

The Moral Vocabulary Approach

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Abstract:

At or near the beginning of many textbooks and syllabi in applied or professional ethics is a unit on philosophical moral theories (such as utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics). However, teaching such theories is of questionable value in this context. This article introduces the *moral vocabulary approach*. Instead of burdening students with complex ethical theories, they are introduced to the logic of elementary moral concepts. This avoids many of the drawbacks of teaching ethical theories, while preserving the benefit of equipping students with the conceptual tools they need to critically analyse ethical issues.

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Introductory Note

This contribution has two parts. This first part, aimed at educators, introduces *the moral vocabulary approach* as a solution to the widely-felt unease regarding teaching of ethical theories in applied ethics courses. The second part, intended to facilitate the implementation of the moral vocabulary approach, is the article-length *Primer on Moral Concepts at Vocabulary* (also forthcoming in *Teaching Philosophy*) aimed at an audience of students without philosophical background.

Teaching Ethical Theories in Applied Ethics Education

In 2007 and 2008 Rob Lawlor published two short articles in the *Journal of Medical Ethics*. In those articles, he argues that “moral theories should not be discussed extensively when teaching applied ethics.” (Lawlor 2007, 370). The target of Lawlor’s critique is an approach to teaching medical ethics that starts with a brief overview of major philosophical ethical theories (such as Utilitarianism, Deontology, and Virtue Ethics) and then attempts to apply these theories to the subject at hand. Similar misgivings about teaching normative ethical theories as part of applied or professional ethics education have been raised in the context of business ethics (e.g. Derry and Green 1989; Pamental 1991), educational ethics (e.g. Howe 1986), and engineering ethics (e.g. Glagola et al 1997; Bouville 2008). And when the Illinois Institute of Technology devised a workshop for professors to help them integrate ethics into their teaching in various fields, facilitator Michael Davis (a philosopher) “stressed (to the evident relief of participants) that moral theory was not something they should teach.” (Davis 1993, 214)

My own experience of teaching applied ethics (mainly, but not exclusively, business ethics) confirmed Lawlor's (and Davis's) conclusion. Thus, after a number of years, I ditched the textbook chapters on ethical theories and began experimenting with alternative approaches. After some unsuccessful experiments (described below), I settled on replacing the lecture(s) and discussion of *ethical theories* with a lecture and discussion of *moral vocabulary*. The appended primer is assigned to students beforehand to facilitate the discussion, as well as a resource they can go back to, throughout the course, in order to clarify their thinking and formulate their ethical views more clearly. The main purpose of the current contribution is to make this resource available to other instructors. When I started thinking that this might be the way to go, I posted in various teaching philosophy forums asking for recommendations for an introduction to moral concepts that I could assign to my students. These queries yielded a great number of handouts, but not the article length-treatment I was looking for. So, eventually, I wrote one myself. I have been using this for a number of years, revising in response to feedback from both colleagues and students along the way. Thus, I think that instructors will find this to be a useful resource that doesn't seem to exist in this form yet. Naturally, it will be of particular interest to instructors who are either new to teaching applied or professional ethics, or who are currently dissatisfied with the way that ethical concepts are introduced in the material they use. Since it is not uncommon for philosophers who work primarily in other fields to be pressed into duty teaching applied or professional ethics, I expect this to be a sizeable population.

In the remainder of these introductory remarks, I motivate the moral vocabulary approach by summarizing a number of problems that myself and others have encountered with teaching philosophical ethical theories as part of an applied or professional ethics course (section

1), and by describing some alternative approaches I tried more or less unsuccessfully (section 2). I then describe how the moral vocabulary approach avoids the problems of teaching ethical theories without throwing out the baby with the bathwater (section 3).

1. Problems with Teaching Ethical Theories

Perhaps the most obvious problem with teaching ethical theories as part of an applied or professional ethics course is that there is typically insufficient time to do justice to the nuances of the theories discussed. The structure of many textbooks suggests that there just be one week on ethical theories. But even if this is stretched to, say, three weeks, it is near impossible to teach anything but a caricature of three or four influential theories. Some students are turned off by the simplistic nature of the theories they are being taught and come to doubt whether moral philosophy has anything useful to contribute to ethical decision making in the real world (cf Lawlor 2007). When students do try to apply the theories they learned about to concrete moral issues, the results are often predictably cartoonish. For example, some of my students have claimed it to be obvious that consequentialism must support sweatshop labour, or that the employment relationship violates the categorical imperative (cf Derry and Green 1989; Glagola et al 1997; Lawlor 2007; Bouville 2008). Such claims can, of course, be great starting points for discussion. However, in the context of an applied or professional ethics course, the discussion should centre around the permissibility of the practice in question. Getting sidetracked by considering various ways in which a theory can be refined to accommodate different answers to such questions is typically unhelpful.

