RESPONSE TO KERRY ROMESBURG

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Kerry Romesburg has the same view about the standard ways of teaching ethics in non-philosophy courses that Michael Pritchard has. I agree with both of them about the inadequacy of all the standard ways of teaching ethics by teaching the classical ethical theories. However, although Kerry is completely right in attributing to me the view that “ethics is implicit in thoughtful decision making for most people” and that “understanding classical thinking” is not “required for well-founded ethical judgments,” he credits me with too much modesty. He says, that I recognize “there may not be one correct, or even best, ethical system upon which to base decisions in all circumstances.” This is not quite my view, for I think that common morality, which I claim to describe, is that “ethical system upon which to base decisions in all circumstances.” What I do claim is that no ethical system, including common morality, provides a unique correct answer to every moral question and that equally informed impartial rational persons sometimes disagree on their answers to controversial moral questions.

Kerry recognizes that even though I hold that the ten moral rules I list are not absolute, I do not hold that anything goes, but rather offer “a two-step procedure for deciding whether it is justified to violate a moral rule.” I am very pleased that he accepts that by using this procedure “a student should be able to successfully address an issue, concern, or conflict in a reasoned manner and present an argument within an ethical or moral framework.” I am especially delighted that he finds the flow charts at the end of the book to be useful, for these flow charts were the suggestion of my daughter Heather, who probably understands better than I do, how to make my account of morality understandable to students.

Kerry raises the same problem that Mike did, about the compromises necessary when writing a book for two somewhat different audiences. One audience is students in an introductory ethics or philosophy
course, where it is important that they see how my account of morality is related to the standard philosophical accounts of morality, e.g., Kant and Mill. The other audience is students in a professional ethics course, or some other course in which other philosophers are not only not studied, but also in which they may not even be known. Note 2 to the preface explicitly acknowledges that “it is not necessary to know any of these views [the views of other philosophers] in order to understand my description of morality and its justification” (153), but almost no one reads the preface let alone the notes to the preface. So from the point of view of students in a professional ethics course, it is legitimate to ask, “If it is not necessary to know about these other philosophers, why did I even mention them?” Short of writing two slightly different versions of this book, which is not a real possibility, I do not know how to avoid this problem.

I hesitate to say that students in a non-philosophy course should not read Part II of the book, but I can say that although it is not necessary for them to read it, it still serves a useful purpose. The presence of Part II shows students that I am not merely describing common morality, but that I am attempting to show that this common morality is not some arbitrary system that their society happens to have adopted. Rather, if they have serious doubts about morality, they can discover that morality does have a rational foundation. I think this helps them to take the appropriate attitude toward using common morality when they are faced with a moral problem.

Kerry is correct in saying that I regard the concept of impartiality as “intuitively clear to thoughtful, rational agents,” but he does not completely agree with me about its practical value. It may be that I am committing the same kind of mistake that Plato makes in the *Meno* where he tries to show that Meno understands far more about geometry than we would normally say that he understands. However, I have found that if I ask students whether a referee is impartial if he favors either side over the other, they have no hesitancy in saying that he is not. My account of impartiality simply expands on this basic understanding. I am tempted to say the same kind of thing about the other concepts that I analyze in Part II, but I realize that if these concepts were really as easy to understand as I suggest, it is incredible that they have been so uniformly misdescribed by philosophers.

I realize that *Common Morality* presents “challenges for both the faculty member and the students, if they had no previous understanding of the study of ethics or morality” or even if they have. However, my expe-
experience with my students, and with those faculty who have used the book, is that after a while, they realize that I am not saying anything that they did not already know. What may make it seem that I am saying something new is that, without quite realizing it, students and faculty had adopted some false philosophical account of morality and related concepts, and it simply takes some time for them to discard these misleading accounts and return to their natural understanding of these concepts. I do not know anyone who says that I persuaded them to change their view about morality; rather they say something like “You have made explicit the view of morality that I always had, without quite realizing it.” No one accepts my account of morality who did not hold it, at least implicitly, before they read *Common Morality*.

I am very pleased that Kerry likes my discussion of impartiality, consistency, and unanimity, but I am slightly surprised that he thinks that these concepts have no practical importance. Recognizing that equally informed impartial rational persons can disagree is of great practical value. As I mentioned in my response to Mike Pritchard, only by recognizing that impartiality does not require unanimity can we acknowledge that those who disagree with us about a moral matter need not be mistaken in any way. This encourages civil and fruitful discussion and allows for all involved to compromise without sacrificing their moral integrity. The present political polarization is in part a failure by both sides to recognize that equally informed impartial rational persons can come to different moral conclusions.