October 25, 2009

**Course Reminds Budding Ph.D.'s of the Damage They Can Do**

**At CUNY, a rare seminar explores the ethics of being a professor**

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New York

In one of Plato's dialogues, Socrates warns a student that teachers can be dangerous. "You do not even know to whom you are committing your soul," Socrates says, "and whether the thing to which you commit yourself be good or evil."

That passage is a favorite of Steven M. Cahn, a professor of philosophy at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. This semester he is exploring it in a graduate seminar in academic ethics, one of the few such courses that has ever been taught. One theme: College instructors should be constantly mindful that they have been entrusted with their students' intellectual and personal growth—and that it is always possible for teachers to do damage.

"People often think that education works either to improve you or to leave you as you were," Mr. Cahn says. "But that's not right. An unsuccessful education can ruin you. It can kill your interest in a topic. It can make you a less-good thinker. It can leave you less open to rational argument. So we do good and bad as teachers—it's not just good or nothing."

For more than 20 years, Mr. Cahn has plumbed that theme in books and scholarly papers. This semester's course is his first sustained attempt to tackle it in the classroom. Graduate programs, he says, should do more to make professors-in-training sensitive to the responsibilities they will face.

On a recent afternoon, Mr. Cahn's seminar was devoted to the contested meanings of academic freedom. Should it be understood as a freedom held by professors, or academic institutions, or both? How free should instructors be to proclaim their beliefs in the classroom? And how sensitive should they be to their students' personal commitments?

Decades ago, Mr. Cahn tells the seminar, he offended a religious student by casually announcing that modern philosophers have rejected the so-called ontological proofs of God's existence.

When he teaches metaphysics now, he says, he is careful to point out that at least a few well-regarded philosophers still defend those proofs.

The dozen students in the seminar come from diverse fields. Some are philosophy students; some are psychologists in training; and two are earning degrees in urban education. At the beginning of each class, they give Mr. Cahn index cards with questions that were inspired by the day's reading.

Jason P. Mandelbaum, a graduate student in forensic psychology, put forward a question about whether the growing numbers of non-tenure-track faculty will—or should—affect how academic freedom is understood and defended, because they don't have the tenure-driven rights to such freedom.

In the ensuing discussion, the class pondered whether public support for academic freedom might erode if college instructors are perceived as short-term contract employees, rather than members of a self-policing profession with unusual rights and responsibilities.

"I've found the course really interesting," Mr. Mandelbaum says later. Most psychology students take courses in clinical ethics, Mr. Mandelbaum notes, but he was glad to have the chance to take a course on the ethics of teaching and research, because that is how he plans to spend his career.

C. Alexander Evans, a third-year philosophy graduate student, says his favorite seminar session so far concerned university neutrality. Do colleges have an institutional duty to stay out of certain public debates? Or is that kind of neutrality actually undesirable or impossible?

Those questions have been on Mr. Evans's mind for several years, because as an undergraduate at the University of California at San Diego he campaigned for the university to divest from Sudan as a protest against the mass killings in Darfur.

The text for that week's session was *Neutrality and the Academic Ethic,* a 1994 book by Robert L. Simon, a professor of philosophy at Hamilton College, in New York state. That volume is part of a 15-book series on academic ethics that Mr. Cahn edited for Rowman & Littlefield.

Mr. Cahn says that he is proud of that series but that he does not want those debates to be buried in libraries. Many graduate schools offer courses and workshops on research ethics, but semester-long seminars that combine the ethics of teaching, research, and administration have been much rarer. The University of Texas at Austin briefly offered such a course early in this decade.

The absence of those courses seems especially jarring, Mr. Cahn says, because there has been a boom in courses in the applied ethics of medicine, business, and law.

"Academic ethics remains the stepchild of all these professional ethics courses," Mr. Cahn says, "despite the fact that it's the subject about which the philosophers know the most. Perhaps it's hardest to know yourself. In some ways, it's easier to go into the hospital and critique what's happening there than to to go into the university and critique your colleagues."

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