

Teaching as Ethical Practice: Authority, Dignity, and Artificial Intelligence in the Academic World

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Abstract

This essay argues that teaching in higher education is, at its core, an ethical practice — one that demands continuous self-reflection about the distribution of authority, dignity, and epistemic standing between professors and students. Drawing on Levinas's claim that ethics is "first philosophy," Aristotle's practical wisdom, Schopenhauer's ethics of compassion, and Nietzsche's vision of the educator as liberator, I propose that the central ethical question for educators is not how to classify or manage students, but how much authority to retain and how much to leave for learners. I examine a widespread pedagogical tendency to categorize students along axes of capability and self-awareness, arguing that such classification — however well-intentioned — is structurally humiliating and extracts from students the very autonomy that education should cultivate. The arrival of artificial intelligence in higher education makes this argument more urgent, not less: AI does not restore professorial authority but exposes its fragility, demanding that educators take less for themselves rather than more. Through reflections grounded in teaching practice, I offer an alternative vision of teaching ethics rooted in the Golden Rule, epistemic humility, and the conviction that a professor's moral standing is measured by what they have left for their students.

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I. Introduction: Teaching as a Question of Ethics

What does it mean to teach well? The question is usually framed in technical terms — pedagogy, assessment design, learning outcomes, classroom management. But beneath these operational concerns lies a deeper question that is, fundamentally, ethical: *What is the professor's obligation to the student, and what limits should that obligation impose on the professor's own authority?*

This essay is a reflection on what I call *teaching ethics* — not the ethics *taught* in courses, but the ethical dimension of the *act of teaching itself*. Emmanuel Levinas, in *Humanism of the Other*, makes a claim that reorders the philosophical tradition: ethics, not metaphysics, is "first philosophy" — the fundamental discipline, prior to all others. If this is true generally, it is true of teaching with particular force. Before pedagogy, before assessment design, before learning outcomes, there is the ethical encounter between professor and student. And the nature of that encounter, Levinas argues, is *responsibility*: to be ethical is to respond to the call of the other who is vulnerable. In a classroom, that other is the student — a person who comes with needs, uncertainties, and a dependence on the professor's good faith that no syllabus can fully protect.

This essay is motivated by the conviction that any professor with a capacity for critical reflection, who pauses to examine what they do and how they do it, will discover gaps between their intentions and their effects: contradictions, blind spots, unexamined habits of authority. These discoveries are not signs of failure; they are signs of honesty. And from that honesty, improvement becomes possible.

The argument proceeds in several steps. First, I examine a tendency that is widespread in academic culture — the classification of students by capability — and argue that this approach, however well-intentioned, is ethically problematic. Second, I develop an alternative framework grounded in Aristotle's practical philosophy, the Golden Rule, and the principle that teaching authority is not a neutral resource but a zero-sum one: whatever the professor claims for themselves is, by that act, withheld from the student. Third, I draw on concrete situations from my own teaching practice to show what these principles look like — and what they demand — in real academic interactions. Finally, I argue that the arrival of artificial intelligence in higher education makes these ethical questions more pressing than ever, because AI destabilizes the very authority structures that traditional pedagogy takes for granted.

The essay is addressed to anyone in the academic world who has wondered whether they are teaching well — and who suspects that answering that question requires moral reflection, not just technical adjustment.

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II. The Temptation to Classify: A Critique of Capability-Based Pedagogy

A common approach to adaptive teaching — one that has gained renewed attention in discussions about artificial intelligence and education — begins with an appealing premise: professors should meet students where they are. In practice, however, this premise often translates into a classification exercise. The professor forms a judgment about whether a student is "capable" or "not capable" — using these terms as rough shorthand for knowledge, skills, and engagement — and simultaneously evaluates whether the student's own self-assessment aligns with that judgment. The intersection of these two axes generates a typology: the student who is capable and knows it can be treated as a peer; the student who is not capable and recognizes this needs support and protection; the student who is capable but underestimates themselves needs encouragement; and the student who is not capable but believes otherwise needs correction and, in the less generous formulations, policing.

This kind of framework has intuitive appeal. Every experienced instructor recognizes situations that roughly correspond to these categories. And the intention behind such approaches is typically supportive — to adapt teaching to the learner rather than forcing the learner to adapt to the teaching. And yet the framework enacts, at the level of its own structure, precisely the kind of authority claim that good teaching should resist.

