[*Expositions* 7.1 (2013) 22–32] *Expositions* (online) ISSN: 1747–5376

Learning from the Labs: Reimagining Ethics Instruction

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It is a truism to describe philosophy as a theoretical field. But while all fields of study have theories that ground their work, philosophy as a discipline has theory as its subject. In other words, the focus in philosophy is so deeply on theory that applications of theory can be treated as afterthoughts. This is evident both in how philosophers approach the field of ethics in their research, and in how philosophers typically teach ethics courses. The effect on students is that what they learn in the classroom is disconnected from how they actually experience and react to moral conflicts they face. As feminists, we think it important that ethical engagement accounts for our situatedness as moral agents and for the complexity of lived, embodied experience.

In this paper, we explain how traditional methods of teaching ethics, as theory that is to be applied, fail to give students useful tools that allow them to address actual ethical problems that they will face. We criticize these traditional methods from a feminist perspective which demands that moral reasoning be grounded in lived experience rather than reflect abstract reasoning about idealized situations. We examine the shift in teaching science—from a formalistic approach that emphasizes getting the answer right, by applying scientific theory correctly to laboratory work, to an experimental approach in which students practice "thinking like a scientist"—as a model for thinking about how we should shift the ways that we teach ethics. Finally, we propose several suggestions for how we can reimagine teaching ethics in ways that give students practical tools for moral reasoning that they can use in actual, real-life moral conflicts.

1. The Limits of Theory: Problems with Traditional Approaches to Teaching Ethics

Most American philosophers teach introductory ethics courses in a similar, standard way. This approach is how most of us encountered ethics as undergraduates, and it is how most of us were taught, in graduate school, to teach ethics. The standard approach starts with theory and moves toward application. For the past several decades, the field of ethics has typically been viewed as comprising three major theories: deontology, consequentialism, and virtue theory. These theories are presented to students as alternative ways of understanding and resolving moral dilemmas, where ethical conflicts are typically evaluated according to intentions, consequences, or character, usually not in combination. The historical giants of Aristotle, Kant, and Mill are often taught; contemporary versions of these approaches usually accompany the historical texts. While egoism and relativism are sometimes added to an ethics syllabus, they are typically straw-people arguments (in other words, presented as examples of a very limited ethical theory). It is the rare ethics textbook that treats feminist ethics, and even then it is considered entirely as ethics of care.

Once the theories are laid out, an ethics class typically proceeds to "apply" the theories to specific topics and cases. Often these are hypothetical or idealized cases used to test the limits of

an ethical rule or generalization. Applications are usually to topics that are part of contemporary public discourse—such as abortion, poverty, and vegetarianism—but the applications are very formulaic. Discussions usually assume a universal moral subject that is abstracted from particulars: disembodied, unsituated, with no history or context.

Margaret Urban Walker calls this approach a *theoretical-juridical model*, which she describes in this way: "The regnant type of moral theory in contemporary ethics is a *codifiable* (and usually *compact*) set of moral *formulas* (or procedures for selecting formulas) that can be applied by *any* agent to a situation to yield a justified and determinate *action-guiding* judgment."[1] In this model, ethical formulas (given by each of the three major theories) comprise very general rules or principles that are applied through deduction or instantiation, producing the same results for all agents regardless of their particular identities or circumstances. These formulas are action-guiding in the sense that they instruct "the" (universal, disembodied, unsituated) agent what to do in a given—albeit idealized—situation and those relevantly similar.[2]

Ethical conflicts are more complicated than idealized situations and bizarre thought experiments would suggest, however. The kind of moral reasoning that is useful for addressing actual conflicts requires accounting for complexities and specific details, and it may involve making nuanced judgments that are particular to the agent and to the situation.

Idealized cases strip particular details in order to try to get at the "essence" of a situation, with the goal of generalizing it as much as possible in order for it to apply to as many particular situations as possible. Usually, however, a wide range of specific details are morally relevant, and the goal of generality for the sake of applicability often prevents the recognition of just what is morally salient. Eliminating morally salient information produces incomplete moral knowledge, resulting in less accurate and less useful moral judgment. Accounting for specific details is important for developing as complete moral knowledge as possible, in order to make more accurate and more useful moral judgments. As Theresa Tobin points out, this problem becomes magnified when moral examples cross cultures, for the contextual details that get removed for simplicity's sake can eliminate crucial information that can distort conclusions.[3]

Moreover, the person doing moral reasoning is not an abstract, universal agent. As Iris Young explains, moral reasoning is never an impartial endeavor, even if that is its ideal.[4] An individual is always a particular: embodied and situated in specific ways with respect to what she is reasoning about. Accounting for this situatedness requires reflexivity about one's position *as* a moral reasoner and moral agent. Such reflexivity involves critically examining practices of moral reasoning as well as the structural conditions that enable and constrain how one is able to engage in these practices.[5] Ethics courses rarely challenge students to do this reflexive meta-analysis, yet a deep understanding and assessment of ethical situations requires it.

