

Ethical Realism: A Guide to Action?

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In his article on “Ethical Realism and Continuing Education,” Gary Miller has provided us a valuable opportunity to reflect on the practice of continuing education (CE) leadership. The goal of becoming a reflective practitioner, to use Donald Schon’s expression, is a worthy one for CE administrators. Dr. Miller reviews six principles that are encapsulated in the concept of ethical realism, but are always good guides to action. It is hard to argue against any of these six universal principles: prudence, patriotism, responsibility, study, humility, and respecting others. Similarly, it is hard to argue against the concepts of realism—each decision or action should always take into account the possible and the impossible. However, in proposing ethical realism as a guide for us, Dr. Miller has also given us an opportunity to look more deeply at our own situations, and this examination reveals some problems with Dr. Miller’s central thesis.

Do we really gain anything from the comparison of the national conduct of geopolitics and CE administration? While there are some similarities between the two there are also some striking differences. The collective ethic involved in the exercise of foreign policy of a nation is different from the personal ethics of CE administration. The common ground of foreign policy is the furtherance of the best interests of the state as a whole, exercised ultimately by elective officials who are duty-bound to represent the people of the state. In this realm, ethical choices are most difficult when the interests of the people conflict with more generalized “goods.” Should the US intervene militarily in areas of little strategic importance to the US to save innocent lives in Darfur, Rwanda, or Kosovo at the risk of losing American lives and using taxpayer resources? Should the US use torture to extract information from individuals that could ultimately save innocent lives? While these may seem like personal ethical choices, they really are

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made within a different context. The difference between this collective ethic and personal ethics is clear when one sees examples of people removing themselves from the decision-making process, not because they disagree with a decision, but because they find that the conflict between two rights is unbearable.

Personal ethics do not allow us to remove ourselves from decision making. An understanding of this leads quickly to the notion that ethical realism is either a contradiction in terms or a truism. It says either that universal ethical principles will always be trumped by the realities of the situation—a contradiction—or that we should take all factors into account when making a tough decision—a truism. Difficult ethical questions are rarely between right and wrong; most often difficulty comes when we are faced with two or more opposing rights, as in the two examples of foreign policy described above. For CE administrators, the archetypal ethical choices of greatest difficulty concern situations in which the best interests of CE students come into conflict with the values and traditions of the university. Since CE administrators operate at the intersection of community and university, this kind of conflict occurs frequently. It is most personally experienced not in the abstract notion of what the university should do for the community but when dealing directly with service to CE students.

For instance, the CE administrator who had an opportunity to create an articulation agreement with an institution that would provide credit toward its degree for students successfully completing the CE unit's credit-bearing but non-degree courses. The accepting institution was an online, for-profit, fully (regionally) accredited institution. Learning of this possibility, the chair of the academic senate of the CE unit's institution objected, saying that an articulation agreement constituted an endorsement of the accepting institution's program, which, in this case, according to her, was a low-quality, money-grubbing diploma mill. How do the six principles of ethical realism help in this case? Should the CE director show concern for the good of his students and sign the agreement, or should he show "patriotism" (institutional loyalty) and not sign the agreement, thereby hurting the students he is to serve?

The decision in this case is not particularly informed by reference to any list of principles. Should patriotism supersede responsibility or concern for others? Nor is it helped particularly by the process principle, realism. Do we not automatically weigh the consequences—will I be fired, lose the confidence of the academic senate, propagate the image in the community

that my institution is elitist, prevent deserving students from achieving their highest potential? In this example, any choice is ethical, and the exercise of realism involves the automatic weighting of expected consequences.

Ultimately, our decisions in these difficult situations are, or should be, determined by what gives meaning to our lives. Does the CE administrator in this example identify with the institution that has provided a career, set of social contacts, a living for his family, and a constant source of pride and belonging? Or does he identify with the students he has dedicated his life to serving, with whom he empathizes and admires?

While I appreciate the opportunity for the reflection which has been prompted by Dr. Miller's article, I am left with the feeling that the ethical realism framework fails as a meaningful context for our daily work. Ethical realism seems more a commentary induced by contemporary geopolitics than a useful guide to CE administrators. But Dr. Miller's thesis hopefully serves as a spur to the development of a discussion of professional ethics and ethical dilemmas more organically connected to our profession. 🌐