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## The Ought

Ned Wisnefske

Nobody likes the Ought. Everyone tries to flee from the Ought whenever it comes around, or even deny it exists.

Moral education is all about the Ought: we ought to do this; we ought not to do that. There is opposition to moral education in college, from students as well as faculty, because not even they want to hear this or be around the Ought. Some say (with respects to Dr. Seuss), "You cannot teach morals to college students because it is too late. They have already been formed by family, school, church, and state." Or else you hear, "You cannot teach values to college students because that would mold them. You must only expose them, not compose them."

Now note something about these two very common claims: they make opposite assumptions. The first complaint assumes that students are already formed (and can no longer be shaped morally), whereas the second charge assumes that students are not formed (and should shape themselves). Curiously, you hear both objections out of the same mouth in the same conversation: "You cannot teach morals because students' morals are already formed." "You cannot teach morals because you will form students' morals." Both cannot be true.

Why do we hear these contradictory objections to moral formation? The answer is that both share the same fear, the fear of the Ought. As is often the case, opposites are joined by a common threat. In this case, both feel threatened by the demands posed by the Ought. They feel threatened because the Ought intends to shape them in ways they do not want. So when students meet moral demands in the classroom and feel the presence of the Ought they will say, "The Ought cannot be real. Since our upbringings are so diverse, and we see things so differently, the Ought has to be something different for each us." In this way they convince themselves that the Ought is not actually there in the classroom with them at all, but only their personal, pet oughts—which is not the real animal. Or, when some faculty find out that the Ought has been allowed into the classroom, they complain, "The Ought must leave. There must only be oughts in the room. Only those oughts are allowed which we choose to be oughts." In so professing they too banish the Ought, since an ought we choose is really not the Ought at all. (A clever way to deny the Ought—while appearing to acknowledge it—is to allow that we each already have oughts we bring with us, so why concern ourselves with the Ought which supposedly

encounters us?) Once more, when the Ought starts to enter, we close the classroom door.

This fear and denial of the Ought tells us something important about ourselves. For one, the fact that we feel threatened shows that we sense the presence of the Ought. How else do we explain our contradictory objections to the moral formation of students, or why we protest so zealously against it? If the Ought were really nothing, we would simply ignore it, as we would the claim that there is a ghost in the room. We feel threatened because we realize that the Ought intends to shape us. That is why we flee from it and even deny it exists. Evidently we have the mind, heart, and will to sense the Ought, to respond to it, and to be shaped by it, yet we do not want to use those capacities. Finally, what does it say about us that we realize something exists, yet refuse to respond to it and even deny it? It says that there is something obstinate about our moral nature. This entrenched stubbornness, whatever it is, prevents us from seeing moral demand before our eyes, and obstructs moral education.

How might we overcome this obstinacy? Can we get the Ought in the classroom without causing students and faculty to flee? As we have seen, we refuse to see the Ought in front of us; but we might sense it behind us, nudging us. Perhaps there we can hear its presence and not close our ears, feel its breath and its clasp on our shoulders and not cover up.

It might work this way. Let students and faculty begin by supposing that there really could be an Ought. (Isn't it possible that moral demand encounters us and is not invented by us? That the difference between right and wrong is objective and not subjective?) Then, let us see whether we might find out what the Ought is, if together we search for it by using our moral capacities: examining our moral senses, applying the rules common to us, and weighing our moral judgments, discerning the better ones from the worse.

When we do that we may not find the Ought, though it will find us; for then we will realize that the persons participating in this enterprise deserve respect. To exercise our capacities to be impartial, to sympathize, and to exert our free will gives us distinction and sets us apart as beings with dignity. To realize this is to be grasped by the claim that humans should and should not be treated in certain ways. When that happens the Ought has entered

the room and nudged us. Then we can no longer deny it, and we will realize that we need not fear it, though we might be awed by it.

This might seem like a small thing, a naught rather than the Ought, but in that little thing is contained most everything. For it is the Ought which shapes our minds

to think clearly, our hearts to feel genuinely, and our wills to act rightly. The Ought can reform the formations of our past, and transform our wants to give purpose to our future.

It is never, therefore, too late, or a mistake, to be shaped by the Ought.

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