This reflexivity both enables and requires an analysis of the social power and authority relevant to a given case and to the position of the moral reasoner/agent with respect to that case.[6] In examining a moral conflict, it is important to recognize that power and privilege condition the nature and goals of moral inquiry, including how we select what ethical factors and facts about a

situation are morally relevant. Our social location helps determine what values, relationships, and responsibilities we find relevant and important.[7]

As a consequence of the abstract, idealized, theoretical approach to ethics, ethical analysis in the classroom tends to take a formulaic approach that has little to do with the kinds of ethical dilemmas we want students to contemplate as they move through a reflective life. Philosophy's long tradition of the thought experiment, which should be least necessary in ethics (the discipline dealing with the applications of theory to one's everyday life), ends up limiting and rendering artificial the value of ethical thinking, simply because the cases students analyze are so often artificial in nature. It is quite unlikely, for instance, that students will find themselves in lifeboats overloaded with artistic masterpieces, selfless doctors, and innocent babies; helming the switch of an out-of-control trolley heading towards two groups of innocent potential victims, trying to decide which harmful track to choose; or indeed, any sort of remotely comparable situation.

We suspect that the result of this kind of teaching is students' coming to see formal instruction in ethics as academic only, and of little use in forming their own beliefs about how they ought to behave. One of us has had anecdotal reinforcement of that belief, having by far the most academic dishonesty of her 20-year career (nearly one-fifth of the class) occur in an applied ethics course she was teaching. This anecdotal experience is backed up by a recent study demonstrating that MBA graduates left graduate school, with its instruction in business ethics, with diminished, rather than enhanced, ethical standards.[8]

2. Challenging the "Cookbook" Model: Analogy to Natural Science

Perhaps surprisingly, the natural sciences are a good model for the possibilities that can occur when we question assumptions about how a course must proceed (assumptions which we have made based on how such a course typically has proceeded, and how we learned this field). Basic lab science courses used to be called "cookbook" classes, in which students would learn fundamental formulas, theories, and concepts in lectures and then perform basic, standard experiments in labs. The emphasis in natural science lab courses was always on the lecture, where the theoretical material was presented; the laboratory was a mere application of the theory. The idea was always simply to understand the techniques, and the emphasis was on *getting the right result*. This had a spillover effect into the construction of lab write-ups (students' accounts of their lab work); the emphasis here was always on writing as a scientist does (learning the professional prose of science).

The ongoing revolution in natural science education began in the 1970s. Educators realized that students, while achieving technical competence, in fact were learning nothing about how scientists think about information that's not already explained in a textbook—and, therefore, were not learning how to think like scientists themselves. Undergraduate science education was in fact poor preparation for graduate specialization in science. In other words, while students were learning to follow very specific instructions, they were limited to those instructions only. To use Margaret Urban Walker's words, they were thinking in formulas only, which actually limited their ability to understand lab work that didn't perfectly fit their models. They did not

have the cognitive tools to apply what they were learning in their basic lab courses to any independent science work.

This is why the "cookbook" pejorative is so apt. In the old model, students could follow a specific scientific recipe competently, but they could not think about what to do with a bench of ingredients; they could not formulate a question and figure out how to answer it independently. This, we fear, is what too many of our students experience in ethics classes. They know how to jerk their Kantian and Millian knees in response to some standard dilemmas, but they do not know how to respond as an ethically reflective person to actual choices that they confront in their own lives. (E.g., what to do when a student in another class asks to copy their case-study paper?)

Science educators responded to the "cookbook" problem by reorganizing their labs around principles of active learning. To be specific, innovations included designing experiments that were open-ended (students could select their own variables);[9] having students develop their own hypotheses (instead of testing predesigned experiments given to them by the instructor);[10] and changing the task of the lab write-up from a technical regurgitation of procedure to an audience-specific persuasive activity.[11] The theme here is common: instead of treating the theory as the focus in the course, and the laboratory as the predictable application of the theory, scientific practice was elevated to an ongoing, recursive, and reflexive activity.

