INTRODUCTION
As I began my studies at the Zicklin School of Business in August 2001, I was convinced that classroom discussions would be vibrant and varied. After all, Baruch’s student body is known as the most diverse in America, and I assumed that that diversity would inform classroom debate on issues of business strategy, tactics, politics and ethics.

Unfortunately, there exists a wide gap between my expectations and my experience. Far too many Honors MBA classmates, certainly a majority, either have little to say or are reluctant to express opinions. This situation lends itself to a discussion of business ethics, for these students’ failure to contribute to class discussion makes them “free riders” and leaves all students less prepared to succeed in the business world.

During the second installment of the “Ethics Throughout and Beyond the Curriculum” seminar series, Professor and former Briloff Prize winner Douglas Lackey delivered a talk titled, “Sustaining Ethics Discussions in the Classroom.” He outlined five simple moral tests that help uncomplicate ethics:

• The Golden Rule Test
• The Universal Generalization Test
• The New York Times Test
• The Promise Keeping Test
• The Injury Test

I will argue that the choice to remain silent fails each of these simple tests and is therefore immoral.

Lackey also outlines two good excuses and four bad ones for doing something wrong:

• “I could not know that the act was wrong.”
• “I could not avoid doing the wrong act.”
• “Everybody does it.”
• “I did nothing illegal.”
• “No one got hurt.”
• “All of this is subjective, anyway.”

I will argue that the good excuses do not apply to one’s choice to remain silent, and the bad excuses remain bad when applied to such a choice, further proof that silence is not golden and that the silent are guilty.

**FIVE SIMPLE MORAL TESTS**

1. **The Golden Rule Test**
   “How would I like it if others did this to me?” is the common expression of this test, according to Lackey. As it applies to classroom discussion, the question would be, “How would I like it if my classmates denied me the benefit of their experience and thinking?” The answer depends on the student’s understanding of the academy and the point of pursuing a business degree. If one understands a university as a place where one earns a credential or “gets his ticket punched,” then the test is not likely to highlight the moral or ethical issue of continued silence, because to such a student, what matters is the degree itself, not the effort the degree represents. If, on the other hand, the student were to understand that a university is a community of scholars pursuing truth and knowledge, then abstaining from class discussion would be understood as a failure to meet one’s duty and as an obstruction to one’s personal goals as they relate to the university.

2. **The Universal Generalization Test**
   “What if everybody contributed nothing to the debate?” would be the class participation version of this test’s question. The difference between this test and the Golden Rule Test is subtle as it applies to the academy, for a student’s goals and those of the university are, ideally, quite closely matched. Nevertheless, the student who understands the mission of a university would be likely to treat silence as a morally unacceptable choice because it would reduce class time to live versions of lectures-on-tape. No one could argue that an absence of dialogue in the classroom is desirable, and therefore one’s choice to contribute nothing fails the Universal Generalization Test.
3. The *New York Times* Test

A better name for this test as it applies to business schools might be the *Business Week* Annual Rankings Test. If corporate recruiters were to learn from rankings of business schools that lively classroom debate is not nearly as common at Zicklin as it is at other business schools, then they would likely be less interested in hiring Zicklin graduates. Furthermore, prospective students might choose schools other than Zicklin based on such rankings. Finally, rankings could discourage alumni from giving generously to the school. Reputation is crucial to Graduate Career Services, Graduate Admissions and College Advancement; failing the *New York Times* Test through continued classroom clamming-up makes success for the professionals who man these offices much more difficult.

4. The Promise Keeping Test

All students offered admission to the Honors MBA program were asked to sign a statement acknowledging the requirements and obligations related to the Honors MBA program. One could not take his place in the Honors MBA program without agreeing to various requirements. Among these duties and responsibilities are “working to the best of my ability” and “working effectively with the other members of my assigned cohort.” The statement outlines the school’s and students’ high stakes and ends with the pledge, “I will make every effort to approach all aspects of my Honors program experience with these stakes in mind.”

It is not unreasonable to assume that among these pledges is the promise to participate in class discussions, although certainly the contract would have been improved had it explicitly stated that class participation is a requirement. Nevertheless, if a student were to ask himself if this contract included a promise to prepare for and participate in class discussions, the only honest answer would be “Yes,” and the only conclusion would be to equate silence with a broken promise.
5. The Injury Test

Lackey calls this the simplest of the five tests. The question as it relates to class discussion is, “If I remain silent, will some classmate get hurt?” In answering this question, one can consider the related issues of discovery and disclosure. In the courtroom, it is a serious lapse for the prosecution to hide from the defense evidence it plans to use in court. In accounting and corporate finance, there are frequent debates about the materiality of information and whether disclosure is necessary. Failure to follow rules of discovery or disclosure can bring serious injury to the other parties, not to mention the self-inflicted wounds should one be found in violation of these rules.

Injury can and does occur when classmates choose to be silent. As an example, a recruiter may find it troubling that a prospective employee from Zicklin possesses not even a superficial understanding of the cultural and other issues an American company might face when doing business in China. “Is this not something you discussed in class? I thought that one of the features of your school is its tremendous diversity,” the recruiter might say. There is nothing the job seeker could say to undo the injury inflicted upon him by his classmates’ failure to give perspective on a host country’s challenges in that student’s native land.

