9-2-2010

Honor Code Ethics 101

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Convocation - Sept. 2, 2010
Connecticut College

A few seconds ago you all pledged to "take responsibility for (your) beliefs." In the next few minutes I'm going to talk a bit about what you might have just committed yourselves to. My plan is to try to provoke you into doing some thinking of your own about the Honor Code and the point of a liberal arts education. If I fail, I hope at least you'll be very confused. And because being confused is the starting point of all philosophy, I'll be pretty happy with that.

So: what could it mean to "take responsibility for your beliefs"? One good possibility is that it means you should to be true to your beliefs. You should translate your beliefs into action. Or, to put it in some of the most potent ethical language ever devised, in pledging to take responsibility for your beliefs, you were pledging to be true to yourselves.

Plato, Shakespeare and my grandmother, as best I can tell, are all on board with this philosophy, and I'm guessing that at least some of you were sent off to college by the various "wise grown-ups" in your lives, with this sage advice. Could it be that the ideal of being true to yourself is at the core of the Honor Code? If you are true to yourselves will you end up essentially abiding by the spirit of Honor Code?

Let's explore this possibility by considering a few implications of being true to yourself:

First, being true to yourself means not failing to be true to your beliefs out of weakness of will. If you've ever done something while feeling at that very moment that you shouldn't be doing it, then you know what weak will is. You smoke a cigarette even though you resolved to quit five minutes ago. You sit on the couch eating Sun Chips and watching "Family Guy" instead of going to the gym. Or, in the following, entirely hypothetical scenario, you party with your friends instead of writing your philosophy paper, and in the morning you guiltily download one from philosophy-essays-that-don't-suck.com and turn it in as your own.

The idea here is that in pledging to take responsibility for your beliefs, you've pledged not to be weak willed, and this means, to put it harshly, that you've given up the right to make excuses for doing what you know is wrong: lack of sleep, the pressure to get good grades, the tragic demise of your sister's dog's hamster. No point in mentioning these things as excuses if you've made a bad choice. In taking a pledge to be true to yourselves, you've just agreed that these things will not and should not get you off the hook.

A correlate of this renunciation of excuses is that being true to yourself means more than just not doing what you know to be wrong. It means standing up for your beliefs even if they're unpopular. It means you shouldn't sit and let things pass by out of embarrassment or fear of criticism. If someone says or does something that you think is wrong or offensive, you should let it be known; you should explain your position. Being true to yourself means that you've got to be prepared to be an activist for your beliefs. Of course it may not be reasonable to expect everyone to be able to do this all the time. So it's worth noticing that the requirement to be true to our own beliefs gives us reason to stand up for others too. After all, if you believe that others are being treated inappropriately, then standing up for them is a way of standing up for yourself too.

A third, perhaps less obvious, implication of pledging to take responsibility for your beliefs and being true to yourself is that, in doing so, you have thereby committed to take responsibility for your actions. This is because we think of ourselves as autonomous agents who do what we do for reasons. Which is just to say that we normally take our actions to be expressions of our beliefs.

To take responsibility for what you do is to acknowledge the existentialist thought that your behavior constitutes who you are. To fail to take responsibility for what you do is to deny that your behavior is the basic determinant of who you are, and is, in Jean-Paul Sartre's sense, to be in bad faith. It is to refuse to acknowledge a fundamental truth about yourself, a truth in virtue of which taking pledges at all makes any sense, namely that you are a free and responsible person. So, taking responsibility for what we do is a central way in which we take responsibility for what we believe and is thus a necessary condition for being true to ourselves.

Again, the implication for the Honor Code is clear. Taking responsibility for your beliefs requires that you acknowledge what you've done. In the language of empowerment, it means you've got to "own it"; in the language of personal responsibility, it means you've got to "own up to it." You've got to be willing either to defend what you've done as a matter of conscience or to acknowledge that you've done what you know to be wrong and commit to changing your behavior so that it matches the beliefs that you avow.

Let me sum up where we are thus far: We've considered the possibility that taking responsibility for your beliefs amounts to being true to your beliefs, which amounts to being true to yourself. And the ideal of being true to yourself seems to ground three very important Honor Code dictates:

One: Don't be weak willed and let pressure or temptation lead you to do what you know to be wrong. In other words, taking responsibility for your beliefs means being conscientious.

Two (and a correlate of one): You've got to be prepared to be an activist for your beliefs — to stand up for yourself when you can and for others when they can't.

And three: You've got to take responsibility for what you do.

So as things stand, it looks like we might be able to go pretty far in grounding Honor Code ethics in general, in the non-controversial idea that it's really important to be true to oneself.

But now I've got to offer you all a preemptive apology because I want to have a little cruel philosophical fun and turn the tables on you. I want to suggest several huge problems with the idea that being true to yourself is a plausible way of grounding the duties of the Honor Code and with the idea that being true to yourself is an especially good thing at all.

First, note, that being true to yourself is a purely formal requirement; it has no particular content. Horrible people can be conscientious; they can be activists for despicable causes and they can take responsibility for what they've done. (I'm reminded of Bill Maher's infamous observation that the 9/11 perpetrators were not cowardly but courageous; it's certainly not easy to show that they failed to be true to themselves.) But, bringing things back to the Honor Code, let me ask you this: Should we be inclined to be lenient with a plagiarist who convinced us that, in cheating, he was being true to himself? I'm actually not so sure what the ethical answer to this question is, but as a matter of simple fact, the Honor Code does not work that way. And this is strong reason to doubt that the ideal of being true to yourself can be a grounding for the Honor Code.

