Losing the Sacred Perspective:
Social Ethics and
Character Development

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I t is hard to imagine that the seventh largest business in the United States, named "America's Most Innovative Company" by *Forbes* magazine for six consecutive years, would become indelibly linked with unprecedented business fraud and corruption. Yet Enron, a Houston-based energy company, plunged into bankruptcy and legal entanglements that made its company name synonymous with scandal. Some felt that the bright side of the Enron debacle, if there was one, was an increased interest in ethics as Enron became the case study of choice for business students. In fact, less than one year after Enron's fall, the Chronicle of Higher Education reported that MBA students felt their schools were not adequately preparing them for the ethical

dilemmas they would face in the "real world."[1] In response to this type of criticism, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), an accrediting institution of business schools, endorsed new ethical standards to be implemented in program curriculum and encouraged schools "to develop codes of ethical conduct for M.B.A. students, faculty members, and administrators."[2] This two-pronged approach to ethics regeneration—teaching ethical standards and establishing behavioral controls—is the typical frame of reference used by both educators and professionals alike.

The focus on educating individuals about ethics is the first of the two-pronged approach to ethics regeneration. Philip J. Langlais, vice provost for graduate studies at Old Dominion University, feels that "higher education has a critical responsibility to focus on educating . . . students about ethical obligations."[3] It is important to understand that *how* we go about teaching ethical standards (pedagogy) is largely determined by the belief that *unethical* behavior is proportionate to the knowledge one has of *ethical* behavior. In other words, it is believed that people act inappropriately either because they don't know what appropriate behavior is or they do not know how to accurately discern between acceptable behavior and unacceptable behavior in a given circumstance. As a result, ethics pedagogy is designed around a framework of acquiring knowledge of acceptable standards, helping individuals know what professional temptations lurk around the corner, aiding individuals in knowing the consequences of personal and professional decisions, and delivering a set of skills so individuals know how to discern between right and wrong in any given setting. These pedagogical emphases are self-evident when reviewing a sampling of syllabi for eth-

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1. Elizabeth Crawford, "M.B.A. Students Want Programs to Put More Emphasis on Ethics, Survey Finds," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 21, 2003.
2. Katherine S. Mangan, "Accrediting Board Endorses Stronger Focus on Ethics in Business-School Curriculums," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 8, 2003.
3. Philip J. Langlais, "Ethics for the Next Generation," *Chronicle Review*, January 13, 2006.

ics courses.[4] For example, syllabi statements on the purpose of the class are typically finished with phrases like "to examine the concepts and issues of business ethics," "to help people further develop their abilities to understand and to participate in this discipline," or "to provide a theoretical background of how to evaluate moral claims." While the wording changes, the intent or purpose behind ethics education still aligns with the philosophical educational framework that is intended to lead to a single outcome. That desired outcome, of course, is that all this knowledge will, as articulated in one ethics course syllabus, "translate into more ethical action."

The second prong, establishing stricter behavioral expectations, codes of conduct, and legalized limits, is also believed to have power in changing behavior. "The natural inclination of a community following major business scandals," wrote Robert G. Kennedy, a professor specializing in professional ethics, "is to pursue a regulatory response."[5] Kennedy feels that creating legal statutes and professional rules is a course of action that is actually fueled by public opinion and political expediency. This is evident as is seen in a plea by Kirk O. Hanson, the Executive Director of the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University, to have "tougher national laws and regulations in place" to deal with unethical behavior. Hanson feels that "we also need the commitment to enforce those laws and to impose tough sanctions," and this is the job of congress, regulators, courts, businesses, schools, athletic teams, and voluntary associations.[6]

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4. A sampling of syllabi dealing with ethics courses was reviewed from Dartmouth, Washington State University Vancouver, University of Michigan, Marquette University, Brock University, and St. Edwards University.

5. Robert G. Kennedy, "Ethics, Courage and Discipline: The Lessons of Enron," in *Enron and World Finance: A Case Study in Ethics*, ed. Paul H. Dembinski, Carole Lager, Andrew Cornford, and Jean-Michel Bonvin (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 207.

