BOOK REVIEW

ETHICS IN THE FIRST PERSON

Deni Elliott
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Deni Elliott’s new book, *Ethics in the First Person*, lives up to its name in several regards.

First, this book masterfully models pedagogical self-reflection. It offers the reader an opportunity to accompany Elliott along an insightful journey of pedagogical analysis done as self-reflection, a process of reflection which generates several useful suggestions from a long and rich career of teaching professional and practical ethics in a variety of venues, to a diversity of students, for a variety of purposes. This book will reward even the seasoned ethics instructor with useful guidance for improving her own teaching and for making her students’ learning experience more rewarding and more lasting.

Second, this book should serve as a useful and effective tool in the development of a practical ethics course and as a text for use in courses in which students learn to teach ethics. Less formally, many graduate programs of philosophy and advanced degree programs in professional schools mentor students who are planning to enter the teaching profession. This book would make a useful primer for such students and such programs. Some of the suggested methods for student assessment seem appropriate for use in any practically oriented class – suitably modified to the topic of the course – not just in practical ethics courses. For example, the ethics course I’ve been revising is a standard ethics course, primarily focused on theoretical, meta-ethical and applied components. It seems to me that, for example, the assessment requiring students to revisit and evaluate their own response papers from the beginning of the class, would serve well in any course where a set of skills and content comprehension are important. I’ve suggested this to my colleagues in our pre-semester teaching symposium, and one colleague is modifying the assessment for his epistemology and critical thinking courses.
Third, Elliott includes an informative discussion of the developmental stages through which individuals move, which tends to result in students cresting the “moral relativism stage” just about the time they enter post-secondary educational institutions, where the bulk of ethics education takes place. This view of moral development helps to ease the mind of the instructor, myself included, who often finds herself frustrated by the near intransigence of student relativism. This insight supports one of Elliott’s central tenets, that good ethics instruction can help students to move through this stage in their moral development by providing the tools and language with which students can express their moral concerns in less relativistic and, Elliott holds, more accurate ways.

Regarding these three strengths, I speak here from experience. This book came across my desk at just the right time. I had become frustrated with my own regularly taught introductory ethics course. After teaching at least two sections (of 40ish students each) every semester for the past five years, I came to the rather disheartening conclusion that I was not teaching the course in a way that would make possible one of my principal goals: to afford the students the opportunity to learn cognitive and practical skills which will allow them to make better moral decisions and live better lives. The challenge I faced was, what to do with this course? Here was my golden opportunity to redesign the course as never before, from top to bottom, from in-class exercises to assigned readings, textbook and grading. Now, here was Elliott’s book. It lay on my desk as a guide; like Mapquest of the moral pedagogical domain. All I had to do was follow along, reflect on my own situation, and figure it out, experiment, think, revise, and . . . risk complete failure.

One of the features of the book I really appreciate, and which I found most helpful, was the very astute way that Elliott models for the reader a way of engaging in pedagogical self-reflection that is transferable across pedagogical styles, purposes and contexts. I don’t teach practical or professional ethics. But, I do think most ethics instruction must be practical in at least the sense that students ought to leave with some moral skills – even if these are only the ones they came with but perhaps exercised a bit during the course of the semester. I do teach a variety of students, many of whom either are currently engaged in professional career preparation or will soon be (mostly, nursing, engineering, business, science, pre-law and pre-medicine). Chapter after chapter found me taking copious notes, not in preparation for writing these comments, as much as notes on what to change in my course, what assignments to
remove or replace, how to order the material, and importantly how to explain and justify the resulting rather radical structure to the students. I found most helpful, the chapters on case analysis and theoretical tools which offer pragmatic strategies for refining the use of cases and theories in a practical ethics course. Frankly, I have always struggled with integrating the theoretical tools with the cases, and have always been unhappy with the result – not unlike the result “Thomas” had upon seeing the rather shallow and “cliche” filled applications of theories to the circumstances of the cases. I’ve been regretting the ways in which our standard teaching of theories is turned toward an easy justification of an already existing opinion. I’ve always worried that this sort of easy rationalization which our presentation of competing ethical theories contributes to the relativism so many of our younger students embrace. I dread, perhaps as Socrates had, the very intelligent student who realizes that in situation A, apply theory X to get desired result R, while in situation B apply theory Y and similarly secure the desired result R – missing the whole point of having a theory of ethics at all – and being enabled to do much wickedness along the way.

