INSTRUCTOR DISCLOSURE AND THEORY DIVERSITY IN TEACHING PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

Cynthia Jones
University of Texas- Pan American

INTRODUCTION

Is it appropriate for a professional ethics instructor to divulge her own views on the choice of an ethical theory to students, or is the unbiased discussion of theories preferable? Should the instructor “narrow the field” to one or two ethical theories or should a fuller range, or a diversity of ethical theories, be introduced? As an assistant professor charged with teaching professional ethics, I’ve found myself faced with questions like these concerning pedagogical issues to which I had previously given little thought. Foremost among these is the issue of the “best” way to teach professional ethics, a required course for several different degree programs at my institution, to students like those I see, for whom professional ethics is probably the only ethics course, and the only philosophy course, they will ever take. Given the limitation of class time (one semester) in relation to the amount of relevant information that should be conveyed, I have found that some important decisions need to be made regarding such instruction. The particular pedagogical decisions discussed in this paper are: whether to limit the range of ethical theories discussed and whether to disclose one’s own ethical theory preferences to students.

In teaching introductory ethics classes as a graduate student I had assumed, without serious questioning, that the correct approach to teaching ethics is to present students with the full gamut of moral theories, in as objective a manner as possible, and allow students to make their own reasoned choices regarding these theories. No doubt, from what I can tell, many ethics instructors would agree with such an approach and would wonder why I hesitate to do the same in teaching professional ethics classes. And yet I find myself questioning whether this is the best approach to teaching these courses.
TIME CONSTRAINTS AND ALTERNATE APPROACHES

I assume that a significant goal for professional ethics courses is to apprise students of the kinds of ethical decisions they may face in their future professional lives and to equip them with the tools to make such decisions. Considering the limited exposure that most of my students have to formal philosophy in general and to ethical theory in particular, perhaps a more focused approach would be preferable and would best facilitate the attainment of this goal—an approach that does not involve the discussion of a range of moral theories and thus restricts theory diversity.

Time always seems to be at a premium in these courses. There never seems to be enough time for a full discussion of the range of plausible ethical theories and for handling issues like subjectivism and relativism, along with case studies and familiarizing students with the kinds of ethical situations they may face as professionals. Thus, a less comprehensive or a less diverse approach might be preferable, given these time constraints and the amount of relevant material that should be covered.

Of course many instructors teaching any kind of introductory course are concerned with the limited amount of time they have to discuss their subject matter. But while time constraints are surely relevant in teaching introductory ethics courses, for example, I would argue that they are even more significant in teaching professional ethics courses. In my experience, the amount of time devoted to a discussion of ethical theories is more limited in professional ethics. In order to address case studies in one or more professions, a professional ethics instructor may not have the same amount of time to devote to a discussion of numerous ethical theories as an instructor teaching a general introductory ethics course would have.

But to be honest, my concerns regarding the issues of theory diversity and instructor disclosure arose from conversations with a senior colleague who teaches professional ethics in a different way than I had ever seriously considered, with great success. Rather than objectively offering students the array of available options, he chooses to teach from one particular perspective, namely, a virtue ethics perspective. He also explains to students why he finds virtue ethics to be the preferable approach. And as I began to consider and research these two seemingly disparate methods of objectively portraying the range of theories as opposed to limiting the range with disclosure of theory preference, I found in the available literature on teaching ethics a third distinct option.
that I take to fall somewhere in between these two. In this third approach, the instructor presents an array of ethical theories, while explaining to students his or her own theory preference along with the reasons for such a choice.3

My trepidation towards choosing from amongst these approaches for teaching professional ethics stems from addressing the following concerns: how best to attain the central goal or goals of professional ethics courses, how to most effectively teach students the important material, and how to most efficiently handle the time constraints involved in a single-semester course.4

As mentioned above, the two central pedagogical decisions at issue here for teaching professional ethics are: whether or not the instructor should disclose his or her own ethical theory choice and whether the instructor should present the range of ethical theories or just the one he or she finds most plausible. These are distinct, yet clearly related, decisions as the reasons that can be given for one choice may affect the other choice. Defining the goals for instruction in professional ethics is obviously an important issue and I will assume, although not uncontroversially, some specific goals for a professional ethics course in the sections that follow.