6. Kirk O. Hanson, "A Nation of Cheaters," *Boston Globe*, January 19, 2003.

Something Is Missing

This two-pronged approach seems to be the most widely accepted method to regenerating ethics, but how effective it actually may be is questionable. While it is important to applaud good efforts and recognize any favorable outcomes, it is vital to understand that while good efforts may indeed be good, they may be insufficient. Once again, consider the Enron scandal. One year before the fall of Enron, Kenneth L. Lay, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, informed Enron employees that "as officers and employees of Enron Corp., . . . we are responsible for conducting the business affairs of the companies in accordance with all applicable laws and in a moral and honest manner."[7] Lay required all Enron employees to read a sixty-four-page *Code of Ethics* book that contained what Lay described as "commonsense rules of conduct with which the great majority of Enron employees routinely conform." In addition to reading the document, each employee was required to sign a "Certificate of Compliance" affirming personal agreement and a promise to comply with the stated policies. Lay ends the foreword to the *Code of Ethics* book by writing: "We want to be proud of Enron and to know that it enjoys a reputation for fairness and honesty and that it is respected. . . . Enron's reputation finally depends on its people, on you and me. Let's keep that reputation high."[8] All this was done while Enron executives were embroiled in activities that would be considered not only unethical but illegal just sixteen months later. It was then that Enron's activities were made public and shortly after a criminal investigation ensued where Kenneth Lay and others were indicted and found guilty of, among other things, fraud. Obviously Lay knew and understood basic ethical principals and the legal and professional codes of conduct at the time; after all, he himself helped craft the codes for Enron.

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7. *Enron Code of Ethics*, July 2000; http://www.thesmokinggun.com/graphics/ packageart/enron/enron.pdf; see also Brian Cruver, *Anatomy of Greed* (New York: Carroll & Graff, 2002), 329–30, 333, 346.
8. *Enron Code of Ethics*, July 2000; http://www.thesmokinggun.com/graphics/ packageart/enron/enron.pdf.

This scenario is not exclusive to Enron or the professional sector alone. For example, a recent study on cheating concluded, "Graduate business students are cheating at an alarming rate."[9] It is ironic that students are calling for greater ethical training to prepare them for the real world, when, according to the survey, 56 percent of the graduate business school students in the United States and Canada admitted to cheating at least once during the last academic year.[10] According to another study dealing with undergraduate students, 70 percent of those surveyed admitted to some type of cheating.[11] Another baffling example is that of a theology professor who was accused of plagiarism in a book he wrote about ethics.[12] Surely one would assume that a professor of theology and ethics would *know* enough about ethics and the academic codes of responsible behavior and propriety that he would not be in a position to claim ignorance as a defense for his unethical behavior.

All of this is reminiscent of Robert Louis Stevenson's best-selling novel *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, which told of the struggle between the good and evil within the same man. Stevenson's work was so moving that the characters of his novel actually became a mainstream phrase ("Jekyll and Hyde") for describing incongruent behavior. While Stevenson's work was fictitious, it reflects reality on many different levels. One level particularly relevant to this discussion is the premise that what we know may not determine what we actually do. Thus, a person may profess a set of principles and then act contrary to those very principles professed. In typical Jekyll and Hyde fashion, statements like Enron's *Code of Ethics*, "everything we do evolves from

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9. Katherine S. Mangan, "Survey Finds Widespread Cheating in MBA Programs," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 29, 2006, A44.

10. Mangan, "Survey Finds Widespread Cheating," A44.

11. Don McCabe, Center for Academic Integrity (CAI) Research, June 2005; http://www.academicintegrity.org.

12. See Thomas Bartlett, "Theology Professor Is Accused of Plagiarism in His Book on Ethics," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 21, 2005, A10.

Enron's Vision and Values statements,"[13] are uttered while scandalous behavior is in full swing.

Some may argue that nothing is really missing in this approach to ethics and all that is really needed is to tweak the current methods. Perhaps the laws, codes, or professional and societal expectations are not strict enough—or maybe they are too strict. Perhaps the curricular or pedagogical design of teaching ethics is flawed or that the exposure to such instruction is too little or too late. Whatever it is, something is not right with the current approach. The efforts are well intentioned, but they just don't seem to be doing the job.

There are some subtle but important problems that should be considered with the current two-pronged approach. While it may feel like establishing stricter behavioral expectations, codes of conduct, and legalized limits, creates a platform for effective results, we are most likely ignoring the core problem. Codes and laws are mere reflections of the standards of the groups that initiate and form such codes and laws. For example, Enron's stated *Code of Ethics* was based on the premise that "everything we do evolves from Enron's Vision and Values statements." It would seem then that at the very beginning, one should have examined what Enron's core vision and values were—exactly. In this context, the terms *ethics* and *morals* articulate the values of a particular group rather than a standard of absolutes.