The Problem of Deficit Framing

The first difficulty is that any such taxonomy sorts students by *perceived inadequacy*. Only one category — the peer — treats the student as a full epistemic equal. The remaining categories define the student by what they lack: capability, self-awareness, or both. Even when these categories are intended to be fluid and contextual, the language does not support that fluidity. "Not capable" is not a developmental observation; it is a verdict. And once a professor has rendered that verdict — even privately, even provisionally — it shapes expectations, feedback, tolerance for error, and the degree of trust and autonomy extended to the student.

Modern pedagogy has moved decisively away from this kind of deficit framing. The recognition that capability is task-specific, domain-specific, time-varying, and socially mediated is not a progressive nicety but an empirical finding. A student who appears "not capable" in one setting may be navigating language barriers, prior educational inequality, neurodiversity, caregiving responsibilities, or the hidden curriculum of academic norms that no one taught them. To flatten all of this into "not capable" is not coarse — it is reductive in a way that has consequences.

The Humiliation of Judging Self-Awareness

The second axis of such frameworks — the student's own self-assessment — introduces an even more troubling dimension. When a professor claims the authority to determine not only whether a student is capable but also *whether the student correctly understands their own capability*, the power asymmetry becomes acute. The framework says, in effect: *I know what you can do, and I also know whether you know what you can do.*

This is a double judgment. The student is evaluated both in their performance and in their interiority. And when these two judgments converge unfavorably — the student is deemed not capable, yet believes otherwise — the professor is positioned as the authority who must correct not just the student's work but the student's *self-understanding*. Even when handled gently, this is structurally humiliating.

Self-assessment accuracy is not a character trait; it is socially patterned. Research consistently shows that underconfidence is more common among students from marginalized backgrounds, while overconfidence is often rewarded rather than penalized in academic culture. A framework that treats miscalibration as a pedagogical problem to be managed — rather than as information about the student's social position — risks reproducing the very inequities it claims to address.

Authority Metaphors and What They Reveal

The metaphors that typically accompany these taxonomies are themselves revealing. When professors describe their role as that of "colleague," "parent," "coach," or "police officer" depending on the student, only the first relationship is horizontal. The rest are explicitly hierarchical — one protective, another disciplinary, a third paternally encouraging. What such language reveals, perhaps unintentionally, is that the professor's default position is

above the student, and the pedagogical question is merely *how* to exercise that superiority: with warmth, with encouragement, or with enforcement.

This is not an individual failing. It reflects a deep assumption in academic culture: that the professor's role is to evaluate, classify, and manage students, and that doing so adaptively is sufficient to make it ethical. I want to argue that it is not — that the act of classification itself is ethically costly, and that the real ethical question is not how to classify well but whether to classify at all.

Why Abstract Categories Distort Perception

The philosophical roots of this problem run deeper than contemporary pedagogy. In his essay *On Education*, Schopenhauer draws a sharp distinction between what he calls "natural" education — in which understanding arises from experience first and abstraction later — and "artificial" education, in which abstract categories are imposed before the learner encounters reality. A mind filled with preconceived abstractions, Schopenhauer warns, will tend to impose its ideas onto what it encounters rather than allowing the phenomena to speak for themselves.

The observation applies with particular force to the professor who has internalized a capability taxonomy. Once the categories exist — capable, not capable, self-aware, miscalibrated — they become lenses through which the professor *sees* the student, rather than tools applied after careful observation. The instructor who has already classified a student as "not capable" can no longer perceive what that student actually is. The abstraction has replaced the person. And because the professor holds institutional power over the student, this substitution is not merely an epistemological error — it is an ethical one, with consequences for grades, recommendations, and the student's own developing sense of what they can become.

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III. An Alternative Framework: Teaching as Redistribution

If classification is the problem, what is the alternative? I propose that teaching ethics begins with a different question — not "What kind of student am I dealing with?" but "What am I willing to give up so that this student can learn?"

This reframing rests on a principle that I believe is both simple and radical:

A professor is not taking for himself anything else than what he has left for his students.

The principle asserts that authority, epistemic standing, confidence, and dignity are not infinitely expandable resources in the classroom. They are, in a meaningful sense, *zero-sum*. Whatever certainty the professor claims is certainty the student cannot exercise. Whatever judgment the professor renders is judgment the student is denied the opportunity to develop. Whatever hierarchy the professor establishes is autonomy the student loses.

