I thought I was over prepared to teach ethics to a bunch of MBA's. So what if these were the best and brightest of future corporate America? To me, Harvard Business School students seemed just as bright eyed, eager, and open to new ideas as any I had had in 30 years of teaching at Columbia, Berkeley and George Washington. Having just completed a book on ethics, "The Moral Dimension," I was loaded with teaching material; and a lengthy series of faculty meetings on teaching ethics had me convinced: sure, it could be done.

An early indication that these business-leaders-to-be were not to be easily swayed happened during a discussion of persuasive advertising. Most of the class firmly believed in "consumer sovereignty." Let the market provide whatever legal products customers are willing to open their wallets for. But what about John Kenneth Galbraith's view? I offered. Prolonged silence. Galbraith, I elaborated, argues that corporations actually produce the demand for their product, together with whatever they wish to sell say, male deodorants. Rather than serving consumer needs, corporations shape tastes by advertising aimed at our emotions or subconscious.

Is that ethical? I asked. One student responded, "I'm not sure there is such a thing as the subconscious." "If I don't want it, no ad will convince me to buy anything" insisted another. Well, I continued, years ago, male executives wore only gray-flannel suits and white shirts to work. No one knew they needed shirts in 16 colors until the industry decided to do to men's clothing what it already had done to women's. The class did not see the point. "We have a built-in desire for variety, for color," a student explained to me. Why not satisfy it by enjoying nature? I asked. What is it that dictates we have to use products to satisfy our need for color, if there is such a need?

I fared even less well in our discussion of corporate and other PAC's. I explained that scores of corporations encourage their executives to form political-action committees, and use the monies amassed to influence both Congress and state legislators. (Many other corporations consider PAC's completely inappropriate and have none.) One student said he liked PACs: "Last summer, I worked for a corporation that has one. Its PAC allowed me to advance my economic interests. And, I could use my vote in the ballot box, to support those who agree with my international ideas." Another reminded the class that "after all," corporations are a pivotal factor in the American economy and society and therefore ought to have a voice in national and state capitols. Some students did object to executives pressuring employees to join PACs.

So it's OK for corporate executives to have, in effect, two votes, while the rest of us have one? I persisted. Well, no, the students allowed. However, they countered, PAC's don't quite give one an extra vote. All they do is provide one's favored politicians with deep pockets essential to win elections in the age of high-cost politics. And, this, they argued, seemed quite proper, "very much in line with the way the society is structured anyhow."

My real undoing came a few weeks later. The subject was binding moral duties. We find such duties compelling; they significantly affect the way we act, I claimed. For instance, "I would like to go to a movie, but ought to visit a friend in the hospital" or, for that matter, "I shouldn't leave this plastic wrapper in the forest, even though I don't want to carry it home." These statements show the tension between what we find pleasurable and what we experience as a moral commitment. It feels different to enjoy a movie than to do what is right,
even or especially when the hospital is far away, the visit is tedious and being there reminds us of our own vulnerability.

Quest for reputation: Most students didn't accept this line of reasoning. "You expect your friend to visit you when you are in the hospital," explained one student, suggesting we do good only to get good in return. "You're trying to impress your friends about how good you are," suggested another. "It makes you feel good, and that's the motivation," stated a third. These MBA's were joining an age old tradition of reductionism, of boiling down whatever is noble in human behavior to base motives (self-interest, the quest for reputation or simply whatever is fun), denying the existence of morality, and, in the process, undercutting its significance.

So I tried again. A delegation from a Middle Eastern nation came to visit an East Coast university, I told them. The VIP delegates let their host know that they expected to be entertained in the style to which they were accustomed: they expected young boys and girls to join their quarters for the night. I asked my MBA class if there were any takers, hoping to evoke intemperate repulsion an indication of moral commitment. "What's the fee for the night?" asked one student, only half in jest. "Yeah," another picked up, "at first I would think no, but then I'd wonder about the price." One, to my relief, did exclaim, "Not my wife!" And another muttered, "What a disgusting thought!"

There were other encouraging signs that my efforts were not a complete failure. One student dropped by to discuss how he might cut costs in his family business without firing longtime employees. Several students warmed up to the idea that there is considerable leeway in corporate management, that a corporation may do some measure of "good" without becoming uncompetitive (many had not believed so earlier in the term). And, while the class was highly unfriendly to labor unions (to put it mildly), many were reluctant to fire old employees on some fabricated pretext. However, by and large, I clearly had not found a way to help classes full of MBA's see that there is more to life than money, power, fame and self-interest.

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