The remainder of this paper will address the question of which of the three aforementioned approaches to teaching professional ethics is preferable for students like those I teach, given the goals of such instruction, and while assuming that these are the best available options. Although the type of class in particular that I will address is a general professional ethics class, I do not assume that what follows is necessarily generalizable to other kinds of ethics classes, such as classes in introductory ethics or ethical theory.5 I would, however, expect that the discussion that follows is relevant to most ethics classes in specific professional fields, like medical ethics, engineering ethics, or business ethics.

THREE APPROACHES

As I see it, the plausible ways to approach the teaching of professional ethics, with regard to the variables of instructor disclosure and the presentation of ethical theories, are as follows.6
The first approach, which I'll label the objective instructor approach (or OIA), is characterized by the instructor presenting students with an array of ethical theories, without giving any strong indication regarding which theory or theories she finds most compelling. In short, an instructor using this approach would not disclose a personal theory choice and would present a range or a diversity of ethical theories. It is reasonable to assume that an instructor adopting this approach intends to allow the students to come to their own conclusions regarding the plausibility of ethical theories, free from the biases of the instructor that could taint their decision-making processes. This approach thus implicitly appeals to autonomy while presupposing that students possess the relevant critical thinking abilities to make such reasoned decisions in applied ethics.

The second approach, which I'll call the virtue ethics approach (or VEA), involves the instructor acting as an advocate for a particular theory, namely virtue ethics, in the hopes of giving students a stronger and clearer basis from which to act ethically in their future professional lives. The primary goal here is to develop a strong sense of moral character that, it is hoped, will lead to more conscientious and natural decision-making from the future professionals. Surely any ethical theory could be the theory of instructor choice for this approach, however, virtue ethics in particular is the position that has often been defended in the literature for such an approach, and it lends itself nicely to a single-theory method with its focus on moral character. It seems that an advocate of VEA assumes that a goal of instruction in professional ethics is to improve the moral character of his or her students, thus enabling them to more readily make defensible ethical decisions in their future careers. An instructor may pursue a virtue ethics approach and disclose her theory choice with or without presenting a range of ethical theories. What I shall refer to as VEA1 refers to the approach wherein an instructor discloses her theory preference for virtue ethics without
presenting a range of other ethical theories as viable alternatives, while VEA2 refers to the approach wherein an instructor discloses her theory preference for virtue ethics along with presenting a range of other ethical theories.

The last approach involves the instructor as both an advocate for a particular theory as well as a source of information about ethical theories in general. In this approach, the instructor presents the array of ethical theories along with his or her own views, making the instructor's decision-making transparent to students while allowing the students to see the other available options. Such an approach takes the role of an ethics instructor to be the presentation of the range of ethical theories in a manner that allows the instructor to explain the reasoning behind his or her own choice of theories, so as to not deprive the students of the instructor's expertise and knowledge in this area. I will refer to this approach as the advocate instructor approach (or AIA). The primary goal of AIA is introducing students to first-hand experience with the decision-making of a professional ethicist in the hopes that such exposure will be instructive. VEA2 is thus a version of AIA, although with more specific commitments to character-building and virtue that follow from supporting virtue ethics.

Perhaps each of these approaches would work well with different groups of students, however my concern is directly with the kind of students I have described in a general professional ethics class, namely, the non-philosophy major, taking professional ethics as their sole philosophy class as a requirement for a degree program. And so an examination of the goals of a professional ethics course for the kind of students in question along with an examination of the strengths and weaknesses of each of these approaches is in order.

**STUDENTS AND GOALS**

Most of the students I teach in professional ethics classes are either required or strongly encouraged to take a professional ethics class by their degree programs. The majority of these students are engineering majors, although a large number are criminal justice, computer science, or business majors, with the remainder coming from other assorted disciplines. And again, for most of these students, a single professional ethics class is their sole exposure to formal philosophy and to ethical theory in general.
As stated previously, I take my role as a professional ethics instructor to primarily include educating future professionals about acting morally in their roles as professionals, which includes apprising students of the kinds of ethical decisions they may face in their future professional lives while equipping them with the tools to make such decisions. Other instructors may have additional goals for their professional ethics courses, but I would assume that this would be a central goal for any such course. Given this goal, it would be prudent to evaluate the pedagogical approaches in question in light of this end. But what does it mean to say that a central goal of professional ethics instruction is the task of educating future professionals about acting morally in their roles as professionals? Surely this can be accomplished by utilizing any of the approaches that have been discussed. It would seem that any course with this as a demonstrated goal would be acceptable. Whether this goal is best achieved via presenting a range of ethical theories, one major ethical theory, or a range of theories while favoring one, is just the question at hand.