This is not an argument against expertise or against the professor having more knowledge than the student. It is an argument about *how that knowledge is held*. A professor can hold knowledge as a tool for classification — sorting students into categories, rendering verdicts on their capability — or as a resource to be redistributed, offered in ways that increase the student's own capacity for judgment, self-assessment, and intellectual autonomy.

The difference is not stylistic; it is ethical. And it has consequences for every decision a professor makes: how to structure assignments, how to give feedback, how to respond to students in difficulty, and — crucially — how to think about students who seem to resist or fail.

Roots in Practical Philosophy

This principle has deep roots in the philosophical tradition — roots that converge, from different directions, on the same conclusion: that the ethical teacher is defined not by the accuracy of their judgments but by the quality of their attention and the restraint of their authority.

Aristotle and the primacy of practical perception. The *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Eudemian Ethics* both emphasize what Aristotle calls *practical philosophy* — the domain of ethics that concerns not abstract principles but concrete action in particular situations. For Aristotle, ethical virtue is not a set of rules to be followed but a *disposition* (hexis) that is cultivated through practice and reflection. The virtuous person is not the one who knows the right thing to do in advance but the one who perceives correctly in the moment, with judgment refined by experience.

Applied to teaching, this means that teaching ethics cannot be codified into a taxonomy or a flowchart. The ethical professor is not the one who has the right classification system but the one who has cultivated the disposition to *see students clearly* — which requires, above all, epistemic humility about one's own judgments. Aristotle's famous remark — "I am a friend of Plato, but more a friend of the truth" — is often cited as a declaration of intellectual independence. But in a teaching context, it reads differently: *I am your professor, but my obligation to truth is greater than my attachment to my own authority*. The professor who takes this seriously must be willing to be wrong about a student — and must structure the relationship so that being wrong is discoverable.

Schopenhauer and the primacy of compassion. In *On the Basis of Morality* (1840), Schopenhauer argues that compassion — not reason, not duty, not abstract rules — is the only genuine foundation for ethical action. His central ethical maxim, *Neminem laede, imo omnes quantum potes, juva* ("Injure no one; on the contrary, help everyone as much as you can"), rests on what he describes as a kind of *felt knowledge*: the awareness that the suffering of another has a reality equal to one's own.

For teaching, this insight is transformative. It means that the ethical professor's first response to a struggling student is not evaluation but *recognition* — the felt understanding that the student's difficulty is real, that it has causes the professor may not fully see, and that it deserves attention before it receives a verdict. This is the philosophical ground for

distinguishing, as I do later in this essay, between *understanding* a student (which requires openness) and *justifying* a student's behavior (which is a separate moral act). Schopenhauer tells us that understanding must come first — not as sentimentality, but as an epistemic condition. The professor who judges before feeling cannot see clearly, because judgment without compassion filters out precisely the information that matters most.

Levinas and the ethical encounter. If Schopenhauer locates ethics in compassion as felt knowledge, Levinas radicalizes the claim. In *Humanism of the Other*, he argues that ethics is not one branch of philosophy among others but the *first philosophy* — the ground on which all other inquiry stands. And the content of that first philosophy is simple: to be ethical is to *respond to the call of the vulnerable other*. Ethics, for Levinas, is the rupture of indifference. Where there is indifference, there is no ethics; where there is credulous routine, there is no ethics. Ethics begins when someone calls and I answer.

In the teaching relationship, this means that the ethical moment is not the moment of evaluation — when the professor assigns a grade, renders a judgment, or classifies a student. The ethical moment is *prior*: it is the moment when the student appears before the professor as a person with needs — intellectual, emotional, social, economic, spiritual — and the professor either responds or does not. Levinas's framework makes clear why classification-based pedagogy is not merely imprecise but *ethically evasive*: it substitutes a system of categories for the act of responding. The professor who has sorted a student into a box has, in a certain sense, already stopped listening — has already replaced the call of the other with an abstraction. The ethical professor, by contrast, remains in the posture of response: attentive, exposed, willing to be unsettled by what the student reveals.

Nietzsche and the educator as liberator. In his 1874 essay *Schopenhauer as Educator*, Nietzsche offers a vision of what true teaching looks like — and it is the opposite of classification. For Nietzsche, the genuine educator does not sort, manage, or correct students. Instead, the educator *liberates*: "Your true educators and formative teachers reveal to you what the true basic material of your being is." The educator's task is to "draw forth and nourish all the forces which exist in his pupil and bring them to a harmonious relationship with one another."

