

Remarks by Derek Bok

20th Anniversary of the Center

May 18, 2007

Dennis, thank you very much for a characteristically generous introduction. I am delighted to be here and to welcome Lily Safra, Amartya, Neil and Angelica, and all of you colleagues and friends – people who share with me a deep concern for restoring ethics to its proper place in American higher education. We are here, of course, to celebrate the 20 th anniversary, but the roots and the origins of this wonderful Center go back much, much further.

On those regrettably rare occasions when I have a really good idea, it's almost always due to Sissela, as it was this time. Because Sissela had taken a PhD in philosophy, she had persuaded the philosophy department to graciously allow her to write on a very unconventional topic for that department – the ethical implications of euthanasia. When she received her degree she worked closely with Dan Callahan and the Hastings Center, which was the first effort to create a real intellectual community of the few people scattered across the country who were engaged in the field of medical ethics. And so applied ethics, professional ethics, was part of our household, and it didn't take a whole lot of imagination on my part to understand that this was something that one needed to get behind in Harvard and in other universities like it.

Certainly if I needed any more reminding I got it constantly from alumni who were reacting to Watergate, to debates over affirmative action, to the controversy over abortion, and to a series of questionable episodes in business and Wall Street. They urged that we give more courses on ethics in the various professional schools – just as regularly as the faculties would say “Oh, we pay attention to ethics. We regularly survey the students and they say, well, occasionally you see an ethical problem, but the professor never seems to get to it; the class always ends before it is taken up.”

So that was the situation that we faced in the mid-70s. And then I began writing the article, “Can Ethics Be Taught?” Sissela washed her hands of that project rather early, despairing of ever being able to complete it successfully with my partnership, but I persevered, and it eventually was published. One thing it taught me was that the major stumbling block of ethics and applied ethics was in the university – that there was simply no place in higher education where people could be taught both something about ethics, and something serious about the particular profession to which ethical principles might be applied. Philosophers sometimes spoke on ethical issues, but did not understand enough about the professions to be credible; and people in the professions pontificated, as many of us do, on ethical questions without having studied ethics. The result was that these courses did not have the standing and credibility they needed to secure a real foothold in the academy. That's when it occurred to me: Why not try to that at Harvard?

To do it required a faculty leader. Nothing serious or promising takes place in universities without a leader to carry it out. And that was very difficult. We finally involved the

deans, who were always enthusiastic, and who helped with the search. We looked across the country, and discovered there was one person who understood a good deal about the field of application, was competent in ethics, and could be appointed under the rigorous standards required of tenure in this institution. And he, the scoundrel, would not come! That was a terrible setback. People say, well, how wonderful that you persevered. How could I not persevere? There were no alternatives! So I simply waited. Eight years went by while children were educated, and various other challenges of life were surmounted, and then finally one afternoon over a glass of wine in a San Francisco hotel (the way to Dennis' heart is always through a glass of wine) an opening emerged, a ray of hope appeared, and the ponderous processes were promptly initiated at Harvard to make an appointment possible. And, of course, Dennis eventually came many years after he should have, but better late than never, as subsequent history bore out extremely well.

Once Dennis arrived, we ran into an unexpected problem of funding. Many prosperous alumni had beaten on me in one way or another for not having more courses in ethics. But when the opportunity arose to create these courses, they melted away – no donor came forward. And so the program, in those years, was sustained by the great generosity of the deans who, seeing the results as their own faculty participated in the program, and returned to the schools to teach serious courses on the subject, realized its importance. None more so than John MacArthur of the Business School, who I see here tonight. He was really the champion among champions in this regard, and he made it possible for us to continue.

And then finally, through two remarkable people – the late Lester Kissel, and of course, Lily Safra – we have a Center that is on a sound financial footing, with every prospect of remaining so indefinitely. Lily, I really thank you. I hope you recognize what a splendid investment you have made simply by looking around the room, noting the distance people have traveled, and the successes they have had after they graduate from the Center. What a successful venture this has been! Certainly it has succeeded my own expectations, which were high when we began. After waiting and hoping for eight years, one's expectations are at a fever pitch – and still Dennis has exceeded them.

I won't repeat what Dennis has said about the graduates of the program, about the centers they have established, and the other contributions they have made; it really is quite remarkable. And probably today many people take this for granted. They may not remember, but I assure you that 30 years ago the combination of logical positivism and the whole mythology of value free inquiry had pushed applied ethics out of the curriculum at almost every institution, except the Catholic institutions who bravely kept the tradition alive. But at places like this it was in a very perilous state. So what you see now is dramatically different from what it was then, and that is really something to celebrate.

You wonder of course whether there are any new fields to conquer when so much has been accomplished. I hope the center goes on exactly as it is. I think it's doing precisely what I hoped, and it should never lose sight of that. I do think there are still opportunities to be exploited. One of them took place this week when the Faculty of Arts and Sciences,

after what must be called an exhausting debate, finally approved a new general education program, and very fortunately, one of the required categories of courses involves moral reasoning, which Dennis and I both had very much hoped would survive the review. But one interesting thing about the faculty report that was approved is the recognition, for the first time, that it's not enough just to study moral philosophers and what they said and wrote; it's really important to apply their teaching to the very practical ethical dilemmas that students are going to face in their personal and professional lives. And for the first time in my memory, a committee of Arts and Sciences professors recognized the contribution that professional school faculty could make in bringing just these kinds of courses into the undergraduate curriculum. And that I think opens up a real opportunity.

