

THE CENTER FOR
ETHICS & EDUCATION

Ethical Costs:

The Case of Higher Education and Social Mobility

STUDENT MATERIALS

The Center for Ethics & Education created this curriculum plan to give faculty and students the tools to bridge philosophy and education. We connected Morton's book about the ethical costs of upward mobility in higher education to other philosophical works about ethical tradeoffs, incommensurability, academic friendship, and the relationship between structure and agency. This curriculum plan connects Morton's philosophical work on higher education with additional philosophical concepts to challenge students to consider the ethical duties of students, faculty, and policymakers.

AUDIO

In April 2019 we interviewed Jennifer Morton about her new book, *Moving Up Without Losing Your Way: The Ethical Costs of Upward Mobility*. Morton describes how her experience teaching at CUNY exposed her to many of the ethical costs that her first-generation college students were enduring in order to achieve a better life through education, connecting them to her own experience as a first-generation college student. We created this audio piece as a companion to philosophical readings on incommensurability, ethical tradeoffs, and the role of individuals operating in unequal social structures.

LISTEN

<http://ethicsandeducation.wceruw.org/curriculum.html>

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About the Center for Ethics & Education

JENNIFER MORTON

Jennifer Morton is an associate professor of philosophy at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill and a senior fellow at the Center for Ethics and Education. She received her A.B. in philosophy from Princeton University and her Ph.D. in philosophy from Stanford University. Professor Morton grew up in Lima, Peru. She works mainly in philosophy of action, philosophy of education, and political philosophy. Her book *Moving Up Without Losing Your Way: The Ethical Costs of Upward Mobility* (Princeton University Press, 2019) discusses the ethical compromises made by students who seek upward mobility through education.



Website: <http://jennifermmorton.com/>

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

Books

Morton, J. (2019). *Moving up without losing your way: The ethical costs of upward mobility*. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Public Scholarship

Morton, J. (2019, September 20). I'm a Latina who went to an elite institution. Kavanaugh culture dominates. Vox. Retrieved from

<https://www.vox.com/first-person/2019/9/20/20874414/ramirez-kavanaugh-college-class>

Morton, J. (2019, September 19). The worm at the heart of meritocracy. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

Retrieved from <https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/20190911-meritocracy-forum>

Morton (2016). Reconsidering idealization. *The Philosopher's Magazine*, 72(1st Quarter). Retrieved from <https://www.philosophersmag.com/current-issue?id=112>

Philosophy Journals

Morton, J. (2019). Mitigating ethical costs in the classroom. *Daedalus*, 148(4), 179-194.

Morton, J. (2014). Molding conscientious, hardworking, and perseverant students. *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 31(1), 60-80.

Morton, J. (2013). Cultural codeswitching: Straddling the achievement gap. *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 22(3), 259-281.

Morton, J. (2011). The non-cognitive challenge to a liberal egalitarian education. *Theory and Research in Education*, 9(3), 233-250.

Morton, J. & Paul, S. (2018). Grit. *Ethics*, 129(2), 175-203

IN-CLASS ACTIVITY:

Ethical Decision-Making

Aim: Students will be able to identify values as an important part of the ethical decision-making process.

I. Skim the case of Carlos (starting on page 53 of *Moving Up Without Losing Your Way: The Ethical Costs of Upward Mobility*).

II. Discuss in small groups:

Read the list of values. In groups of three to five students, discuss the following questions:

1) Which values do you think Carlos is prioritizing as he makes his decision? Choose at least three values from the list or name others that you believe are relevant.

2) Why are these values more important than others you identified? How do these values conflict, if at all?

3) Based on the relationship among these values and potential ethical conflicts involved, what should Carlos actually do?

III. Share with large group:

Each group shares out which values they thought were most important, any ethical conflicts that arose, and their recommendation for Carlos.

Optional assignment: Write a journal entry from Carlos's point of view about his decision making process (500-750 words).

Values:

- Autonomy
- Community
- Compassion
- Determination
- Economic security
- Educational achievement
- Equality
- Happiness
- Health
- Independence
- Justice
- Knowledge
- Loyalty
- Safety
- Selflessness
- Service Status

USING PHILOSOPHY IN EDUCATION

Understanding Ethical Costs

In the audio piece you listened to, Morton Says:

....That's the dilemma that I was hoping to capture in the book. In the book, I call the kind of sacrifices a student like Sandra make "ethical costs." What I mean by that is that Strivers are sacrificing areas of their lives that are meaningful and valuable to them. So, their relationships to their families, to their friends and through their communities. And these are areas that for most of us are really important to how we see our lives, how we see the meaning in our lives, how we think of ourselves.

