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The role of moral theories in the teaching of applied ethics

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The role of moral theories in the teaching of applied ethics

Abstract:

In this paper, I argue that moral theories should not be discussed extensively in the teaching of applied ethics.

First, I argue that, because of limited time, students are either presented with a large amount of information regarding the various subtle distinctions and the nuances of the theory and, as a result, the students simply fail to take it in, or, alternatively, the students are presented with a simplified caricature of the theory, in which case the students may understand the information they are given, but what they have understood is of little or no value because it is merely a caricature of a theory.

Second, I argue that there is a methodological problem with the approach to applied ethics that suggests that we should deal with particular questions by simply applying a moral theory to those cases. Here I appeal to an analogy with science. In physics there is a hope that we could discover a unified theory of everything. But this is, of course, a hugely ambitious project, and much harder than, for example, finding a theory of motion. If the physicist wants to understand motion, he should try to do so directly. We would think he was particularly misguided if he thought that, in order to answer this question, he first needed to construct a unified theory of everything.

THE ROLE OF MORAL THEORIES IN THE TEACHING OF APPLIED ETHICS

Introduction

A very common view regarding the teaching of applied ethics, including medical ethics, is that applied ethics courses ought to include, and probably ought to start with, an introduction to a number of moral theories such as utilitarianism and deontology. Furthermore, some of those who hold this view will also believe that these moral theories will essentially form a base or a foundation on which the other work will be built. On this view, applied ethics is seen as applying a moral theory to particular cases.

In this paper, I will argue against this approach. Indeed, if we object to this approach, we might also object to the term "applied ethics". Stephen L. Darwall writes:

> This… term may not be especially apt, however, since it suggests a relation to normative theory like that of applied to pure mathematics, where theories are derived independently and, only then, applied to cases.[1]

Although I share this concern, I will continue to refer to "applied ethics" just because it is the most recognised term.[2] In addition to arguing that we shouldn't simply apply a particular theory to a particular case, I will also argue

that – to a large extent – I will also argue that – in many cases – we should avoid discussing moral theories completely.[3]

This paper is divided into four parts. In the first I will say more to clarify what I mean by a moral theory – thereby identifying my target. In part 2, I will present one line of argument for my claim that we should avoid discussing moral theories, and this particular line of argument is based primarily on the practical considerations in teaching applied ethics. In part 3, I present a line of argument against the view that in doing applied ethics we ought to apply moral theories to particular cases. This line of argument is based on methodological considerations. Finally, in part 4, I will allow some concessions.

1 – Moral theories (identifying my target)

In *Approaches to Ethics in Higher Education: Teaching Ethics across the Curriculum*,[4] Susan Illingworth identifies three different approaches to the teaching of applied ethics: pragmatic, embedded and theoretical. The pragmatic approach is based around regulatory bodies and codes of conduct and the embedded approach involves reflective practice, drama, role plays and narratives. This is, I admit, a very superficial summary of these two approaches, but – for the purposes of this paper – these summaries will suffice, as it is Illingworth's account of the third approach that I am interested in. Illingworth writes:

> The third approach has been called theoretical, because, unlike pragmatic and embedded methods, it places an understanding of moral theory at the heart of ethics learning and teaching... The ethics of real-life or life-like situations are then presented in terms of the application of that theory.[5]

It should be noted, however, that Illingworth's understanding of this approach is actually very broad. It is not limited to the approach that Darwall compares with applied mathematics, where we take a particular theory (consequentialism, for example) and apply it to a particular case. Rather, what Illingworth seems to have in mind is *philosophical* ethics. As such, I think it would be more accurate to call Illingworth's third category the philosophical or the critical approach.

The first thing I want to say is that I do not intend to argue against the philosophical approach, such that I would be arguing for the pragmatic or the embedded approach.[6] Rather, the debate that I want to engage in is a debate *within* the philosophical approach. I would like to divide the philosophical approach into two different approaches such that we have:

1) The pragmatic approach
2) The embedded approach
3) The philosophical approach
    a. The unified approach
    b. The piecemeal approach[7]

According to the unified approach, we should first construct a moral theory (or adopt and defend an existing theory) and then apply it to the particular case.

Essentially, this is not primarily a claim about how to teach applied ethics. Rather, it is a claim about how to *do* applied ethics – about the appropriate way to solve moral disputes. But, of course, if we think that this is the way applied ethics should be done, then there's a prima facie case for thinking that this is what we should teach students to do. (Though the arguments presented in part 2 may give us reason to think that, even if this was an appropriate way to *do* applied ethics, it may not be the best way to *teach* applied ethics.) When I refer to moral theories here, I am referring to those theories that claim to provide what Brad Hooker calls the foundational or unifying principle(s) of morality.[8] For example, utilitarianism, rule-consequentialism, contractualism etc.