Assessment has been ongoing (but has generally documented improved student learning), and changes continue to develop in natural science, but the overall theme here is illuminating for thinking about ethics. The old model of teaching science focused on ensuring that students understood the big principles of scientific theories and could apply them correctly; it had limited effects on how students actually thought about and practiced science. We propose that there is a similar "cookbook" paradigm in teaching ethics that is equally limiting. Students learn the big three theories of ethics (deontology, utilitarianism, and virtue ethics) and then apply them to case studies so that they can understand basic differences in the theories. But this approach does not teach students how to generate their own questions about how they ought to behave, or how to analyze the kinds of ethical dilemmas they might actually encounter. More particularly, the "cookbook" approach to ethics does not help reveal or illuminate the kinds of ethical challenges that are not simply a result of clashing interests or values, but of deep structural injustices (such as racism, sexism, or class inequality). Finally, "cookbook" ethics classes do not have a place for considering questions of context or culture.

It is surely relevant to note that the major articles to date discussing the effectiveness of teaching ethics, and comparing different strategies, are mostly in applied ethics fields (medical, nursing, accounting, business ethics).[12] Obviously, one reason for this is that students have a sustained self-interest in acting ethically (or at least in compliance with current law). But it is just as striking to observe the paucity of studies and assessment done of traditional ethics courses and their outcomes, including not only student knowledge of ethical theories, but also, more important, how students think about actual choices they encounter.

3. Reimagining Ethics: New Approaches to Teaching

Reimagining our approaches to teaching ethics requires intentionally thinking about goals for student learning, a process that involves some of the reflexive analysis that students should be doing. If the typical approach to teaching is producing problematic "cookbook" results, it is necessary to clarify and articulate the goals we teachers want to achieve, so that we can determine what methods will enable us to do so.

We (the authors of this paper) propose the following goals. Students should be able to recognize what are ethical conflicts and to be able to discern what information they need to know in order to address specific conflicts. Students should be able to identify and describe a variety of ethical factors, often occurring concurrently and in relation to each other, that may be relevant to understanding and assessing a situation. When students assess a moral conflict, they should be able to explain the tensions and difficulties inherent to the problem, in depth, to demonstrate what makes it a *conflict*; and they should be able to explain how the various relevant ethical factors make the conflict a concern of *ethics*. Additionally, they should be able to reflect upon the relationship between these factors sufficiently to be able to develop their own approaches and solutions to the conflict, and to support their ideas with strong reasons by incorporating into their approaches or solutions as much relevant information as possible.

With these goals in mind, we propose the following ways to reimagine how an ethics course can foster the moral development of our students:

Complicate moral reasoning: There are a variety of ethical factors that we as moral agents can look at when examining a moral conflict, including intentions, consequences, virtues, and structural conditions. The traditional approach of applying ethical theory to a case has us isolate a particular factor as the most morally relevant one and cast aside the others (and which factor we select depends on which ethical theory we are applying). In fact, a variety of factors exist in any given situation, and many are relevant to thinking about the nature of the conflict and the ways in which it is an ethical issue. Good moral reasoning identifies and accounts for as many morally relevant facts as possible, based on as many ethical factors as seem relevant to the case. Good moral reasoning does not involve choosing between one factor or another, nor does it require weighing factors (or facts) as if they were quantifiable and measurable against a single standard. Such a unifying approach is falsely reductive, leading to incomplete moral knowledge and inaccurate (and therefore not useful) moral judgment. Additionally, such an approach may perpetuate relations of domination and oppression by obscuring the nature of existing power relations, coding the moral reasoning and perspectives of those in positions of privilege as neutral and normal standards against which other forms of reasoning and other perspectives are judged.[13] Applying the major ethical theories to specific cases in a formulaic way typically produces such narrow judgments as to be unhelpful and is not actually as action-guiding as the method is intended to be. Recognizing and accounting for the vast range of factors and their complicated relationships to each other produces more nuanced, more complicated, but also more accurate and realistically action-guiding judgments.