This vision directly supports the redistribution principle. If the educator's role is to liberate what already exists in the student — rather than to impose categories from outside — then the professor must leave the student maximum space for self-directed growth. Authority claimed by the professor is, in Nietzsche's terms, a force that *suppresses* rather than *liberates*. The more the professor takes for themselves — in certainty, in judgment, in the authority to classify — the less room remains for the student to discover their own capacities.

Nietzsche also identifies three qualities that made Schopenhauer an exemplary educator: "his honesty, his joy, and his consistency. He is honest, as speaking and writing for himself alone; joyful, because his thought has conquered the greatest difficulties; consistent, because he cannot help being so." These are not abstract virtues. They are, precisely, the qualities that students recognize and trust in a professor: honesty about what one knows

and does not know, genuine engagement with the material, and coherence between words and actions.

Ben Zoma and the structure of wisdom. The Talmudic sage offers a complementary insight: "Who is wise? One who learns from all people" (*Pirkei Avot* 4:1). This is not a platitude about open-mindedness. It is a claim about the *structure of wisdom*: that the wise person is defined not by what they know but by their disposition toward others as sources of knowledge. For a professor, this means that the student is not an object to be assessed but a person from whom something can be learned — about the subject, about teaching, about the limits of the professor's own understanding.

Together, these thinkers point toward a teaching ethic that is fundamentally anti-classificatory. The professor's task is not to sort students but to remain open to what each student reveals — about themselves, about the material, and about the professor's own practice. Aristotle grounds this ethic in practical perception, Schopenhauer in compassion, Levinas in the primacy of response to the vulnerable other, Nietzsche in liberation, and Ben Zoma in the humility that is the condition of wisdom. Different starting points, but the same destination: the professor who takes less for themselves leaves more for the student to become.

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IV. The Golden Rule in the Classroom

The ethical framework I am describing can be stated even more simply: *Treat your students as you would want to be treated.*

This is, of course, the Golden Rule — found across ethical traditions, from the Torah to the Gospels to the Analects of Confucius. Its application to teaching may seem obvious, but its implications are more demanding than they first appear. If a professor truly asked themselves, "Would I want to be classified as 'not capable' by someone in authority over me? Would I want someone to judge not only my performance but my self-understanding? Would I want to be managed as a 'police officer' manages a suspect?" — the answer would be unambiguous.

But the Golden Rule in teaching goes beyond negative prohibitions. It also demands *positive action*: the kind of communication, transparency, and structural fairness that professors would want for themselves. Consider a concrete example.

Case 1: The Assignment Dispute

Toward the end of a semester, a student writes to her professor saying she is confused about a change in the syllabus. She believes she was allowed to drop her lowest assignment grade. Without stating it directly, she implies that the professor has changed the rules, and she requests permission to redo an assignment she missed.

The professor responds clearly: no such change was made. The policy was discussed in class three times. There are only four assignments in the course, and a drop-the-lowest policy was never part of the design.

The student persists. She explains that she moved mid-semester, that she is taking five courses, that the commute is stressful. She asks again to be allowed to complete the assignment.

Now the professor faces an ethical choice. A purely bureaucratic response would simply restate the policy. A purely accommodating response would reopen the assignment, potentially compromising academic integrity — since solutions had already been discussed in class and feedback had been given to all students who submitted.

The Golden Rule demands a third path: *firmness about rules, combined with genuine care for the student's situation and a transparent explanation of why the rules exist*. The professor responds by acknowledging the student's difficulties, explaining clearly why the assignment cannot be reopened (solutions are public, reopening would be unfair to others), and offering a concrete alternative — a proctored retake of the midterm exam, arranged through the department. The response treats the student as an adult who deserves an honest explanation, not a child who needs managing and not a rule-breaker who needs policing.

This is what the Golden Rule looks like in practice: not leniency, not rigidity, but *coherence between what the professor says and what the professor does*, with respect for the student's dignity preserved throughout.

Case 2: The Advisor Who Knows Too Much

A second situation, less bounded but no less consequential, arises in the advisory relationship — particularly at the graduate level. An advisor forms an impression of a student's capability. Perhaps the student is slow to produce, struggles with writing, or seems unsure of their research direction. The advisor may conclude — privately, perhaps unconsciously — that this student is "not capable," or at least not as capable as others.