The word *ethics* is commonly defined as the "science or scheme of morals," and *morals* is derived from a combination of the classical Latin *moralia*, meaning "moral philosophy" and from *moralis*, meaning "customs or manners." Thus, while we like to view morals and ethics as defining right or wrong, these terms are actually descriptors of the customs or traditions of the group—what *they* define as right or wrong, what *they* feel is acceptable or unacceptable. As such, ethics is a relative standard. This relativity also impacts the educational prong dealing with ethics. For example, learner outcomes in some syllabi have stated that students who have taken an ethics/morals class will, (1) demonstrate "awareness

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13. *Enron Code of Ethics*, July 2000, 5; http://www.thesmokinggun.com/graphics/packageart/enron/enron.pdf.

or sensitivity to what is morally/ethically at stake in a situation," (2) demonstrate "reasoning and other reflective skills leading to judgments about what ought to be done in a situation," and (3) implement "the practical and emotional ability to carry out the course of action that a person has judged ought to be done and is motivated to do."[14] It is the third outcome that illustrates the relativity of ethics today in education. It is also the most frightening outcome when considering that every student serves as the ultimate judge of what is to be considered ethical or appropriate. Even more frightening is all of this is determined according to what the student is "motivated to do."

"The purpose of moral education is to change people for the better," James Davison Hunter points out. "As presently configured and institutionalized," Hunter explains, "[moral education] is utterly captive to the society in which it exists, . . . a reflection of the moral order it seeks to transcend and then transform."[15] In this way, both the legislative and the educational approaches to ethics and morals actually work more to legitimize the reigning culture rather than to transform it.

Knowing from a World Perspective

Another important point to consider is that the educational emphasis to capture knowledge may be flawed or inappropriately interpreted. Currently, the focus is to acquire knowledge of acceptable standards, to know what ethical conflicts exist in a particular discipline, to know the consequences of personal and professional decisions, and to know how to discern between right and wrong in any given setting by using a set of skills. To know is typically understood as "to perceive, understand, or comprehend." It is formed from the Greek *ginoskein*, which is an "intellectual looking" at something with objectivity. In short, this is mostly an intellectual experience, a matter of the mind. It is this foundation that frames the educational approach to ethics by framing

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14. David T. Ozar, "An Outcomes-Centered Approach to Teaching Ethics," *Teaching Ethics* 2, no. 1 (2001): 1–29.

15. James Davison Hunter, *The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age without Good or Evil* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 220.

knowledge in terms of learning outcomes that can be neatly measured to ensure success. Unfortunately, this approach also makes it possible for one to intellectually *know* about ethics and even score high on measurable indicators of possessing such knowledge while still not translating such knowledge into action. It is when knowing and doing actually collide that intense disillusionment occurs. Consider Tolstoy's character Pierre from *War and Peace* as an example. In light of his Jekyll-and-Hyde behavior, Pierre laments, "Why is it that I know what is right and I do wrong?"[16] For many, this separation deals with a lack of heart or character more than a lack of intellect.

Character, known as the betokening "moral qualities impressed or engraven upon a person," involves much more than mere intellect when dealing with morals and values. Unfortunately, the problem here is that since morals and values are determined by the prevailing intellectual worldview, even character has lost its substance and depth and forfeits the power that really changes individuals. "The problem," Hunter states, "is that character cannot develop out of values 'nominated' for promotion, 'consciously chosen' by a committee, negotiated by a group of diverse professionals, or enacted into law by legislators. Such values have, by their very nature, lost the quality of sacredness, their commanding character, and thus their power to inspire and to shame."[17] When considering what is actually missing from current methods of ethics reform and regeneration, it appears to be what Davidson called, "the quality of sacredness."

A Sacred Perspective

It is true that ethics, according to our current worldview, has lost its sacred mooring. Sure some may argue that ethics today espouses pretty much the same standards of behavior that are espoused by religion. While it may look similar, it is definitely not the same thing. The Apostle Paul wrote of the conditions of our day. "This know also," he wrote, "that in the last days perilous times shall come" (2 Timothy

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16. From Mario Camerini's script of *War and Peace*, Paramount, 1965.
17. Hunter, *Death of Character*, 225.