In contrast, the piecemeal approach involves addressing particular issues directly. This is perhaps best illustrated with an example. Consider, for example, Judith Jarvis Thomson's "A Defense of Abortion". Thomson starts from the assumption that the foetus is a person and therefore has a right to life. Thomson states that she does not believe that the foetus is a person, but she worries that we may not make progress in the debate if we concentrate on the issue of personhood. Therefore, for the sake of argument, Thomson concedes that the foetus is a person from the moment of conception. Thomson then attempts to demonstrate that, even if we grant that the foetus has a right to life, it doesn't follow that abortion is necessarily impermissible. To do this, Thomson uses her violinist analogy. She asks you to imagine that you have been kidnapped by the Society of Music Lovers and then connected up to a famous violinist, who has a kidney problem and will die unless he is allowed to remain connected to you, so that he can make use of your kidneys. (You alone have the right blood type to help).[9]

Thomson suggests that, although it would be very nice to allow the violinist to use your kidneys, you are not morally *required* to do so. More fundamentally, Thomson's point is that a right to life does not entail a right to everything that one needs in order to live.

This is not the end of the argument. Thomson concedes that there may be a number of replies to this argument, and she offers a number of replies to a range of predicted objections. It would be stretching the meaning of "theory" to say that Thomson has a theory of abortion. Rather, she has a series of arguments. For the purposes of this paper, I do not need to consider these arguments in detail, or to argue for or against Thomson's position. I merely cite this as one example of the piecemeal approach. [10]

In this paper, I will argue for the piecemeal approach and against the unified approach.

2 – Practical concerns

Moral theories are generally fairly complex, and require a fair amount of study in order to be able to appreciate them. When teaching applied ethics to professionals or future professionals, time is often limited. The worry then is that this will lead to one of two unsatisfactory results. Either the students are presented with a large amount of information regarding the various subtle distinctions and the nuances of the theory and, as a result, the students simply fail to take it in, or, alternatively, the students are presented with a simplified caricature of the theory, in which case the students may understand the

information they are given, but what they have understood is of little or no value because it is merely a caricature of a theory.

Clearly, this is undesirable in itself, but it also has the further damaging effect that students are likely to dismiss the theories as obviously wrong and ridiculous. And, even more worryingly, the students may not merely dismiss these particular theories. Taking these (caricatured) theories to be representative of what moral philosophers have to offer, students may dismiss moral philosophy as a whole. For many, this may simply reinforce existing preconceptions that philosophers are not in touch with the real world.

In addition, if students get the impression that the way to do applied ethics is to apply a moral theory to a particular case, there is a worry that this could lead to a particularly crude form of relativism, where students take the answers to ethical questions to be relative to moral theories, such that they think the idea is to pick a moral theory and then simply follow it to its conclusions.[11] Clearly this would suggest that there is no right answer, rather it just depends on your starting point. A Kantian will say x and a consequentialist will say y. There is no right answer. You just *decide* whether you want to be a Kantian or a consequentialist.

Of course, this concern can be addressed by raising the issue with the students, stressing that Kantians and consequentialists *disagree*, and that it is not merely a case of choosing which you *prefer*. But, in doing this, we are just moving further away from the particular issues we are supposed to be addressing. Furthermore, even if this was not a problem, there is a further concern, which will be addressed in part 3.

3 – Methodological concerns

The attempt to construct a moral theory that offers a foundational justification for all of our moral judgements is a far more ambitious project than the attempt to answer particular questions. For example, there is overwhelming agreement that (in normal circumstances) we should *not* kill one healthy person in order to take his organs to save the lives of two people who will otherwise die. But there is huge disagreement about the foundational justification. Deontologists and utilitarians, for example, will offer different justifications for this conclusion.[12]

Similarly, Brad Hooker makes the point that we have much more confidence in our judgements about which particular pro tanto duties we have than we have in our judgements about which moral theory is correct.[13] A pro tanto duty is a duty that has some weight but may not be conclusive. So, for example, we have more confidence in the claim that we have a pro tanto duty to tell the truth than we have in our judgement that utilitarianism (or any other moral theory) is the correct moral theory – the unifying principle of morality.

If these judgements are correct, we have good reason to question the wisdom of trying to answer questions about particular cases by first trying to find the correct moral theory, such that we can then apply it to the case in question.

Here, an analogy might be illustrative. In physics there is (as I understand it) a hope that we could discover a unified theory of everything. But this is, of course, a hugely ambitious project, and much harder than, for

example, finding a theory of motion. If the physicist wants to understand motion, he has two options.

1) He could start by trying to construct the hugely ambitious theory of everything. Then, once he has created that, he could then apply it to particular problems – for example, to get a theory of motion.
2) Alternatively, he could recognise that the unified theory of everything is the far more ambitious project, and therefore the most difficult and likely to be flawed. Therefore, if he wants to understand motion, he should concentrate on developing a theory of motion, and leave the unified theory of everything to someone else.

My claim is *not* that the physicist should not work on the unified theory of everything, and that he should recognise his limits and try something less ambitious. My claim is just that, if he wants to understand motion, he should try to do so directly. The scientist should work on the unified theory of everything if he wants to discover a unified theory of everything. What he shouldn't do is work on the unified theory of everything if, in fact, all he wants to do is understand motion.