The ethical danger here is not the initial impression but the *rigidity* of that impression. Students grow non-linearly. A student who struggles in one semester may make dramatic progress in the next. A student who appears unfocused may be integrating ideas in ways that are not yet visible. The advisor who locks in a judgment — even a sympathetic one — risks becoming the obstacle to the very growth they should be facilitating.

Schopenhauer regarded education as a lifetime process, not a predetermined path, and observed that the more we learn, the more we discover how much we still do not know. He understood that education's principal purpose is to help students build their own self-awareness and self-discipline — not to have these qualities imposed by an external authority. If this is true, then an advisor who fixes a student's capability in place is not merely making a misjudgment; they are *obstructing the very process that education exists to support*.

Kierkegaard tells a parable that applies here with uncomfortable precision:

"A fire broke out backstage in a theatre. The clown came out to warn the public; they thought it was a joke and applauded. He repeated it; the acclaim was even greater. I

think that's just how the world will come to an end: to general applause from wits who believe it's a joke."

The parable is usually read as a warning about the world's indifference to truth. But in a teaching context, it carries a different lesson: *the professor must consider that their own reading of the student may be wrong*. The student who appears to be performing, coasting, or failing may be communicating something the professor has not yet learned to hear. The ethical obligation is not to classify more accurately but to *listen more carefully* — to remain open to the possibility that the clown is, in fact, telling the truth.

The gap between self-perception and external perception is real, and it cuts in both directions. Students sometimes overestimate their abilities; they sometimes underestimate them. But so do professors — about their students and about themselves. The professor who believes they can reliably distinguish capable from incapable students, and who further believes they can identify when students' self-assessments are wrong, is claiming a degree of insight that is not merely arrogant but *empirically unsupported*. People are more opaque than we admit, and learning trajectories are more unpredictable than taxonomies allow.

Every professor, before judging a student, should say to themselves what Aristotle said to Plato: *I am your friend, but more a friend of the truth*. And the truth may be that the professor's judgment is the thing most in need of revision.

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V. What Students Find When They Find Meaning

The ethical framework I have described is not only about avoiding harm. It is also about creating the conditions under which education can fulfill its deepest purpose.

The students who thrive in the academic experience — who emerge from college or graduate school transformed, not merely credentialed — are those who found in it a response to their search for meaning. These searches are more or less conscious, but the outcome, when it arrives, always has the same character: the student discovered that the academic experience helped them to *do something good, create something beautiful, find order, or pursue truth*.

These are not sentimental aspirations. They are, in the language of classical philosophy, the *transcendentals* — the qualities that characterize being itself: goodness, beauty, order, truth. When education connects to these qualities, it is experienced as meaningful. When it does not — when it is reduced to compliance, credential-seeking, and the management of grades — it is experienced as hollow, regardless of the student's GPA.

Professors who respect teaching ethics must therefore attend to meaning as well as to mechanics. This means, concretely:

- **Communicating from truth.** Students detect incoherence between what professors say and what they do. A professor who espouses critical thinking but punishes dissent, who values creativity but rewards conformity, who claims to care about students but treats them as objects of classification — that professor is teaching something, but it is not what they intend.

- **Being coherent.** The alignment between stated values and actual practice is not a matter of personal style; it is an ethical requirement. Student satisfaction surveys, for all their limitations, often illuminate precisely this dimension: students consistently distinguish between professors who are demanding and professors who are incoherent, and they respect the former far more than the latter.

- **Distinguishing understanding from justification.** There is a critical difference between *understanding* a student — which requires openness, attentive listening, and the suspension of judgment — and *justifying* a student's behavior, which is a moral act that may or may not be warranted. The ethical professor practices the first habitually and reserves the second for cases where it is earned. Conflating the two — either by refusing to understand (because understanding feels like excusing) or by justifying everything (because judgment feels like cruelty) — is a failure of moral discernment. In Levinas's terms, understanding is the *rupture of indifference* — the moment when the professor stops processing the student through categories and begins to *respond* to them as a person. Justification is a subsequent step that may or may not follow, but the rupture must come first. Where there is indifference — where the professor has already decided what the student is — there is no ethics, however sophisticated the pedagogical framework.

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VI. Artificial Intelligence as Ethical Mirror

The arrival of artificial intelligence in higher education has been treated primarily as a practical challenge: How do we assess students who have access to ChatGPT? How do we design assignments that cannot be outsourced to a language model? How do we detect AI-generated work?