A related problem is that students sometimes come away from the class with a crude form of relativism according to which one can simply pick one's favourite ethical theory and then apply it while ignoring relevant ethical considerations that are less emphasized within the favoured theory (Pamental 1991; Glagola et al 1997, 475; Lawlor 2007; Saunders 2009). In my experience, there is an even more problematic related phenomenon where students aren't even consistent in which theory they apply but simply assume a choice passes ethical muster as long as it can be justified via any of the ethical theories they learned about (cf Gentile 2010, xi). In other words, some students, rather cynically, take the lack of agreement among experts as to which ethical theory is correct as an excuse to simply use the theories as tools for rationalization. Alternatively, some students conclude, as Lawlor puts it, "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." (Lawlor 2008) While this is perhaps slightly less worrisome, it nevertheless strikes me as an undesirable outcome. Students should be empowered, rather than discouraged, to develop critically assessed yet sincerely held opinions about concrete moral questions.

A second set of problems concerns students' understanding of the status of ethical theories. As philosophers, we are used to thinking of ethical theories primarily (though not exclusively) as an attempt to systematize moral judgements (Moriarty 2021).¹ By contrast, many of the religious and cultural codes that students bring to the classroom are primarily (though not exclusively) used to generate moral judgements. Many students who adhere to a religious or

¹ When one's favored ethical theory appears to conflict with one's intuitive moral judgements, this is more often than not taken as an occasion to refine the theory rather than to overrule the judgement. It might be worth noting, in this context, that empirical investigations suggest that, among professional philosophers, adherence to different ethical theories doesn't lead to differences in behavior (Rust and Schwitzgebel 2014).

cultural code are used to referring to it for their decision making (Blosser 2019). Some such students perceive ethical theories as alternatives to their religious or cultural code. I had a student tell me, for example, that they were not interested in 'becoming a consequentialist or a Kantian' because they were strongly committed to a particular ethical worldview (in this case it was a religious one; but the problem can equally arise for secular students). It is worth noting that this student was quite willing to discuss concrete questions with an open mind. They were open to revising particular judgements and integrating those into their worldview. Comprehensive ethical theories, by contrast, were perceived as a threat to said worldview. It is, of course, possible to explain and discuss the status and purpose of ethical theories with students. Indeed, I think this is extremely worthwhile. But, in the context of an applied or professional ethics course where building theory is not the primary purpose, it takes up resources that are better spent thinking about concrete ethical questions.

2. Some Alternative Approaches

Some colleagues who shared my dissatisfaction with teaching ethical theories recommended simply dropping the unit on theory without substitution. The suggestion was to go straight into a topic and to discuss bits and pieces of theory along the way as they were being employed in the assigned readings. The advantage I found in trying this method was that students found the beginning of the course more engaging. They were immediately confronted with the kinds of questions they expected to think about when signing up for the course. Moreover, since there was no specialized terminology to master at the beginning of the semester, they felt able to

participate right from the get go, using whatever terms they were comfortable with. In some cases, this set a tone such that participation stayed unusually lively throughout the entire term.

However, contrary to the optimism expressed by some colleagues, I found that students found it very difficult to properly engage with the philosophical reasoning in the assigned readings. There was a marked tendency to simply accept any theoretical presuppositions an author would make. For example, when the reading presented a consequentialist argument, many students would uncritically adopt the consequentialist framing of the question. When prompted, some students would object to the paradigm the author was working with. But, unfortunately, more often than not this would lead them to dismiss the author's perspective completely, rather than to a more nuanced appraisal. A second problem I encountered was that the lack of a shared vocabulary for expressing moral concepts meant that, while discussions were lively, students often had a hard time fully understanding the claims made by their peers. While it is part of the role of the instructor to help students to clarify exactly what claims are being made in a discussion, I found myself needing to do too much of this.²

A second set of colleagues who do not teach ethical theories suggested the use of a handout with a list of important ethical concepts. The potential benefit of such an approach is that it gives students conceptual tools that help them develop their reasoning and analytical skills, and expose and critique theoretical assumptions underlying particular ethical judgements and practices. More concretely, giving students the right set of moral concepts allows them to look for and recognize morally salient features of a choice ("what consequences would the

² I don't have a clear measure of how much of this is "too much". However, I found that I was often forced to choose between either interrupting the discussion so often that it would lose momentum, or letting slide a good number of instances of students talking past each other.