It is worth mentioning that students who spread misinformation through their comments, inadvertently or otherwise, may also inflict injury if that misinformation were to be repeated in interviews or on the job. However, the professor and the students’ classmates can and should be on the lookout for such errors. As long as participants are alert to errors, the risk of injury from saying something wrong is far less than the injury of saying nothing at all.

EXCUSES, GOOD AND BAD

1. “I could not know the act is wrong.”

Lackey deems acceptable the excuse that the student could not have known that the act, in this case silence, is wrong. Is ignorance possible? Unfortunately, it is. It should be
the administration’s responsibility to impress upon all students, ideally before and during orientation, that regardless of one’s previous educational experience or home country’s approach to higher education, active participation is expected and required for the betterment of the Zicklin community. I took part in Orientation 2001 as an incoming student and in last year’s three-day program as a volunteer, and I am certain that this message was not delivered effectively, if at all. As already discussed, the contract my classmates were required to sign did not mention class participation as a specific requirement, giving credence to the claim, “How could I have known?”

Students’ understanding of class participation is also influenced by professors’ varying emphasis on class discussion. In at least five of the twenty Honors MBA sections during the 2001/02 academic year, class participation accounted for 0% of one’s final grade. With such a high percentage of courses requiring nothing in the way of contribution, it is no wonder some students believe that participation is optional.

2. “I could not have avoided the act.”
To the best of my knowledge, there are no students among my classmates who are mute or otherwise unable to express themselves orally. While the “unavoidable” excuse is one that Lackey finds generally to be a good one for wrongdoing, silence in the classroom does seem to be avoidable, and therefore the excuse is not an acceptable one for the silent treatment.

3. “Everybody does it.”
While the number of students who participate regularly and fully in class discussions is small, it is not zero. “Everybody refuses to participate in class discussion” would not only be a bad excuse, according to Lackey, but in this case it is not even an accurate statement.

4. “I did nothing illegal.”
As Lackey points out, “The rules of morality are stricter than the rules of law.” There is at a university a community standard, often forgotten, that requires members to contribute
to progress towards the institution’s goals and to the goals of one’s colleagues. Failure to contribute to progress is, in fact, not merely inaction but rather outright obstruction, and therefore it is a violation of the contract. Illegal? No. Outside the spirit of the “law”? Certainly.

5. “No one got hurt.”
As outlined in the discussion of the five simple tests, students can and do suffer from classmates’ opting out of such an important part of academic life. As with “Everybody does it,” this is not only an invalid excuse but also an incorrect statement.

6. “Ethics is all subjective, anyway.”
The give-and-take of debate opens minds, reveals biases, and increases understanding. There are members of the community who are frustrated by the general state of debate in the classroom, but it is not merely opinion that fuels their frustration with the silent majority. There is nothing subjective about the centrality of debate to the pursuit of truth and knowledge in a dialogue-based educational system such as ours. Rather, it is a fact that the pursuit of truth and knowledge cannot go on without discussion and debate, at least not in this culture and in this system.

**NEXT STEPS**
Higher education is no longer a privilege enjoyed only by the elite; *USA Today* reports that 63% of today’s high school seniors will go on to college. Because a college education is something that is now more routine than rare, perhaps it is time to ask ourselves, “Why are we here?” A refresher course on the academy’s *raison d’être* and on our role within the academy may make us better able to impress upon others that time spent on campus is precious, and that time is best spent as an active, not a passive, participant.

Students need to be told by faculty and administrators and reminded by their classmates that they must have opinions and that they must express those opinions. Such a message
must be one prospective students review, matriculating students vow to uphold, and professors include in setting expectations. Professors should be encouraged to make A’s unattainable for non-contributors. By assigning a minimum of 15% of the final grade to class contribution, by giving no credit for merely showing up, and by actually assigning a grade of zero when warranted, a professor can say at the outset, “If you contribute nothing, your class contribution grade will be zero, and it will therefore be impossible for you earn higher than a B+ in my class.” \((4.0 – (4.0 \times 0.15) = 3.4 = B+)\) That may not be motivation enough, but it is certainly more motivation than exists now.

Placing greater emphasis on class contribution will bring its own set of problems. How should the professor rate contribution? Is consistently adequate commentary the goal, or are occasional flashes of brilliance more highly valued? Certainly some students will feel that their own particular brand of contribution is not assessed properly by some professors. Nevertheless, disputes about the value of class contribution would be evidence of progress from today’s sorry state, namely the low volume of class discussion.

**CONCLUSION**

Putting talk of truth and knowledge aside for a moment, part of the mission of the Zicklin School of Business is to prepare students for success in the business world. Successful businesspeople must be able to express themselves, to negotiate effectively, and to argue points of view; they also must be able listen to others and to use what others say in formulating their own counterarguments and counterproposals.

The place to begin mastery of oral communication is in the classroom. The people who must insist that Zicklin students become fully engaged in classroom debate are the students themselves, their professors, and the administration. The time to address this issue of business ethics is now.