A good course in professional ethics is quite unique, I think, in the number of ways in which it can contribute to the best purposes of a good liberal education. It certainly contributes to the moral development of students, which is one important undergraduate aim. It helps them learn to reason clearly, in this case about ethics. But reasoning clearly about one subject is reasoning clearly about many others. Over 90 percent of college professors in this country believe that learning to reason carefully is the most important aim of undergraduate education, and yet they go on lecturing – which as we know, and as cognitive scientists have told us, is not the best way to teach people. The professional school ethicists of the kind that have come through this program understand the value of active discussion about compelling human problems.

Even beyond that, I think professional ethicists have an opportunity to do something else of great importance, and that is to provide the kind of course that will help students decide what to do with their lives, what profession to choose. I speak from experience since I, like so many people who went to law school, decided sometime late in my final year in college to do it only as a last resort. College for many students includes the quest for a career and, as we have learned from Howard Gardner, who is here tonight and who has studied what meaningful work means, it is important that a meaningful career have ethical content, that it not require one to act unethically, and that it provide scope for helping other people and being sensitive to their needs.

And so courses of the kind that are grist for the mill of this Center do also provide ways of allowing students to begin to see what it is like to be a doctor or a lawyer or a business executive, and to ask, in Justice Holmes' great words: Can I live greatly in this profession? I think courses on professional ethics, applied ethics, provide perhaps the best way of helping students to answer that question. So those of you who are interested and practice the work of the Center have an opportunity to make a great contribution to undergraduate education. I hope you will all think about that and take advantage of the generosity of the Arts and Sciences Faculty to welcome this kind of course into the undergraduate curriculum.

I also hope that the Center could provide an even wider discussion of ethical issues in the University and beyond. I know how much you have done already, but with your graduates now embedded in every faculty, you have an opportunity to see where chances exist to engage in ethical discourse where such discourse is needed. Let me give you a

few examples. One is a personal example in the area of business that I have written about – the huge executive salaries of CEOs of corporations. There are prominent business school professors who applaud this development, so long as we are aligning incentives with the welfare of the shareholders – which means driving up the stock price.

Now, there are a lot of problems with that. These prominent professors, who have made this point in many publications, overlook several things: whether furthering the interests of shareholders is really the only or dominant purpose of being a business executive; whether CEOs really are necessarily responsible for increases in stock prices, or whether other forces may contribute; and, most important, that if huge rewards depend on driving up the price of stock, you create enormous temptations to do this by illicit or unethical means, if you can't achieve it in the normal course of business. All of that was grist for the mill of professional ethicists, and yet at a business school conference I attended in the wake of Enron, the discussions showed that some of the professors who had championed these outsized corporate compensations had never talked to the ethicists on their own faculty. Now that we have outposts in all of these faculties, I think this kind of breakdown in communication is something that we should try very hard to overcome; otherwise, the consequences can be quite serious.

The second example relates to science. Over 50 years ago when I was in college, I heard a number of my professors, in different contexts, make the point that somehow advances in technical knowledge were greatly outrunning the advances that were made in how to deal with the moral and ethical human issues that followed in their wake. And surely that same problem exists today, and promises to become even more prominent in the future. We are really poised on the edge of an enormous revolution in human biology and genetics. Many of the advances being made already (on stem cells, for example), or that will be made in the future (cloning, genetic engineering), are going to raise tremendous ethical problems. One fascinating issue came to light when some very wealthy people came to Ivy League colleges and offered large sums of money for the eggs of Amazons, who had to be blonde, have SAT scores over 700, and be competent athletes. Wasn't there something a little bit creepy about donating your eggs in return for large sums of money and somehow ceasing to have any further responsibility for the results?

These kinds of sensitive and difficult problems are likely to arise with increasing frequency as biologists continue their work. In James Watson's latest book, he predicts that within 15 years we are going to find that there are indeed genetically-based racial differences in intelligence. There are responsible and able scientists who disagree with him but, should such a thing come to pass, the question will be: What can we do as ethicists to engage scientists about those questions? In an institution that does not always achieve standards of objectivity or the greatest possible freedom from political correctness or liberal bias, can we really create a forum in which issues of that degree of volatility and incendiary quality can be discussed in a careful and rational way? I hope so.

But these are only very tentative thoughts about the continuing frontier and opportunity for the kind of work that the Center nourishes. They are only thoughts along the way toward restoring the Greek ideal of placing ethics at the center of education, where I

deeply believe it ought to be. We hear a lot about the revitalization of the humanities. I would suggest this Center is already a model of revitalized humanities and a model of what philosophy could contribute to a humane education and to a principled community.

So looking back at my years of presiding over Harvard, it really is quite honestly hard for me to think of anything that I am prouder of than the work that Dennis and many of the rest of you in this room have done, to take an idea and turn it into a living and significant reality. It reminds me of something I sometimes lose track of, which is why sensible people undertake academic administration in the first place. It is, I think, to savor evenings like this, when we can point to real intellectual progress toward goals that are demonstrably worthwhile. So I leave you tonight with the thought that my cup runneth over when I think of the humble beginnings and the initial frustrations and all that has come to pass since then. I thank Dennis particularly. I thank all of you who have helped to make this moment possible. Thank you.