in palliative care — a taboo subject up to not so long ago — or the advertising of an interdisciplinary programme on the environment with slogans emphasizing our responsibilities towards future generations cannot exactly be claimed to be value-neutral. Other relevant choices operate at greater distance from the teaching activities. Think, for example, of the somewhat exotic case of the Christian fundamentalist Bob Jones University (South Carolina) mentioned by Jean-Pierre Richer, where Blacks and Whites were not allowed to date together on campus. Much closer to home, think of the ban on places of worship on one of our university campuses, or of the allocation of a university-owned *kot communautaire* to a project for gay students rather than to the local branch of the Opus Dei.

By allowing or prohibiting, encouraging or discouraging some activities, decisions of this sort are hardly neutral in their inspiration, and even less neutral in terms of their impact on the normative convictions of students. Of course, some of these measures may prove counterproductive: discrimination against the Opus Dei may prompt conversions, and environmental brainwashing may produce ecological cynics. But it can nevertheless be expected that having attended more or less assiduously an institution that tolerates or facilitates certain attitudes or conducts, while discriminating against other ones, will tend to make its students regard the former as self-evident and the latter as problematic for the rest of their lives. Within the constraints of what the law imposes and forbids, there is much a university and its many organs can choose to do and not to do, to allow and to forbid.

True, the values implicitly taught by the environment thus shaped fall far short of a fully specified conception of justice or a fully-fledged ideology. They are also largely of such a nature that few, here and now, would dare to challenge them openly. But this does not prevent them from being values, nor from being taught at and by our universities, whether or not they like to admit it. The teaching of values does not reduce to the preaching of values. Hence, refraining from preaching values in ethics courses does not exonerate

universities from thinking about which values they do and should teach their students through the overall environment they create by their decisions.

## 5. University teachers as senior siblings

Admitting this is not particularly comfortable. But there is worse to come. As stressed in particular by Andris Barblan, the pedagogical relationship is at one at the same time, and inextricably, a transmission of knowledge (*savoir*), skills (*savoir-faire*) and *savoir-être*, which includes unavoidably a moral dimension. Of course, each of these aspects of the teaching function may be performed quite ineffectively. As regards the third one, it is certainly sobering for us university teachers to know that when some of our UCL students were asked who they got their moral outlook from their families, youth movement leaders and primary school teachers feature far more prominently in their answers than we do. Nonetheless, it is no doubt true for many of us that the admiration we nurtured for some of our professors related to their way of being no less than to how well their thought, how much they knew or how brilliantly they taught.

What follows is quite a bit more general and radical than just expecting professors of moral or political philosophy to “come out” and confess what their own views are, rather than just line up what others think; more general and radical also than expecting all those who teach subjects with some policy relevance to stick their necks out and indicate, based on what they think they know and on explicit value judgements, what they believe must be done<sup>4</sup>. What follows, far more generally, is that university teachers, along with all other teachers, should not shy away from being “judgemental”, from asserting that not everything is equivalent. Given that there is no way of squeezing the moral message out of the teaching relation, deliberate moral abstention can too easily be interpreted, as stressed by Bart Pattyn, as amounting to a commitment to equivalence. This is of course not a morally neutral position. It is a morally untenable position. Compared to all other civil servants — whether firemen or tax collectors, judges or social workers — there is arguably, in this respect, something very special about us teachers — from the kindergarten all the way to doctoral programmes — that makes us a bit like older brothers and sisters to our pupils and students, and thereby singles us out from. We are unavoidably, interminably, in the business of helping them to grow up, and the acquisition of sound values is part of growing up.

Of course, the most direct and obvious ways of teaching what we believe are sound values can easily be counterproductive. When I was a student at the UCL’s Philosophy Institute, there was a course in *Questions de morale spéciale* that smacked so much of moral indoctrination that we campaigned to scrap it from the programme. We failed miserably, and fifteen

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<sup>4</sup> The responsibility of academics in the public debate was the subject of our third Ethical Forum 3 *Free to Speak Out?* (November 2004). For a synthesis, see: [www.fondationuniversitaire.be/common\\_docs/2004.SynthesisEF31.pdf](http://www.fondationuniversitaire.be/common_docs/2004.SynthesisEF31.pdf).

years later, I was appointed to teach it. Unsurprisingly, I hurried to redesign it thoroughly, with the purpose of encouraging students to think by themselves and, after the creation of the Hoover Chair, relabelled it *Ethique économique et sociale*. After two decades of teaching it, however, I am now reluctantly realizing that there was something more legitimate than I thought in the idea, central in the *Questions de morale spéciale* I wanted scrapped, that moral education is part of what we owe to our students.

Of course, in the world our students inhabit, we cannot hope to accomplish this task by requiring them to learn some sort of catechism, nor by drawing up an *index autorum (or oratorum) prohibitorum*. On the contrary, students should be exposed to read and listen to the most diverse, indeed the most extreme positions, however politically incorrect, and to discuss with people who hold them. Effective moral education cannot and must not bank on anything like *cordon sanitaire* of the word. If there is any chance for it to exist, it will be thanks our not shying away from expressing our own moral convictions, tactfully but firmly, if and when opportunities arise; thanks also to our living up to the convictions we profess in that (typically very small) part of our lives which our students are made to share; and thanks to our creating occasions for our students to meet and interact with personalities we admire not just for their intellectual qualities but also for their moral commitments.

This is then the second not so comfortable (and not so uncontroversial) sense in which it seems to me unavoidable and right for universities to teach their students what is right and wrong. Not only do university decisions collectively create a value-laden and value-shaping environment. In addition, each of us individually must be aware of the moral education component of his or her role. For the young adults entrusted to us, we are not just knowledge transmitters and skill teachers, we are also something like older brothers and sisters, senior siblings, who do not step out of their roles by expressing, by word and by deed, discreetly rather than pompously, a certain conception of what constitutes a good life.

Recognizing the legitimacy and importance of this task raises a number of tricky questions. Some of them relate to the substance of the values that should be the object of this (often implicit) moral education. Other questions relate to the institutional implications of recognizing the latter's legitimacy. It remains pretty clear that the evaluation of our students, whether they pass or fail and how high a mark they get, should be based only on the knowledge and skills they are able display, and not on their *savoir-être*, their moral commitments and conduct. But is it equally clear, if part of a university teacher's job is moral education, that the moral qualities of candidates should be bracketed out as a matter of principle when making appointments or discussing promotions? This is one of the many questions that our 6<sup>th</sup> Ethical Forum forced us to face — without providing a final answer...