proposed course of action have for the well-being of individuals?"; "are there special obligations to consider?"; "what motive is the decision maker acting from?"; etc.). It also helps them understand the logic of particular arguments ("the author asserts that a right is being violated"; "the author focuses exclusively on consequences") and associated characteristic critical questions they should ask ("who has the corresponding duty to this alleged right?"; "do the ends really justify the means in this case?"). Of course, these are precisely the goals that teaching ethical theories is supposed to achieve (Benatar 2007; Monteverde 2014). But there is little reason to think that students need theories, rather than the more elementary conceptual building blocks, to achieve these objectives. These concepts do not require full-fledged theories to be useful. Admittedly, students' understanding of moral concepts could gain further depth by contemplating how a concept can fit into a comprehensive ethical theory. But in the context of applied and professional ethics classes, this additional depth is probably not worth sacrificing time that could be spent working with the concepts to analyse concrete ethical questions.³ Thus, I agree with Mathieu Bouville's recommendation that we teach our students to

...think in terms of elementary concepts rather than in terms of complex doctrines. Rather than ask 'what would Kant do in this situation?' or 'what would utilitarians do in this situation?', one should ask whether a possible course of action [...] e.g. would hurt innocents, whether it would be far from maximizing welfare, etc.

(Bouville 2008, 119)

³ It might be objected that familiarity with ethical theories should be considered an essential learning outcome for a university level ethics course. I disagree. It would be a key learning outcome in a course on ethical theory. But this is not what courses in professional or applied ethics are.

Applying elementary concepts, as Bouville suggests, is a much more manageable task than determining the answer to a practical question within the context of a complex doctrine. This also frees up cognitive resources to consider a situation from various perspectives some of which might be obscured or deemphasized within a particular theory (see Caroline Whitbeck's remarks at Glagola et al 1997, 475).⁴

I found that using a handout with an annotated list of moral concepts did have some of the desired effects, but was ultimately not satisfactory. The problems persisted through a variety of experiments with using and creating such a list. My first attempt was to give students the list at the beginning of the term and then draw attention to the concepts on it, whenever they became salient in the assigned readings or in discussion. Next, I tried an approach of collaboratively creating the list throughout the term by asking students to flag important concepts in the assigned readings that we would then discuss and add to the list. Finally, I tried to give them the list at the beginning of the term combined with a lecture dedicated to working through the concepts on it. As mentioned above, all of these approaches were an improvement over both the original setup of teaching theories as well as over the no-theory approach described at the beginning of this section. The debates about cartoonish forms of consequentialism and virtue ethics had been eliminated, and there was some shared vocabulary helping to keep discussions on track. Ultimately, however, there was too little of the latter. The problem, I found, was that giving students a list of concepts did not sufficiently force them to

⁴ One may worry that such an approach sacrifices consistency between particular judgements. But, as Lawlor points out, introducing consistency as an important desideratum for moral thinking doesn't require teaching ethical theories. It can simply be achieved by challenging students to make their particular judgements about one case consistent with those they make about others (Lawlor 2008).

think about those concepts. This meant that they would not use the concepts unprompted and, when prompted, would often display a deficient understanding.

3. The Moral Vocabulary Approach

The most promising results of the list-of-concepts approach had come when I combined the list with an introductory lecture working through the concepts. The list by itself was not engaging enough to prompt students to pay it close attention. While my better students were willing and able to memorize the concepts on the list, they were a bit like someone who tried to study a natural language solely by memorizing words. In order to activate the acquired vocabulary and put it to use, they needed more. The lecture allowed them to see that the list corresponded to a rich conceptual environment. The remaining challenge was to get them to explore that environment on their own time in addition to the lecture. Thus, I went looking for an article or textbook chapter that would introduce moral concepts in an engaging and somewhat comprehensive way, but without emphasizing ethical theories. When I turned up crickets, I started drafting the appended primer.

I use the primer by assigning it as required reading for the second class of the term. In the first class, students will have explored some challenges to the overall project of applied or professional ethics, e.g. some forms of relativism or subjectivism or, in the case of business ethics, the notion that business ethics is an oxymoron (von Kriegstein 2019; 2022). By the end of that class, most students are ready to accept (a) that (at least some) ethical questions are not a mere matter of taste or preference, (b) that some, but not all, of our ethical disagreements are ultimately grounded in disagreements about non-normative issues, and (c) that those ethical

disagreements that are not grounded in non-normative disagreements cannot be resolved via the scientific method. This prepares the ground for the modus operandi for the rest of the course which is to try to make progress with difficult ethical questions by reasoning about them. I close that lecture by making the case that such reasoning requires clear communication which, in turn, requires a shared set of concepts and vocabulary. At that point students are given the appended primer.

