This is a repository copy of *Against Moral Theories - Reply to Benatar*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/96792/

Version: Accepted Version

Abstract:

Although sympathetic to my claims ("Moral theories in teaching applied ethics"), D Benatar argues that I have overlooked important roles that could be played by moral theories in the teaching of applied ethics. In this reply, I will consider the cases that Benatar suggests and, for each, I will suggest that there is an alternative approach which, as well as avoiding the costs discussed in my original paper, will also be a more effective response to that particular issue.

INTRODUCTION

In "Moral theories may have some role in teaching applied ethics", D Benatar states that he is not sure how much talk about moral theories is compatible with my approach. He states that he is sympathetic to my arguments but claims that whether or not they are successful depends on what my conclusion actually is. Benatar claims that, *if* my claim is that moral theories should not be taught at all, or that there should be very little talk about theories, then my conclusion should be rejected. He argues that I have overlooked important roles that could be played by moral theories in the teaching of applied ethics.[1]

I will consider each of these in turn, and will demonstrate that, in these cases Benatar overstates the benefit (or in some cases I will argue there is no benefit at all) and understates the costs (which will be the same costs highlighted in my previous paper [2]).

CLARIFICATION

I concede the fact that my paper wasn't completely explicit about how much (if any) teaching of moral theories I would allow. Benatar may be disappointed to hear that this paper won't be much more explicit. Rather than offering any kind of prescription, telling people how much (or how little) teaching you should have on moral theories, my aim was just to highlight the dangers of using moral theories. Being aware of the dangers, teachers can of course decide for themselves. Also, my paper did include the concession that the longer and the more thorough the course, the more likely it is that it might be appropriate to include some teaching of moral theories.

Nevertheless, in general, I am willing to accept Benatar's characterization of my position – at least if we ignore more detailed and in depth study of applied ethics. In most cases, I do believe that "no more than very little talk about theories is compatible" with my arguments.

BENATAR'S COUNTER-EXAMPLES

Benatar offers a number of counter-examples to my conclusion that moral theories should not be discussed in detail when teaching applied ethics, demonstrating that the teaching of moral theories can be useful. In this reply, I will consider the cases that Benatar suggests and, for each, I will suggest that there is an alternative approach which, as well as avoiding the costs discussed in my original paper, will also be a more effective response to the particular issue considered.

First: non-philosophers appeal to theoretical frameworks

Benatar argues that, even without realizing, non-philosophers will often "appeal to theoretical frameworks when discussing practical moral problems." As an example, he claims that students will often appeal to the consequences of an action when arguing.

I agree with the claim that students do sometimes appeal to theoretical frameworks, and also agree that students do appeal to consequences, but I fail to see why this gives us any reason to teach moral theories.

Benatar claims that "If students are introduced to moral theories, they will be able to identify this as a consequentialist argument."

I have to confess, I cannot see what students would be missing out on if they don't have a knowledge of moral theories and, thus, are unable to identify these arguments as "consequentialist arguments".

The claim that an argument that appeals to consequences is a consequentialist argument is ambiguous. It could mean that an argument is

consequentialist just as long as it is an argument that appeals to consequences. Alternatively, it could mean that an argument is consequentialist if it is an argument that relies in some sense on a consequentialist framework.

On the first interpretation, this doesn't look informative. A student is not missing anything important by not knowing this. On the second interpretation, the statement is false. Pointing out that a particular act or policy would have negative (or positive) consequences is an important consideration that should be taken into account by anyone, and does not rely on a consequentialist framework.

Someone who says that x is wrong because x has certain bad consequences may be a consequentialist, but he needn't be. He could be a Rossian pluralist. Or he may not fit neatly into either. The student might simply believe that the fact that x would have bad consequences is a reason to avoid x.

Thus, the claim that someone who appeals to the consequences of an action is appealing to a theoretical framework needn't be true. More importantly, even if it is true, it is not clear that there is anything to be gained by teaching the student about moral theories.

Rather than teaching this student something about consequentialism, a better approach, I suggest, would be to ask him a further question: do you think that the consequences of the action are the only relevant considerations?

