Legal Ethics Must Be the Heart of the Law School Curriculum
Symposium: Recommitting to Teaching Legal Ethics- Shaping Our
Teaching in a Changing World

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LEGAL ETHICS MUST BE THE HEART OF THE LAW SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Russell G. Pearce*

Despite what seems to be far greater attention paid to the teaching of legal ethics than to any other law school subject,¹ legal ethics remains no better than a second class subject in the eyes of students and faculty.² This essay suggests that all efforts at innovation in legal ethics teaching are doomed to a marginal impact at best. Only recognition that legal ethics is the most important subject in the law school curriculum³ will lead to real and significant changes in the teaching of legal ethics.

If the commitment of the legal profession and of legal academia to producing ethical lawyers⁴ is genuine, legal ethics must be the most important subject in the curriculum. Properly taught, ethics courses should provide the lens through which students view what it means to be a lawyer and discover how to find meaning in their work.⁵ From a pragmatic perspective as well, legal ethics is the only subject in law school "which every student [who becomes a lawyer] will encounter in practice."⁶ This recognition of the significance of teaching legal ethics would require far-reaching revision of the law school curriculum.

First, in contrast to most law schools where legal ethics is an upper

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¹ See generally id.

² Id. at 721-22 (observing that "[a] fundamental commitment to high ethical standards pervades professional rhetoric").

³ Id. at 736 (noting that legal ethics courses "establish[] the foundation for the vital decisions that students will have to make regarding how they will live their lives as lawyers").

⁴ Id. at 735-36.
class course sometimes of only two credits, legal ethics would have to be a first year course of at least three credits to make clear to students and faculty that ethics is a fundamental component of what it means to think like—and to be—a lawyer. While the ethics rules are an essential aspect of such a course, it cannot resemble “Simon Sez” with an exclusive focus on developing facility with the rules. The rules must be taught in the context of their purpose and history. They must be placed in the framework of lawyers’ central role in how society distributes justice and maintains order. This consideration must include both an explanation of how the doctrine of professionalism provides the basis for lawyers’ privilege to practice law and develop ethics rules for themselves, together with the many critiques of professionalism. It further must explore the dominant conception of the lawyer as advocate, together with alternative perspectives on the lawyer’s role.

Second, while most law schools today require only one ethics course, the curriculum would have to require an advanced course in legal ethics in the second or third year. An advanced course would build on what students learned in the first year, emphasize that ethics remains central throughout their studies, and enable students to integrate a broad conception of ethics into their assessment of their practice experiences as students and their formation of their self-image as a practitioner in the particular field they will pursue after graduation. One pos-

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7. Roger C. Cramton & Susan P. Koniak, Rule, Story, and Commitment in the Teaching of Legal Ethics, 38 WM. & MARY L. REV. 145, 147 (1996) (noting that “[i]n most law schools today legal ethics occupies a minor academic role as a one- or two-credit required course in the upper-class years, often taught by adjuncts or by a rotating group of faculty conscripts”); Teaching and Learning Professionalism, supra note 1, at 40-41 (finding that only 23% of law schools required a three-credit legal ethics course).

8. Pearce, Teaching, supra note 2, at 736.


12. See supra note 7.

13. Pearce, Teaching, supra note 2, at 737.

14. Id.
Legal Ethics Must Be the Heart

Possible framework for advanced courses is the contextual curriculum offered at Fordham where we have provided students with an opportunity to take courses such as Ethics in Corporate Practice, Ethics in Criminal Advocacy, Ethics in Public Interest Law, and Lawyering for Individuals.¹⁵

Third, unlike most law schools where the pervasive teaching of legal ethics is either ignored or given lip service,¹⁶ a serious ethics curriculum would indeed be pervasive.¹⁷ Only this approach will educate students that ethical issues arise throughout practice and are not limited exclusively to ethics courses. The pervasive method "teaches students the skills . . . to identify and analyze [ethical questions] in settings where ethics is not the primary focus of attention."¹⁸

Unfortunately, like all efforts to teach ethics seriously, these simple—and seemingly self-evident—prescriptions will find a tough audience among legal academics who cling to assumptions that legal ethics need not, cannot, and should not be taught.