Reconsider texts: A radical approach to teaching ethics would require us as teachers to rethink what readings we assign. One justification for teaching canonical texts by Aristotle, Kant, and Mill in an ethics class is our strong obligation to bring historical texts to bear on contemporary approaches. As the authors of this paper, we find this obligation very important, especially since we teach at a Jesuit institution that values situating contemporary problems and approaches within a historical context and especially within the liberal arts tradition. However, philosophers often use these canonical texts in such a formulaic way as to make their theories what Mill calls "dead dogmas,"[14] rather than dynamic participants in a living dialogue about how we ought to live. Transforming our teaching requires us to approach these canonical texts in radically different ways and/or to incorporate alternative texts to which we may bring a fresh approach. Alternative texts may include different historical texts and/or contemporary readings that approach moral conflict in more nuanced ways than the traditional "three major theories" generally do.

Focus on actual moral conflicts rather than abstract theory: We philosophers need to broaden our understanding of what constitutes an ethical problem. Ethics courses (and scholarship) should examine actual problems experienced by particular individuals, under specific circumstances. While testing the limits of a theory through abstract thought experiments may be an enjoyable mental exercise, it does not have real-world application: it is not useful for enabling students to develop the reflective tools to approach moral conflicts that they will actually encounter throughout their lives. Ethics courses should be structured around the examination of real moral conflicts rather than around the rote learning (and application) of the mechanics of three theories.

Address the structural conditions of ethical conflicts: We generally approach ethical conflicts as problems that an *individual* faces and has to resolve, leaving *social* problems of justice to the realm of political philosophy. This strict division of labor between ethics and political philosophy is somewhat arbitrary, however, since many ethical problems have both individual and social dimensions; and it is problematic insofar as it construes what constitutes an ethical versus a political problem too narrowly. Many ethical conflicts have structural conditions that determine who (which particular individuals) experiences the conflict and under what circumstances. Structural conditions—such as existing political and economic systems and social relations (e.g., gender, race, class)—are usually in the background, unrecognized and therefore unaccounted for and unaddressed. However, they ought to be in the foreground of our moral consideration, as they provide essential context for the particular moral conflicts we encounter.[15] Ignoring specific details of actual cases prevents us from developing a deeper understanding of the contexts which give rise to ethical conflicts and thus gives us incomplete information for making ethical analyses. Identifying relevant structural conditions, on the other hand, allows specific details of the conflict to be recognized as morally salient and thus enables them to be accounted for when addressing the conflict.

Take advantage of peers in an ethics class. If the general emphasis in ethics classes should be less on whether or not students can apply specifics of theories "correctly," and more on whether

or not they can recognize a live ethical issue and work out some of the complexities in its analysis, group discussion becomes crucial to achieving this result. Having students sort out the various issues relevant to a particular ethical question, as well as generate some of the relevant structural or contextual questions that may affect their answers, requires examining multiple perspectives. This has been demonstrated in medical ethics: a recent study of medical students' case study discussions of an ethical question established that students who participated in small-group discussions of the case were more capable of identifying ethical issues, "*seeing multiple viewpoints*, and justifying their actions."[16]

While class discussion is often incorporated into philosophy classes, we are suggesting here that it should be worked more intentionally into classes. For instance, it is common for professors to use discussion as a way of revealing many arguments, but (ultimately) to have the grades in a course based on individual written assignments, designed to argue for a single solution to the case. Discussions often happen after the individual assignments are completed. This tends to minimize the learning that can happen from thinking about other students' perspectives, and to maximize the need for a student to reproduce particular details of a theory. There are a variety of ways in which student perspectives could be more thoroughly explored in a class. Moving from the easiest to most difficult: scheduling discussions before writing assignments occur; requiring individual writing assignments to incorporate (not merely as a straw person) an alternative viewpoint from a peer; and developing peer assignments (such as Team-Based-Learning models) that are actually structured into the syllabus for part of the grade. Each or all of these would encourage, and concretely value, the exploration of multiple perspectives on any one particular issue.

Experiment with alternative models of writing assignments. Case study analyses are by far the most common writing assignment for ethics courses, and they have some of the same weaknesses that "cookbook" lab write-ups do. The emphasis is on getting the technical details right (can the students recognize when a hypothetical imperative can be rendered in categorical terms without contradicting itself?), as opposed to exploring the difficulties of the question itself. Some of the models with which science has experimented—in particular, persuading a specific, and skeptical, audience[17]—could easily translate to an ethics class. For instance, asking students to write a position paper, or a memo for a policy organization or Cabinet officer, could be framed so as to incorporate ethical reasoning while requiring that students apply this reasoning in a more complicated way than simply considering individuals abstractly.