I’ve also struggled with conveying the very significant way in which the diverse theories actually correspond more than not, and that, when carefully and thoughtfully applied, tend to converge on the same right actions, though for different reasons. Elliott’s helpful approach is to focus student attention on the kinds of questions each theory allows us to ask and for which each provides useful tools with which to seek to answer the questions. Using this approach, we can focus students’ attention on the different features and emphases of the theories, yet use them in conjunction to adequately examine and understand the complexities of moral circumstances.

These three principal strengths lead me to consider some of the limitations of this book. Actually, they’re not so much limitations, as proposals for further clarification and future development. The bulk of these proposals take the form of identifying some tensions which run throughout the book.

To begin, the discussion of one of the very strengths of the book – its presentation of theories and how to use them effectively in a practically oriented ethics course – is also a source of one major limitation: its inclusion of non-standard, non-mainstream ethical theories. Upon coming to the last chapter on “bridging cultures”, the reader finds much analysis and application which would have been usefully included in the chapter on theoretical tools. The approaches Elliott highlights – from
First Nations’ ethics – add significantly to the use of standard ethical theories. It would have been much better (both practically and theoretically) to have centered this material within the chapter on theoretical tools rather than relegating it to a closing chapter, as a sort of misplaced and incomplete post-script – where the effect was to leave these insights and tools at the margins.

Secondly, to the tensions the book introduces yet fails to resolve. The first of these tensions regards the relation between consequentialist and duty ethics. In almost every discussion of wrong-doing or immorality, Elliott speaks in terms of the consequences of actions as the measure of wrong. This is most clearly presented in what she refers to as the “human analogy” which requires that a being be capable of recognizing others as sufficiently like oneself to be able to impute as harms done to others which one would view as harms when done to oneself. The discussion here focuses on inflicting death, or pains and torments, and depriving life, freedom, or pleasures and comforts. This is also the case in Elliott’s discussion of integrating cases into the teaching of practical ethics. On the 10 item list of “moral rules” borrowed and modified from Gert, “do your duty” appears as the 10th item. Indeed, the top 5 indicators of wrong-doing are all consequentialist – emphasizing a variety of harms known primarily through the human analogy. In the human analogy and these 10 “moral rules”, it is the consequences of one’s actions which take prime of place as the moral standard of wrong-doing.

However, and here arises this tension, in the case under consideration – the case which Elliott uses to demonstrate the method of analysis and application of the 10 moral rules – the principal concern is duty, the requirement to recognize and perform it according to the professional role one occupies. Indeed, as Elliott carries through with her analysis of the case, it is the failure of the journalists, and the media in general, to accurately comprehend and act upon their duties as journalists which she identifies as their principal moral failing. This is the case, even though no harm results from that failing. The tension arises in other locations in the text as well, sometimes leaving Elliott at great pains to illustrate just how even a seemingly harmless moral failure to comply with a principle, such as not to lie, can have indirect (indeed, quite remote) harms, and is thereby identified as wrong. Indeed, at times when no one else is present or no one is aware of any moral failing, it is one’s own conscience which will tell one of one’s wrong – this, as Elliott repeats, is what it means to “do ethics in the first person.”
It would seem, then, that consequentialism and non-consequentialism take at least equal place in an adequate practical ethics. It would serve both rookie ethics instructors, and those they teach, for Elliott to reconcile this tension and place more significant theoretical and conceptual weight on the important non-consequentialist measures of wrong-doing than she currently gives. It would also help to clarify the process of self-reflective pedagogical analysis were Elliott to clarify the relationship between consequentialist and non-consequentialist approaches to practical ethics.