If the student says yes, then he is appealing to a theoretical framework after all. If not, he isn't (or, at least, needn't be). And if the student says yes, you can press him further, asking if he's sure that he wants to commit himself to that claim. And, of course, you can present the student with difficult cases to challenge this belief. And, of course, these counter-examples may come from

the literature on consequentialism, but this (I suggest) isn't something the student needs to know. And if the student says no, or if he gives up the claim that only consequences matter, you can ask him what else he thinks matters, and then you can discuss those different issues too – and none of this requires the discussion of moral theories.

The particular argument that Benatar appeals to in relation to this is the back-street abortions argument against making abortion illegal. As I said above, Benatar claims that discussing moral theories with students allows the student to identify the argument as a consequentialist argument, and he goes on to say that the student will also be aware that the consequentialist approach is not uncontested.

I cannot see the benefit of considering this argument in this round about way. Rather than identifying the argument as a consequentialist argument, and then showing them that consequentialism is not uncontested (which doesn't seem to leave the student in a better position to judge the argument than they were in the first place) why not address the argument directly? Confront them, for example, with David Oderberg's reductio ad absurdum argument:

> I am disturbed by the number of backstreet contract killings being carried out by members of the Mafia and other gangland organisations. These murders are often bloody and excruciating. Some victims survive and are maimed for life. Unscrupulous operators, often untrained or semi-trained in the art of killing, receive thousands of dollars for their acts. A whole black market in contract killing has arisen. I propose to solve the problem by taking contract killing out of the backstreet and into the hands of the state.[3]

A discussion of consequentialism is not required.

Ultimately, Benatar claims that the value of discussing theories is not to lay a theoretical foundation, but to expose theoretical assumptions. This is a useful distinction, but I question the need to appeal to moral theories in order to expose theoretical assumptions. Instead, it is, I suggest, better to question the students, probing deeper, and then challenge each of the more foundational beliefs in turn. As I suggested above, you can simply ask the student: "Do you believe that it is *only* the consequences that matter?"

Benatar also claims that his approach pre-empts another problem that I identified – that students might adopt a form of relativism according to which the answers to ethical questions are relative to moral theories. Benatar offers two responses to this. First, the students will know that they "do not know enough to choose among the theories." Second, "Students can be taught the important lesson... that just because there is disagreement – even an unresolved one – this does not mean that every view is correct."

I agree with the second point, and would stress that it is essential that students are taught this, but students can be taught this whether we discuss moral theories or not, so it is not clear how this point is supposed to help Benatar's approach, or to pre-empt this problem.

The first point seems more relevant, but seems to be almost as undesirable as the relativism I was keen to avoid. Indeed, I am tempted to think that, when I thought of it as a form of relativism to start with, I may have simply misidentified the phenomenon. Maybe Benatar's account is more accurate. It is not that the students are relativists, it's just that they think they

are qualified to say, "this conclusion follows if we are consequentialists", and "this conclusion follows if we are deontologists" but then think they are unqualified to say anything else and they simply give up. They are unable to say anything more than that, because (given the complexities of some of the moral theories) they do not know enough to choose between them.

So what they learn is that the purpose of their classes in ethics is to identify what a consequentialist would say about an issue, and what a deontologist would say about an issue, and then concede that they are unqualified to say anything else.

If this is the outcome of this approach, I cannot see why anyone would think that this was a point in *favour* of discussing moral theories.

Second: students hold stronger opinions about practical issues

Benatar claims that students "often hold much stronger opinions about practical issues than they do about theoretical ones" and then argues that a discussion of moral theory "can introduce students to philosophical reasoning via issues about which students may be less defensive and more open-minded."

I have to confess that I am unsure what I want to say about this. On the one hand, I want to ask if it is necessarily a bad thing that students are passionate about an issue. It seems to me, this could be another reason in favour of discussing the practical issues directly, rather than the more theoretical issues.

That said, in some cases at least, I think I ought to accept the claim that it might be beneficial to discuss issues in which the students will be open-minded and less defensive. But we should note that Benatar says "The skills, even if not the theories, can then be applied and developed further in discussion of practical problems."