Develop examples and cases with students carefully. Felicia Ackerman offers up a cautionary note about the dangers of some of the kinds of approaches suggested here. One of her rules for her philosophy classes, even her ethics courses, is counterintuitive: "We never discuss our personal lives."[18] While she recognizes the merit of applying theory to one's personal life, she reminds readers that students may be more tentative to think creatively about a difficult example if they know it is one that a student is struggling with or has done so (such as rape, illness, disability). This is a fair warning, but one that would not rule out our approach, just some ways in which it might be conducted. Professors experimenting with this approach to ethics teaching

should probably lay out some ground rules as they develop case studies with students. For example, ethical cases should be varied, students should not be expected to volunteer their direct personal experiences, and, most crucially, cases should span cultures or structural differences through the course of a semester. Trolley problems, surgically attached violinists, and overstuffed lifeboats are equally problematic (or not) in any culture—their genericness strips them of interest. But questions about consumption, allotment of medical resources, and limitations on free speech (just to name a few) could be radically different depending on the specifics of the culture and the audience. We think it is exactly that sort of variety that can generate a productive, applicable, and provocative ethics classroom.

As an illustration of our proposal, one of us recently taught Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* in an introductory class.[19] Skloot explains that Ms. Lacks' cells have been consistently used for many important medical breakthroughs in the sixty years since they were first taken from her; a central ethical issue examined in the book, however, is the fact that doctors used Ms. Lacks' cells without her or her family's consent, or even knowledge. The book's exploration of consent in medical ethics ended up being rich material for class discussion, precisely because there were basic ethical issues present, and because there are so many structural injustices explored in the book. Students raised and compared their own experiences with the health care system, as well as their own institutional experiences of racism or sexism, and how these structural injustices materially changed how they thought about the core ethical issues. Students also recognized that their weighting of the value of consent, as well as the practical and life-giving results of the research based on Henrietta Lacks' cells, was complicated once they started thinking more seriously about some of these institutional barriers.

In another example, one of us had a particularly profound discussion about the use of stigmatizing language. Not only did students share their observations about the use of terms such as "retarded" among their peers, but a couple of male athletes also shared their experiences with being called by their teammates—and, they admitted, calling their teammates—derogatory sexist and homophobic terms. From this, the class moved into a discussion about gendered power relations and the norms of masculinity that such language represented. This concrete example of stigmatizing language—an example which came from students who themselves used the language without thinking about its significance—allowed us to examine gender norms and relations in a way that was deeply relevant for and meaningful to students. While a discussion like this occurs spontaneously, teachers should pay attention to ethical situations that students raise as meaningful to them, and explore the ethical and structural dimensions of those situations carefully (without judgment) and gently (so that all students in the classroom feel safe as they participate and listen). Paying attention to and incorporating into discussion the real-life ethical issues that students think about can be an important way to practice and develop truly practical moral reasoning.

4. Conclusion

As we have argued in this essay, an undergraduate ethics class should not be an exercise in formal, abstract reasoning but rather provide practical tools to enable students to address real-life moral situations. Philosophy should follow the lead of science in replacing a "cookbook" method of teaching with a more realistic, experimental approach which requires students to deal with complex situations to which formal rules cannot give perfect guidance. By broadening what constitutes the practice of moral reasoning, ethics classes can provide students with practical ways to address the actual moral conflicts that they will encounter in their lives.

Notes

1. Walker 1998, 52 (italics in the original).
2. Ibid., 52–53.
3. Tobin 2011, 611.
4. Young 2011, 99–105.
5. For discussion of how epistemic or intellectual authority typically (and uncritically) underlies practices of moral reasoning, see Walker 1998, 54–55.
6. Ibid., 55–56.
7. For an analogous discussion of how even scientific knowledge is conditioned by values and assumptions that underlie scientific inquiry, see Longino 1990, 40–45 and Potter 2006, 78–79.
8. Callahan 2004, 290.
9. See Berg et al. 2003, 354.
10. See Hofstein and Lunetta 2003, 32.
11. See Moskovitz and Kellogg 2001, 920.
12. See Smith et al. 2004 and Brinkmann and Ims 2004.
13. Young 2011, 112.
14. Mill 1978 [1859], 34.
15. See O'Connor 2002.
16. Smith et al. 2004, 268 (emphasis added).
17. See Moskovitz and Kellogg 2011, 919.

18. Ackerman 2011, 7.

19. Skloot 2010.

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