3:1), and Paul then described a world filled with people who are proud, disobedient, unholy, traitors, liars, and immoral (see 2 Timothy 3:1–7). Also included on Paul's list of perils is "having a form of godliness; but denying the power thereof," to which Paul concludes, "from such turn away" (v. 5). Consider how easily society embraces forms of godliness while, at the same time, vehemently opposes any type of connection with God. Typically society readily accepts the acts of Jesus Christ—kindness, compassion, promotion of peace, understanding and love—but will not acknowledge any serious connection that these acts have with Christ and His doctrines or precepts. "For many," wrote Robert L. Millett, professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University, "the doctrine of Christ has been replaced by the ethics of Jesus."[18] Thus, society enjoys the ethical aspects of the ministry of Jesus but cannot tolerate the doctrinal teachings of the divine Christ. In short, they love the *form* of godliness but despise the power thereof—namely, Jesus Christ. It is in this sense that ethics have become nothing more than a "form of godliness" and are robbed of their commanding character. "While we desperately want the flower of morality to bloom and multiply," Hunter said, "we have, at the same time, pulled the plant up out from the soil that sustains it. We so urgently desire the cultivation of moral qualities, but under conditions (we insist upon) that finally render those qualities unattainable."[19]

Knowing from a Sacred Perspective

Sacred literally means "to make holy." This term deals with much more than making something important, special, or even separating something from everything else. Historically, *sacred* has always been inseparably connected with God. With this in mind, compare the current approach to ethics, moral, and character development as perceived by the current worldview with a sacred or divine approach to the same. Foundationally, both methods require knowledge of the subject. Whereas

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18. Robert L. Millet, "A Divine Deterrent to Creeping Relativism," address delivered to BYU–Idaho faculty, January 24, 2002.
19. Hunter, *Death of Character*, 226.

the world's view to gaining knowledge is an intellectual experience (*ginoskein*), the sacred view of knowledge is significantly different. The book of Ecclesiastes, for example, informs us that to "know wisdom," we must apply our heart (see Ecclesiastes 8:16). *To know*, in almost every instance in the Old Testament, is derived from the Hebrew *yada*, which is translated into various forms, including *know*, *knowledge*, *learn*, *teach*, *acknowledge*, and so forth. More important than the mere translation, however, is the way *yada* was understood. You see, *yada* was more about the heart than the mind. While the Greek version of "knowing" strives for objective information about an object, *yada* framed "knowing" in terms of feeling or experiencing an object in one's heart. Thus, when comparing *ginoskein* with *yada*, Rudolf Bultmann explained that "the OT [Old Testament] usage is much broader than the Greek, and the element of objective verification is less prominent than that of detecting or feeling or learning by experience."[20]

While it may appear that a sacred approach to ethics differs only subtly from the world's view, the differences are actually quite profound. For example, rather than allowing ethics, morals, and character to be defined by professional groups, legislative bodies, dominant individuals, societal trends, or economics, the sacred approach accepts a single source in determining appropriate standards of behavior. That source is, of course, God. The scriptures clearly point out that God's ways and man's ways are not the same. The Lord stated: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8–9). Without a sacred perspective, we have allowed others to determine our moral compass and set the laws that govern (or at least that should govern) our behavior. Elder Dallin H. Oaks warned: "Mortals can change their personal clock or calendar, but they cannot alter the workings of the solar system. They can change the language by which they describe or address God, but they have no power to alter the nature or purposes of God."[21]

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20. Rudolf Bultmann, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 1:697.

21. Dallin H. Oaks, *The Lord's Way* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991), 4.

We can pretend to be God, but we cannot expect divine results. A sacred approach to ethics would streamline the standards for every profession, every situation, and every person. Consider Jesus Christ's approach to teaching ethical behavior during His mortal ministry. Christ's standards were meant to be applied by all groups, for He was "no respecter of persons" (Acts 10:34) or, we could safely assume, respecter of professions. As such, God's standards are inclusive—rather than exclusive—and are intended to guide every person. "I give unto you directions how you may act before me," the Lord instructed the Saints, "that it may turn to you for your salvation" (D&C 82:9; see also 43:8).

This approach is not to say, however, that there is no value in the current educational method of warning individuals of the possible ethical dilemmas that are specific to certain disciplines and professions. Even the Lord used a similar tactic when He gathered His people to warn them so they would "be prepared in all things against the day when tribulation" would come (D&C 29:8). But unlike the current trend, the Lord did more than just warn about future tribulations. He first gathered them together to "prepare their hearts" so they might be prepared in all things against the day of tribulation (see D&C 29:8). Herein is a significant difference between the sacred approach and the current approach in knowing about ethics. It is not enough to warn of the pressures of specific unethical circumstances and dilemmas alone. It appears that the most important thing is to first prepare an individual's heart—their character. After the heart is set right, then an individual is prepared for tribulations that might come. It is only in this combination that commanding power to protect is realized.