If this is the argument that Benatar is appealing to, we should note that he is not using the moral theory as a method of getting to the answer to a particular question. Rather, he is using it as a training ground. If this is the benefit of teaching moral theories, and if Benatar accepts that there are costs involved in teaching moral theories, wouldn't it be better to stick to applied ethics, but to take this consideration into account when deciding the order of the topics. So, if we accept the claim that we don't want to start with the topics where students might have stronger opinions and closed minds, we can leave those topics for later, and start with something else. But the something else needn't be moral theory – it could just be less contentious topics in applied ethics – and we can use these topics as the training ground.

I was a little surprised that Benatar didn't defend the use of moral theories by saying that we could abstract away from the particular case, talking at the level of moral theories, where the students would be less passionate and more considered, and then apply that to the case, demonstrating what they are committed to.

Although Benatar didn't offer this response, I suspect others will want to, and therefore I will respond to this argument too. To some extent, I am sympathetic to this approach. However, my response is just to point out that

there are alternative approaches that have the same advantages, but without the problems raised in my original paper.

First, one approach can be to consider two different issues simultaneously, so that you can draw comparisons between the two, and highlight apparent contradictions. Then the student is forced to acknowledge that they need either to give up one of their views, or they need to work hard in order to explain away the apparent contradiction. [4]

In these cases, it is an advantage that the students will be passionate about these issues. If you confront students with an apparent contradiction in some abstract moral theory, students may simply shrug their shoulders. They may not care about the contradiction if they cannot see the implications it has for issues that they are passionate about. However, if a student is confronted with an apparent contradiction between two of their own beliefs, both of which the student is passionate about and keen to defend, the student is more likely to engage with the issues and is more likely to consider the issues more carefully. In this case, it may well be their indifference and lack of passion that leads to them having a closed mind, and their passion that leads to an open, enquiring mind, wanting to explore the issue further in order to resolve the issue.

Second, another possible use of moral theories is to use the discussion of moral theories to question the students' more foundational beliefs. As I argued in relation to Benatar's first point, you can do this without appealing to moral theories. You can, for example, ask simple questions like: do you really believe that it is only the consequences that matter?

If their passion is preventing them from considering the other side of the argument, this method can be used to take a step back, and consider an issue they are less passionate about. But this step backwards needn't take us all the way back into a discussion of moral theories.

In short, if the argument is that moral theories can be used as training grounds, my response is that there are other training grounds, and, if the argument is that we can use moral theories to abstract away from the particular issues to argue about the issues more dispassionately before applying our conclusions to the particular case, there are ways of doing this that have similar advantages but avoid the problems associated with teaching moral theories.

CONCLUSION

As Benatar points out, whether my arguments are successful or not depends on what my conclusion is. If I commit myself to the stronger conclusion that moral theories should not be taught at all (which I think I might, at least in relation to the amount of ethics teaching that will be received by a typical medical student) then I accept that there may be counter examples. There may be some cases in which the teaching of moral theories would be useful. However, if there are any counter examples, I don't believe that Benatar has identified them.

Competing interests: none.

The Corresponding Author has the right to grant on behalf of all authors and does grant on behalf of all authors, an exclusive licence (or non exclusive for government employees) on a worldwide basis to the BMJ Publishing Group Ltd and its Licensees to permit this article (if accepted) to be published in ADC and any other BMJPGL products to exploit all subsidiary rights, as set out in our licence (http://adc.bmj.com/ifora/licence.pdf).

REFERENCES

1. Benatar, D. Moral theories may have some role in teaching applied ethics, *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 2007; 33: 671-672.

2. Lawlor, Rob. Moral theories in teaching applied ethics. *Journal of Medical Ethics* 2007; 33: 370-2.

3. Oderberg, David. *Applied Ethics: a non-consequentialist approach.* Blackwell Publishers, 2000: 45-46.

4. Consider, for example, Peter Singer's arguments about the treatment of animals, comparing these cases with the treatment of humans with similar mental capacities (in response to those who appeal to animals' mental capacities to defend our treatment of animals). Singer, Peter. *Pracitcal Ethics Second Edition.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993: 55-83, esp. 67.