A related point is that the duty to be true to yourself is an entirely relativistic one. If given pride of place, the implication would be that so long as you've been true to yourself, no one can make any further claims against you. If being true to yourself is the coin of the ethical realm, then "I'm OK, you're OK" is the order of the day. But is this right? Is this even compatible with the idea suggested a minute ago that you should stand up for your values? What's the point of standing up for what you think is right if, by your own lights, the people who disagree with you should continue to do what they think is right? The directive to be true to yourself, because of its relativism, seems to have contradictory practical implications.

The mandate to be true to yourself is also essentially egoistic. Is the reason to stand up for others really that doing so is a way of being true to yourself? This would make our concern for others purely instrumental to our self-concern. This doesn't seem like an especially honorable or virtuous position.

Most perplexing, to me, about the requirement to be true to yourself is that it presupposes both that there is something stable, clear and determinate that is you and that, at bottom, it's like the most important thing to be faithful to that. I don't have time right now to develop my objections to these two presuppositions but, happily for me, that's what I get to spend my current sabbatical working on and I hope to I'll be able to update some of you on my findings along the way. For present purposes, I'll just point out that the ideal of being true to yourself is, by its very structure, a conservative principle because it means sticking to who you are.

I propose that rather than interpreting the pledge to "take responsibility for your beliefs" as a conservative pledge to live in accordance with your beliefs, that instead we take it as a pledge to take responsibility for figuring out, prospectively, what to believe. I propose that this responsibility is at the core of the Honor Code and also at the core of a liberal education. Instead of being faithful to some antecedently stable beliefs and values, we've now got three rather different responsibilities:

One: Instead of being confident in our beliefs and sticking to them, we should be skeptical about them — we've got to try to figure out why we believe what we do and whether we have good reasons for believing it. The implication for the Honor Code is that we've got to be morally modest and self-critical — it means doing intellectual work before, during and after we act.

Two: Instead of going straight to the project of convincing others that we are right, we should commit to what philosophers call the Principle of Charity. This means trying to understand others in the best possible light and seeing the sense in what other people think, even and perhaps especially when it looks crazy to us. This requires serious listening and hard interpretive work. The implication for the Honor Code is that we've got to respect others because the business of figuring out what to believe requires cooperative and sympathetic inquiry. The data set of your own life is the most familiar resource you've got, but it's not sufficient for figuring things out.

And three: We've got to try to reconstruct our own beliefs, integrating, wherever possible, what we've learned from others. This means you've got to do your own hard work. There's no way to figure out what to believe without slogging through the messy possibilities and burning some serious mental rubber of your own. Inquiry is cooperative, but ultimately, each of us is individually on the hook for figuring out what to believe. Quite literally, no one else can do that work for you.

Before I let you go, I want to say a few words about the commitment to "cultural and intellectual diversity" that you all just made in the pledge. Why did you commit to this? What is so important about cultural and intellectual diversity?

One might think that a commitment to diversity stems from the thought that none of us has any privileged justification for what we think or how we live. One might think the reason to respect difference is that none of us has any special claim to moral authority or moral superiority. This kind of relativism can be a little disorienting but also has a nice and open-minded ring to it. After all, we'd be grounding the commitment to diversity in the seemingly democratic thought that, ultimately, no one is better or "more right" than anyone else.

But is this a sustainable or consistent position? What should we say to or about people who are not committed to cultural or intellectual diversity or who don't think everyone deserves to be treated civilly and respectfully? Are they included under the umbrella of valued diversity that we've just endorsed? Does committing to diversity mean that we must also value the expression of uncivil and disrespectful perspectives? On the one hand, if it did, then we'd obviously be defeating our commitment to civility and respect. On the other hand, if we don't value uncivil and disrespectful perspectives under the umbrella of diversity, then it seems we've got to abandon our "open-minded" relativistic justification for valuing diversity in the first place and "own up" to the truth that we are claiming a definite and privileged moral high ground.

The Honor Code and the pledge are filled with the language of a robust moral metaphysics: "honor," "integrity," "respect," "human dignity." We are agreeing to live as if these are real and more or less intelligible things, and this means that the commitment to diversity you've just undertaken does not sit easily alongside the thought that everyone's opinion is "equally valid." But it does sit quite nicely with the thought that taking responsibility for our beliefs is one of the most important things we can do because that requires learning from each other. And incivility and disrespect make such learning pretty much impossible.

OK, now an exciting conclusion with some rousing advice:

If you're going to take college as an opportunity to keep your pledge to take responsibility for what to believe, then I really hope you won't be true to yourselves.

So here are a few tips on how not to be true to yourself: Don't worry about contradicting yourself or being a hypocrite or a phony — it's called changing, and you're allowed to do it. Try on new ideas and theories and see what they feel like from the inside. Wear clothes you wouldn't have been caught dead in in high school. Listen to new music — the kind of music that last week you thought was for losers. Willingly subject yourself to the charge of being an inauthentic pseudo-intellectual poser. If no one thinks that about you, you're probably not learning anything. Instead of being true to yourself, pretend to be someone different and I virtually guarantee you'll make new friends, not be bored and, in all likelihood, find a major that surprises and compels you. It's going to feel weird. You're going to feel alienated from who you think you are. But this is a good thing. It means you are stepping outside your comfort zone, otherwise known as the comfortable delusion that you have a true self that you've got to stick to.

I expect I haven't convinced many of you that you shouldn't be true to yourselves. But if you agree at least that trying to figure out what to believe about important things is one of the main points of college (and life for that matter), then I think you've taken the first step toward my counter-intuitive position. Short of that, I hope you are thoroughly confused.

Thanks for listening to me and I hope everyone has a great semester.