First, many legal academics believe that legal ethics need not be taught. This belief has at least two sources. Some believe that conventional legal pedagogy—the Socratic method—is sufficient to build moral character.¹⁹ Others believe in the business-profession distinction inherent in professionalism.²⁰ They contrast the self-interest of business people with lawyers' commitment to the good.²¹ Professionalism controls the small number of unethical lawyers through an invisible hand of reputation that rewards ethical practitioners and disciplinary committees that weed out the truly bad apples.²²

Second, many legal academics believe that legal ethics cannot be taught. They assume that law students are young adults whose values are "fully formed prior to law school and are not likely to change."²³ Perhaps the most extreme (and bigoted) expression of this view was the assertion

¹⁵. Mary C. Daly et al., Contextualizing Professional Responsibility: A New Curriculum for a New Century, 58 LAW & CONTEMP. PROBS. 193 (Summer/Autumn 1995). As taught at Fordham, however, these are introductory ethics courses which seek to combine the advantage of providing students with the context of a practice area of their interest with an overview of legal ethics. Id. at 199-201.


¹⁷. See generally id.

¹⁸. Pearce, Teaching, supra note 2, at 737.


²⁰. Pearce, Professionalism, supra note 9, at 1238.

²¹. Id. at 1238-40.

²². Pearce, Teaching, supra note 2, at 726 n.52; Pearce, Professionalism, supra note 9, at 1240, 1245.

²³. Pearce, Teaching, supra note 2, at 732.
by Henry Drinker, the leading legal ethicist of the mid-twentieth century, that the biggest ethics problem facing the bar was Russian-born Jews whose disproportionate responsibility for ethical violations resulted from family upbringings lacking in American values. Drinker sought to improve the ethics of the bar by excluding them from admission. While not going as far as Drinker to attribute particular values to specific racial, ethnic, or religious groups, many academics nonetheless accept Drinker’s assumption that students’ values are fully formed before they begin law school and are not susceptible to change through legal education.

Third, many legal academics believe that legal ethics should not be taught. This view dates from the origin of modern legal pedagogy in Harvard Professor Christopher Columbus Langdell’s case method of the late nineteenth century. At that time, higher education generally shifted from a moral paradigm to a scientific one. The scientific paradigm distinguished between facts, which could be taught, and values, which could not. Ethics was in the realm of values. Langdell similarly adopted a scientific approach. He viewed classroom dissection of appellate cases as the equivalent of a chemistry laboratory. While most law professors today would probably not believe themselves to be scientists, they continue to apply the same pedagogical approach as Langdell and to separate legal from ethical questions. The legal literature is full of stories of students who raise their hand to question the ethics of a particular legal doctrine only to be told by their professor that the subject of the class was law, not ethics.

These three sources of resistance to teaching ethics should no longer determine the place of legal ethics in the curriculum. First, the consensus today is that existing methods of teaching law and of lawyer discipline do not adequately ensure that lawyers are ethical. Second, the current literature suggests that ethical learning continues into adulthood. But even if it did not, students would still have to learn in law school how to

25. Id. at 176, 184 n.41.
27. David B. Wilkins, Redefining the “Professional” in Professional Ethics: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Teaching Professionalism, 58 LAW & CONTEMP. PROBS. 241, 246 (Summer/Autumn 1995) (noting that “students who raise general ethical objections in traditional law school courses are often told that these concerns are irrelevant to the ‘legal’ issues being discussed”); WILLIAM STRINGFELLOW, A Lawyer’s Work, in WILLIAM STRINGFELLOW, A KEEPER OF THE WORD 30, 32 (Bill Wylie Kellerman ed., 1994) (recounting that in the 1950s use of the term justice in the Harvard Law School classroom “evoked ridicule, as if justice were a subject beneath the sophistication of lawyers”).
28. Pearce, Teaching, supra note 2, at 728.
29. Id: at 733-35.
apply their existing ethical framework to the practice of law. Third, the fact-value distinction has come into question and ethics “has regained respect as a serious academic subject” throughout higher education. Even the scientific community has rejected the proposition that science and ethics don’t mix.

Even though the objections to the serious teaching of ethics lack persuasive support, they persist as widely shared assumptions upon which legal academics unthinkingly rely. Until we confront these assumptions directly, we will not be able to make the fundamental changes necessary to move legal ethics from the periphery to the center of legal education. Incremental changes and teaching innovations alone will have little or no impact. In the midst of the legal profession’s current doldrums, we cannot afford to do anything less than transform legal education to make legal ethics the single most important subject.

31. Pearce, Teaching, supra note 2, at 731.
32. Id.
33. Id.