Similarly, I am not claiming that philosophers are wasting their time if they try to develop a moral theory. Hooker considers the search for the unifying principle of morality to be "the most exciting research project in moral philosophy".[14] I do not contest this anymore than I would contest the claim that the search for the unifying theory of everything is the most exciting research project in physics. My point is simply that we should not think that we

have to complete these hugely ambitious projects before we can address other problems. Part of the reason why the search for the unifying principle of morality is so exciting is because it is so hugely ambitious. But it is precisely because it is so ambitious that we should not consider it to be a necessary part of everyday moral reasoning.

4 – Concessions and clarifications

First, I am not suggesting that moral theories should be avoided completely. Students will need to be familiar with terms like utilitarianism and deontology – even if only because they are likely to come across these terms in their reading. As far as possible, however, I suggest that it would be better to discuss utilitarian and deontological *considerations* rather than utilitarian and deontological theories. The discussion of ethical theories should be kept to a minimum, and tutors should be very careful to avoid the suggestion that the way to do ethics is to simply apply a moral theory to a particular case.

Second, I am not against moral theories. I am not even entirely against the appeal to moral theories in applied ethics in research. In science or in philosophy, we may want to appeal to the implications of some bigger project in order to shed new light on a smaller project. I do not mean to suggest that this is *always* inappropriate. For the reasons considered in part 3, however, I would argue that we should always be at least a little sceptical of such efforts.

Ultimately though, my claim is more narrowly focused than this, focusing particularly on the teaching of applied ethics at a fairly introductory

level. And this brings me to my third point of clarification. The less advanced the level, such that students have less resources (both in terms of time and in terms of their philosophical experience) the stronger my case. And, likewise, the more advanced the level, the weaker my case. So, if we are talking about postgraduates, with more time and more philosophical experience, such that they can tackle complex theories, things change somewhat. In particular, the concerns expressed in part 2 are less likely to apply. Even at research level, however, the concerns expressed in part 3 won't go away completely. When we are faced with a hard question and an *incredibly* hard question, we should always be at least a little sceptical if someone proposes that the best way to answer the former is by answering the latter.

This doesn't mean that we should just tell them dogmatically what the issues are, and so on. Dogmatism isn't the alternative to picking a theory and following it to its conclusion. The alternative is to teach them skills in reasoning and analysis, and to apply these skills to particular issues.

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References

1 Darwall, Stephen L. “Theories of Ethics” in *A Companion to Applied Ethics*, ed. R.G. Frey and Christopher Heath Wellman. (Blackwell Publishing, 2004.) p. 17.

2 Darwall also objects to the term “practical ethics” and his own suggestions, “case ethics”, seems unfortunate in that it might be confused with an approach to teaching applied ethics that is based primarily around case studies.

3 I say “to a large extent” because there are good reasons to think we cannot avoid moral theories completely. This will be discussed in part 4.

4 *Approaches to Ethics in Higher Education: Teaching Ethics across the Curriculum* is available from the Philosophical and Religious Studies Subject Centre, free of charge, to all involved in learning and teaching in Higher Education in the UK. http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/. A pdf version can be downloaded from http://www.prs-ltsn.leeds.ac.uk/ethics/.

5 Illingworth, Susan. *Approaches to Ethics in Higher Education: Teaching Ethics across the Curriculum*, (Philosophical and Religious Studies Subject Centre, 2004.), p. 10.

6 I am not arguing against these approaches either. I am simply remaining neutral on these approaches – they do not concern me in this paper.

7 Tony Hope also makes a similar distinction in relation to medical ethics in the first chapter of his *Medical Ethics: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2004), but he appeals to Isaiah Berlin’s distinction between the fox and the hedgehog. However, Hope doesn’t offer an

argument for his approach (which I would identify as the piecemeal approach). He merely states that it is the approach that he prefers.

8 Hooker, “Intuitions and Moral Theorizing” in *Ethical Intuitionism: Re-evaluations*, ed. Philip Stratton-Lake (Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 182-183.

9 Thomson, Judith Jarvis. "A Defense of Abortion," Journal of Philosophy and Public Affairs, vol. 1, no. 1 (1971), pp. 48-9.

10 In relation to teaching medical ethics, Tony Hope’s *Medical Ethics: A Very Short Introduction* deserves a mention as a very good example of the piecemeal approach, which is very accessible and an ideal text for introducing philosophical ethics to health care students.

11 We can imagine a philosopher holding out a deck of cards: “pick a theory, any theory.”

12 Indeed, in the case of utilitarians, many argue that utilitarians ought to be committed to the claim that we should (at least sometimes) kill the one to save two. But, as Bernard Williams stresses, utilitarians have typically been reluctant to embrace these “unpalatable conclusions”. (Williams, Bernard. *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics.* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 82-98, and especially pp. 94-95.) This seems to highlight the point that even committed utilitarians have more confidence in their judgements about specific cases than they have in utilitarianism.

13 Hooker, “Intuitions and Moral Theorizing”, p. 182.

14 Hooker, “Intuition and Moral Theorizing”, p. 183.