These are legitimate questions, but they are not the most important ones. The deeper question is ethical: *What does AI reveal about the teaching relationship, and what does it demand of professors?*

I want to argue that AI functions as an *ethical mirror* — reflecting back to professors the actual distribution of authority, trust, and autonomy in their classrooms, often in ways that are uncomfortable.

AI Destabilizes Authority

Traditional pedagogy rests on an implicit bargain: the professor has knowledge and the student does not; the professor's role is to transfer that knowledge and verify its acquisition. This bargain was always oversimplified, but it was functional. AI disrupts it fundamentally. When a student can ask a large language model to explain a concept, solve a problem, or draft an argument, the professor's monopoly on knowledge — which was never total — becomes visibly partial.

This is not a crisis for good teaching. It is a crisis for *authority-dependent* teaching — the kind that relies on the professor's position as the exclusive source of information,

evaluation, and judgment. Any pedagogical framework that places the professor's ability to assess student capability at its center belongs to this tradition. It assumes that the professor's judgment is the stable anchor of the educational relationship. AI makes that assumption untenable.

The Temptation to Reassert Control

The natural response to a loss of authority is to reassert it. And indeed, many of the early responses to AI in education have been disciplinary: stricter plagiarism policies, surveillance software, bans on AI use, syllabi that read like contracts rather than instruments of learning, incentives and penalties that foster extrinsic rather than intrinsic motivation. Some educators recognize these tendencies as counterproductive. But even those who see the problem often fail to escape it: their alternative frameworks still locate the professor as the *evaluating authority* who decides how to position themselves relative to different categories of students. The direction of authority remains vertical, even when the posture is supportive.

What AI Actually Demands

If my argument about the zero-sum nature of teaching authority is correct, then AI points in the opposite direction from reassertion. In moments of epistemic disruption — when the foundations of who-knows-what are shifting — the professor must *take less, not more*.

This means:

- **Trusting students more, not less.** If students are using AI to learn, that is information about how they learn, not evidence of cheating. The ethical response is to design learning experiences that engage students' actual processes — including their use of AI — rather than policing compliance with rules designed for a pre-AI world.
- **Redesigning assessment around trust.** Oral examinations, in-class discussions, collaborative projects, reflective portfolios — these are not workarounds for AI-proofing. They are pedagogically superior forms of assessment that AI has finally given us reason to adopt. They work because they restore the relationship between professor and student to the center of evaluation, rather than relying on proxy measures (written assignments submitted anonymously) that were always imperfect.
- **Modeling intellectual humility.** If professors expect students to be honest about their use of AI, professors must be honest about their own uncertainties. The professor who admits that they are still learning how AI changes their discipline, who experiments openly with new approaches, who treats the current moment as one of shared uncertainty rather than unilateral expertise — that professor is practicing the ethics they profess.

AI does not resolve the tensions in the teaching relationship. It *exposes* them. And what it exposes is the extent to which traditional pedagogy has relied on an authority that was always more fragile than it appeared. The ethical response is not to shore up that authority

but to build a different kind of teaching — one grounded in trust, transparency, and the deliberate redistribution of intellectual autonomy.

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VII. Conclusion: The Professor's Disposition

This essay has argued that teaching is an ethical practice — that the decisions professors make about how to relate to students are not merely strategic or pedagogical but moral. I have argued against the classification of students by capability, on the grounds that such classification is structurally humiliating, epistemically arrogant, and ethically costly. I have proposed instead that the central ethical question for educators is how much authority to retain and how much to leave for students — and that the answer, almost always, is to take less.

This is not a prescription but a *disposition*. Aristotle would call it a *hexis* — a stable state of character, cultivated through practice, that enables right action in particular circumstances. The professor with this disposition does not need a taxonomy of student types. They need the habit of asking, before every interaction: *Am I taking something that should belong to the student? Am I claiming authority that should be shared? Am I judging where I should be listening?*

Teaching ethics, so understood, is not a separate domain from teaching competence. It is its foundation. The professor who reflects honestly on their practice — who notices the contradictions, the hyperboles, the unexamined habits — is already engaged in ethical work. And from that engagement, everything else follows: better feedback, fairer assessment, more honest communication, greater respect for the complexity and unpredictability of human learning.

The world is full of clowns warning of fires while the audience applauds. The ethical professor is the one who takes the clown seriously — who considers that the student may be telling a truth the professor has not yet learned to hear.

Who is wise? One who learns from all people. Including — perhaps especially — from their students.

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