Incommensurability

Consider, for a moment, a choice between two vacations. One is in a large city with lots of museums, great restaurants, and nightclubs. The other is in a beautiful and serene part of the countryside with few amenities and few tourists.

For many people the choice will be easy: they care a lot about culture or a lot about beauty, and that determines the outcome. But for some it is much harder, not because they are indecisive, but because they value culture and beauty, culture and serenity. For them the costs and benefits of different options are very difficult to weigh on the same scale.

Morton thinks that for Strivers, the day-to-day and the strategic choices they face in college present them with a similar difficulty, except that the costs and benefits that they have to weigh are not just about what they want in a vacation, but the ethical values by which they plan to live out a whole life. Importantly, these choices may involve sacrificing deep commitments to areas of life, such as family and community.

What are ethical goods, ethical costs, and ethical conflicts?

A good is an “ethical good” when it concerns the areas of life that contribute to value or meaning. For example, relationships with family and friends, hobbies and interests, and participation in a community add value and meaning to one’s life. Imagine someone who does not develop any individual or community relationships or hobbies throughout her lifespan. It is clear that she is missing out on deeply important ethical goods that add meaning to her life—goods that could not easily be replaced by money, clothing, or food, for example. Through her relationships, hobbies, and community, she may gain a sense of meaning and understand herself in a new sense.

Therefore, an ethical cost is a sacrifice of something that adds value or meaning to one’s life, such as familial and friend relationships, hobbies, and community. One may have to sacrifice a relationship with a friend due to their journey across the country for college. The loss of this friendship is an ethical cost because the good in question—the friendship—adds value and meaning to life. Ethical costs often occur when one encounters an ethical conflict or ethical dilemma.

The severity of these conflicts differs from person to person. Imagine that you are raised in a family where everyone has been to college, where everyone talks about college, and where you have been raised with the expectation that you will go away to college, your family will not depend on you, and you won’t come back to live near your family. In this case, there really isn’t a conflict between doing what it takes to succeed in school and abiding by familial norms and expectations. But for students whose families are less familiar with the expectations colleges have for students, and who expect the student to remain a fully integrated part of the interdependent family unit, the day to day conflicts of college attendance can be serious. Often, students are forced to choose between different, genuinely good things which are not easy to reconcile.

ACADEMIC FRIENDSHIP

Paul Weithman offers an account of academic friendship which he argues is a relationship that ought to emerge between undergraduates and their professors. Drawing on Aristotle, Weithman says that academic friendships are mainly concerned with the shared commitment to education. Undergraduates and professors are involved in a project that concerns both of them. The undergraduates are concerned with learning and their professors are concerned with instilling in them valuable qualities of mind. Professors act as guides to their students. We might think of undergraduates and professors as fellow travelers on a journey. Weithman argues that academic friendships are unequal because undergraduates and professors are at different emotional, social, and intellectual stages. Professors maintain more power than their undergraduate students. Due to these inequalities, an academic friendship cannot fit the model of Aristotle's perfect friendship, according to Weithman, but it is still an important friendship.

Additionally, Weithman argues that there are particular qualities that professors ought to instill in their undergraduate students. Autonomy is one such trait. Professors ought to give their students the skills to be autonomous because autonomy helps us to live better lives. We live better when we have control over how our lives will go. As a member of an academic friendship, professors ought to do what they can to instill autonomy in their students. One way that Weithman recommends professors do this is modeling. He says, "In modeling the qualities of autonomy, we show that we are subject to the same authority that we expect our students to acknowledge: the authority of reason" (p. 59). We model the qualities of autonomy because we want our students to be truly autonomous, to act freely and with good reasons. Additionally, professors must inform students about the various imaginative options that exist for them intellectually. Students ought to understand that others see the world differently than they do and have the capacity to imagine alternatives for themselves. Finally, Weithman argues that students should be educated to appreciate the intellectual accomplishments of humankind. In his words "[education] must also shape their cares, their tastes, and their desires" (p. 67). Thus, if we truly want students to walk away with these dispositions and attitudes, we must do more than just impart knowledge upon them.

Weithman, P. (2015). Academic Friendship. In H. Brighouse & M. McPherson (Eds.), *The aims of higher education: Problems of morality and justice* (pp. 52-73). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

THE CENTER FOR ETHICS & EDUCATION

We at the Center are committed to encouraging philosophical reflection on contemporary issues in education. This curriculum was developed for use in undergraduate and graduate education, philosophy, and sociology classes. It is available for free.

The Center for Ethics & Education is housed in the Wisconsin Center for Education Research (WCER) in the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The Center supports the field of philosophy of education by supporting scholars, graduate students, practitioners, and policymakers in thinking analytically about ethical issues in education.

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