On a related note, the second of these tensions regards the conception of duty at play in the book. There are times when Elliott speaks of duty in a more general, universalizing sense (duty as a matter of moral principal, universally applicable to the whole moral community), and at other times more narrowly understood in terms of profession-specific role morality. One may wonder what might bring about this tension, and rightly so. The tension comes when one properly understands the origin and justification of role-morality. Professional role morality is typically contingent – identifying what one must or must not do is determined by the function of the profession within a given society. Typically, these are specified in a professional code of ethics which captures the primary function, capacity and goals of the profession. These codes of ethics are notoriously conventional, varying in significant ways from historical period to historical period within a given profession, and varying even between countries or cultures in the same historical period. Such conventional roles create, at best, conventional duties.

However, the other conception of duty, as a matter of general, universal principal, is often held in opposition to and as a correction for conventional morality. A moral duty, understood in these terms, is a duty applicable to any moral agent sufficiently similarly situated, regardless of contingent social features such as one’s profession or status in society. Indeed, among the principal reasons why some professional ethicists reject role-morality is for its too-narrow portrayal of an individual’s moral duty. This is especially the case in socially important professions, for which there is good reason to believe that practitioners ought to be good moral beings — good members of the moral community — who ought to be orientated toward justice, not merely good professionals within the bounds of their practice. Discussions in legal, business, and medical ethics come to mind here.

This tension between conceptions of duty really requires resolution, and one principal means for doing so would be for Elliott to provide an
adequate clarification of role-morality. A good example arises again from the case study analysis of journalistic ethics in Chapter 6. Here, Elliott suggests the journalists failed in meeting various professional duties. She presents these duties as clearly delineated role-morality duties, but they have the feel of being the result of an appeal to a certain conception of a just society in which the media plays a pivotal supporting role. But it is not clear to me, and I have a hard time thinking it would be clear to the specified target audience for this book – rookie ethics instructors from a variety of professions and backgrounds – how it is that one determines what a professional role-morality duty is apart from reference either to the conventions of the profession or to some universal notion of right and good. But, then the problem surfaces of which of those conventionally adopted duties are those which one should follow.

Indeed, as I see it, the proper relation between role-morality and universal morality is evaluative. That is, one may appeal to universal morality in order to assess whether what one’s profession takes as a duty really is a moral duty. However, in her careful and meticulous analysis of this case, Elliott neglects to demonstrate how one may come to know one’s role-specific professional duties and whether these are also moral duties. After all, as Elliott reminds us in her rejection of corporate appeals to “when in Rome” justifications to do only the minimal required by local ethical standards, “This position denies the necessity of making normative judgments in determining whose ethics or which ethics is more adequate” (107). Surely, this is also the case for assessing role-morality. For example, it should also apply to those who would claim no responsibility for correcting the observable impact that economic status has on jury sentencing with an appeal to role-morality: such as, “as a tax lawyer, this just isn’t my responsibility”; or similarly for the person who denies any need to ease the suffering of the homeless who never quite make it to the hospital doors, such that “as a doctor, they are not my responsibility unless assigned to me as a patient.” These are after all, more broadly problems of social justice – not specified in any code of professional ethics or role-morality. But, perhaps they ought to be so; or, perhaps the ethical practitioner ought to see responding to these problems as a matter of good professional ethics, even if not specified in an ethics code. This is the challenging relationship between a universal morality of duty and a profession-specific role morality.

I’ll leave the criticisms at this expression of two tensions – both of which, once resolved, would make the book clearer and more useful to the target audience. It is important to note, however, that aside from
these two tensions, the book is well worth the time to read, to engage with, and to have at one’s desk as one is revising one’s ethics course. Hopefully, my own students will feel some benefit from my application of the very many helpful features of this book.