Another significant difference between the current approach and the sacred approach to ethics deals with the gap between knowing and doing. As pointed out, the intellectual approach to ethics allows for a separation between knowing and doing and in some ways actually accommodates inconsistencies. The sacred approach, however, cannot even exist under such circumstances. To know from a sacred perspective connotes heartfelt or deep learning through feelings and personal ex-

perience. According to Bultmann, knowing (*yada*) "is not thought of in terms of a possession of information" but is only obtained "in its exercise or actualisation."[22] As such, knowing ethics from a sacred perspective can be realized only by actually experiencing ethical standards through personal application. One cannot claim to know ethics from this perspective without doing ethics.

Thomas Groome, professor of theology and religious education, adds another twist to this concept. He explained that a sacred perspective "demands active acknowledgment of the Lord." As such, the sacred approach to ethics requires one to acknowledge God's role in establishing behavioral standards and laws. But according to Groome, acknowledging the Lord is more than mere lip service, for it "requires obedience to God's will."[23] Once again, we find that according to the sacred perspective, one cannot know ethics without doing ethics. The Lord Himself explained this relationship as He defined discipleship to the early Saints: "He that receiveth my law and doeth it, the same is my disciple; and he that saith he receiveth it and doeth it not, the same is not my disciple, and shall be cast out from among you" (D&C 41:5).

A disciple can only know ethics by doing ethics. Perhaps it is this level of knowing that prompted Wang Yang-Ming to declare, "There have never been a people who know but do not act. Those who are supposed to know but do not act simply do not yet know."[24]

This brings us to one final point: the sacred perspective is a matter of the heart rather than just an intellectual experience. As such, the outcome of knowing ethics, morals, and character from a sacred vantage point is not merely an attempt to change a person's mind or behavior alone. This is an experience designed to change a person's heart and happens as a literal extension of true discipleship. As we consistently align our will with the will of Jesus Christ and seek to become like the Master Himself, a change will occur. According to Elder Oaks, "The

22. Bultmann, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 1:698.
23. Thomas H. Groome, *Christian Religious Education: Sharing our Story and Vision* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1980), 141–42.
24. A. S. Cua, *The Unity of Knowledge and Action: A Study in Wang Yang-Ming's Moral Psychology* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1982), 9.

Apostle Paul taught that the Lord's teachings and teachers were given that we may all attain 'the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ' (Eph. 4:13). This process requires far more than acquiring knowledge. It is not even enough for us to be *convinced* of the gospel; we must act and think so that we are *converted* by it."[25] The Book of Mormon taught that "as many as believed, or as many were brought to the knowledge of the truth . . . were converted unto the Lord, [and] never did fall away" (Alma 23:6). Conversion is more than strong willpower to do what is expected. Consider King Benjamin's people, who experienced such conversion. They said to Benjamin, "Yea, we believe all the words which thou hast spoken unto us; and also, we know of their surety and truth, because of the Spirit of the Lord Omnipotent, which has wrought a mighty change in us, or in our hearts, that we have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually" (Mosiah 5:2).

As we are converted through knowledge and action, we are changed—changed in what we know, what we believe, what we want, and in what we do. "In contrast to the institutions of the world which teach us to *know* something," Elder Oaks explained, "the gospel of Jesus Christ challenges us to *become* something."[26] Thus, through God's miraculous power, we do not act in ethical ways simply because we understand what we are supposed to do or even because it is expected of us, a duty of sorts. We act in appropriate ways because that is what we have become. When ethics are directly connected with the sacred powers of God, we know and are converted to His ways and, as a result, are forever changed.

Conclusion

It must be recognized that efforts made to improve behavior is good. Professional organizations, educators, and institutions that endeavor to regulate and educate good standards of ethics should be applauded appropriately. Yet, at the same time, we must recognize that such efforts are incomplete and something ultimately needs to be done.

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25. Dallin H. Oaks, "The Challenge to Become," *Ensign*, November 2000, 32.
26. Oaks, "The Challenge to Become," 32.

It would take a miraculous change for the world at large to suddenly embrace a sacred perspective of experientially knowing the truth, which would, of course, set them free (see John 8:31–32). But in the meantime, it behooves every disciple of Christ, to know and live God's standards of ethics, to emulate His character, and to "stand as a witness of God at all times and in all things, and in all places" (Mosiah 18:9). As our personal conversion deepens and we strive to help others change their perspectives on ethics, morals, and character, we should consider President Spencer W. Kimball's observation: "We endeavor to convince the world that where the truths of manmade organizations end, the gospel of Jesus Christ continues. The truths they teach are largely ethical. We go forward from there with ethics and gospel that carries us through the mortal life and on past the heaven of their fondest dreams into worlds of progression and creative work which are to their religious concepts as the airplane to the bumblebee."[27]

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27. Spencer W. Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, ed. Edward L. Kimball (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 422.