Dan Wueste raises some serious questions about the appropriateness of using *Common Morality* as a text in nonphilosophy courses with the aim of integrating ethics into them. Dan goes even further than Mike and Kerry in holding that Part II of the book would be very challenging to students in nonphilosophy courses and, unlike them, he thinks even Part I “presupposes a level of philosophical sophistication or interest that students who have not ‘signed up’ for philosophy will lack.” In fact, he thinks that the same is true of most of the faculty who would be teaching such courses. He speaks from experience, and I have no reason to doubt the correctness of his description of his experience. Indeed, when I gave lectures in courses in the Thayer School of Engineering at Dartmouth, I found that the students were not much interested in philosophy or philosophers. However, they did like some of the features of my account of morality that they viewed as practical. They liked the list of moral rules and they liked that there was an explicit procedure for deciding when it might be justified to break a moral rule.

I found that some of the faculty members who taught the course were putting forward views that had serious problems, e.g., that acting morally was always in one’s self-interest. This Platonic sounding view was not accompanied by a Platonic account of the importance of the harmony of the soul, but rather seemed to be simply an overoptimistic account of the world of business and engineering, or a misguided attempt to persuade the students to act morally. It was misguided because if the students decided that some way of acting was not in their self-interest, then they might conclude it was not morally required that they act in that way. Engineering students were not unlike some doctors who consulted the ethics committee; they didn’t want to be taught anything about morality, they simply wanted to be told what to do. Thus I have no reason to doubt Dan’s word when he says, “I frequently visit classes (e.g.,
mechanical or chemical engineering, architecture, or health care management) in which I have to ‘cut to the chase,’ not only because time is short, but because students in these classes are even less responsive to philosophical questions/moves than students in their first philosophy course.” I would hope that Dan would not do what the students want. It is far more important for students to develop their moral reasoning skills than to know the answer to any particular moral question. Learning how to reason about moral matters is not a matter of “philosophical questions/moves”; it is about taking responsibility for one’s moral decisions and realizing that not all moral questions have only one morally acceptable answer.

I am not distressed by Dan’s denial that “Common Morality would be a good book to assign as a text in a nonphilosophy course” because he also says, “Where we want to be at the end of the day is similar to the place that Bernie Gert’s new description of common morality is supposed to take us to.” Dan just thinks that using Common Morality as a text is not the right route to take us there. He does have a valid objection to some convoluted sentences, but I do not think that this is his primary objection. Rather, I think that he would object to using any philosophy book in a nonphilosophy course. Certainly he is right if he is claiming that it would not be a good idea for an engineer to use Common Morality as a text without his first taking a course with a philosopher on the book. Although I do think that at least Part I of Common Morality can be read with understanding by those with no background in philosophy, I doubt that such people would be able to teach the book effectively.

How can this problem be solved? One answer is that those nonphilosophers who are going to be integrating ethics into their courses should themselves take a course with a philosopher. That is what we did in the ethics committee of the Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center. I have already pointed out that many doctors who came for ethics consultations simply wanted to be told what to do, and did not want to be taught how to think about ethical matters for themselves. But some health care workers, including some doctors, were interested enough in thinking about ethical matters for themselves, that they asked to become members of the ethics committee. For these persons, we provided training in thinking about ethical matters, and although Common Morality was not yet published, I provided the same account of morality to them that I provide in Part I of Common Morality.

These doctors and other health care workers were able to show their professional colleagues in the field, far better than I ever could, why it
was important to understand why one decision was morally acceptable and another one was not. They could also explain why, in some cases, it was important to realize that there was more than one morally acceptable way of proceeding. In the same way, if some faculty are interested in thinking about morality in a precise and systematic way, which engineers often are, then these are the faculty that ought to be given a course, taught by a philosopher, in which Common Morality can be used as a text. Thus I would say something a little different than what Dan says in giving a qualified yes to the question about “recommending the book to a faculty member for the purpose of preparing to integrate ethics into her classes.” I would say that the book should be used as a text in a course for faculty preparing to integrate ethics into their classes. Only if these faculty members come to understand the importance of having a precise and systematic way to think about moral problems, will they be able to convey this to their students. And if they do come to understand this, then they may even be able to use Common Morality as a supplementary text in their courses.