In addition to the primer, students will be assigned an episode of a podcast to which many of the concepts explained therein can be usefully applied. True crime podcasts are a great resource here. For example, the episode “The Body Snatcher” from the *Swindled* podcast recounts the career of Michael Mastromarino, a dental surgeon who, after losing his license, founded a for-profit business of selling body parts from corpses to be used as tissue replacements. The story is both gripping and incredibly rich in terms of moral concepts.⁵ Students will be enraged by the story and eager to condemn Mastromarino. In lecture they are being slowed down and asked to channel their reaction into carefully constructed ethical claims and questions (“Mastromarino violated the rights of patients who had given no consent to having their body parts used in this way”; “Mastromarino’s actions had bad consequences for patients who received tissue from people who had died of HIV or cancer”; “was Mastromarino himself dying of bone cancer a case of justice being served?”). They will also find that sometimes it is not easy to say what exactly is unethical about a part of the story that is upsetting (“What is

⁵ The story is also somewhat gory. While this is part of what accounts for it being so gripping, some instructors might prefer slightly less shocking content.

objectionable about Mastromarino's employees stripping human corpses much faster than standard practice?").

I find that, after reading the primer containing a lot of concrete examples and attending a lecture in which the relevant concepts are applied to a captivating story, students have a better grasp of the moral concepts in the primer than I was able to achieve throughout an entire semester with the handout approach. I reinforce this understanding by assigning, for class 3, a set of readings that focus on different ethical aspects of a concrete ethical question. For example, when the topic is affirmative action, some authors focus almost entirely on the rights of the individuals affected (positively or negatively) by affirmative action policies while others have the social consequences of such policies as their primary interest. Students are able to detect and formulate the difference and engage in fruitful discussions both within each of these framings and about whether either of them is preferable, or whether they should be seen as complementary. At that point a common way of identifying and talking about ethical considerations has been established that students naturally draw on throughout the rest of the term.

So far, I have mostly described the improvements I have seen in classroom interactions since adopting the moral vocabulary approach. However, the most significant payoff I have observed concerns written assignments. When teaching theories, students often wrote essays trying to put themselves in the shoes of someone who accepted one theory or another. Since most of them didn't fully accept any of the theories discussed, they wrote from a rather detached point of view. And, in many cases, it was difficult to avoid the impression that the choice of theory was driven by the question which theory would give the most straightforward answer to a

question. Under the current design, most students write essays in which they try to defend the views they actually hold. And the effect of this is that they tend to be more engaged, think harder, and produce arguments that are both stronger and more interesting. This change occurred as soon as I dropped the ethical theory component, i.e. prior to my adoption of the moral vocabulary approach while I was experimenting with the approaches described in section 2. The introduction of the moral vocabulary approach coincided with a further improvement corresponding to the improved classroom discussions described above. Students now are able to explicate and defend their views with much improved theoretical rigor. They confidently handle concepts like, for example, supererogation or the distinction between legal and moral rights in a way that I had not seen before.

Conclusion

The purpose of the appended primer, then, is to provide students with a set of conceptual tools for ethical analysis without burdening them with complex theories. Among other things, students will learn about the difference between descriptive and normative claims, be introduced to various deontic statuses of actions (impermissible, permissible, obligatory, supererogatory), as well as ways in which these may be related to consequences and motives, and will be shown the logic of rights (including distinctions between, e.g., positive and negative rights) and how they're related to duties. Having this vocabulary will be helpful in articulating their own ethical views, as well as in understanding the considerations others bring to the table (be they classmates, the professor, or assigned readings). Such, at least, is my own experience and my hope for others who adopt the moral vocabulary approach.

As acknowledged in the introduction of the primer, some people will disagree with the way some concepts and terms are defined therein. This is unavoidable, but I've made every effort to keep things as uncontroversial as possible. Relatedly, some of the distinctions introduced (e.g. between descriptive and normative judgements, or between positive and negative rights) are helpful in framing discussions despite being difficult to draw precisely and quite possibly having vague or fuzzy borders.

On a final note, the primer is fairly comprehensive and covers a lot of ground. Not every instructor will have enough time to discuss every concept covered, and not all students can be expected to read the entire document. Thus, educators who are strapped for time (or are worried about students not reading an article of this length) can excerpt the discussions of concepts that are particularly salient for the context in which they teach or for the readings they assign. To facilitate this, the primer is written in a modular fashion with few cross-references between sections. Relatedly, because the primer covers a lot of ground, some students may struggle with the density of the material (despite my best efforts to write in a simple, clear, and accessible style). My own experience with business school sophomores suggests that the primer is challenging but manageable for this population. It pays, however, to spend some time, occasionally throughout the term, revisiting the primer to remind students of important concepts and clear up misunderstandings.

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