Each of the approaches considered, however, implies a further unique goal. In adopting OIA, an instructor seems to be tacitly acknowledging that a goal of such instruction is allowing students to make their own decisions regarding the choice of ethical theories, free from the biases of the instructor. In adopting either version of VEA, or AIA, an instructor seems to be acknowledging that making the students aware of the instructor's preference for an ethical theory is pedagogically useful, either as an aid to guide the students to see how such decisions are made, in the case of AIA, or as a way to best achieve the end of making students more conscientious professionals, better able to face the role of a professional after a prolonged discussion of the relevant virtues and vices, in the case of VEA. And presenting a very limited range of ethical theories without examining support for most theories could be done merely for the sake of expediency or because it is not necessary to present theories that the instructor does not find compelling.

It is important to question what the departments from which these students hail take to be the objectives or goals of such a class, as they are responsible for training the would-be professionals in other aspects. If these departments have particular goals in mind, then these should be considered. In my experience, however, most departments have no clearly defined goals for professional ethics courses, outside of their desire to satisfy those bodies from which they attain accreditation, along with a genuine concern that their students should receive such training in
ethics. One exception, in my experience, has been engineering. In engineering majors, the accreditation issue carries some further requirements for students at my university. Engineering students need to be familiar with the ethical codes of their particular engineering profession and they need to make a group presentation. These further constraints for engineering students, however, can be addressed within any of the approaches we are considering. Although it is possible that discipline-specific constraints exist, I haven’t encountered or heard of any discipline-specific goals for professional ethics instruction that would preclude any of the approaches herein discussed.12

Unless we can cash out the goals more narrowly, the goals of instruction alone cannot determine our decisions on the two variables of instructor disclosure and theory diversity. But specifying the goals of professional ethics instruction too narrowly could easily raise the specter of question-begging. For example, I teach my classes as exercises in ethical decision-making and I hope that my students leave with some of the necessary tools for making informed ethical decisions in the workplace. As such, I would restate the general goal to include a discussion of decision-making. But this could beg the question against the way many instructors would employ VEA1 or VEA2, which typically involves a focus on character-building over decision-making.13

**Comparing the Three Approaches**

We turn now to a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the approaches at hand. My main worry about VEA in general is the issue that initially bothered me when I became aware of this approach, namely, the focus on building character over decision-making. But this is just part of the standard debate between advocates of rule-based theories and advocates of character-based or virtue-based theories and so again it would be unfair to merely beg the question against virtue ethics.

What can be said for and against VEA1? Some advocates of VEA in general argue that its main advantage is that it best promotes the Aristotelian ideal of teaching ethics so as to make students better people.14 Unlike virtue ethics, most other ethical theories focus on isolated decision-making and not on building moral character.15 With VEA1 in particular, teaching students virtue ethics exclusively avoids this focus on decision-making and allows the instructor to assist students in character-building. As the only theory under consideration that does not involve presenting the range of ethical theories, VEA1 has the benefit of
fewer time constraints, in comparison to the other approaches that must devote quite a bit of class time to the presentation of multiple ethical theories. Students would have considerably more time available to discuss and debate case studies, for example, with VEA1 in comparison to the other alternatives.

VEA1 has the further advantage of reducing the work for the students, so to speak, in that it gives them a concrete basis from which to start, making it easier for them to begin contemplation of solutions to the difficult ethical decisions they may face in their professional lives. I would liken this approach to the way many “hard” science classes are taught. Why waste the students’ time with detailed discussion of scientific theories that are not well-supported by evidence, unless to illustrate the superiority of the accepted view. AIA and VEA2, on the other hand, seem to be more closely analogous to the way social science courses are taught where there are many different theory choices available, but the instructor typically teaches one as most significant. When I studied psychology as an undergraduate, for example, most of my psychology professors taught from a behaviorist perspective, while making it clear that there were other theoretical approaches.

The lack of theory diversity in VEA1 would seem to help in my least favorite aspect of teaching professional ethics—dealing with student relativism. I often hear the most relativistic comments from students during the class sessions when we are discussing ethical theories. When students see that there is more than one plausible theory option and that ethicists themselves can’t agree on one approach, the specter of moral relativism often rears its ugly head.

But there is a negative side to VEA1’s choice against theory diversity. It may be argued that an instructor choosing against theory diversity deprives students of making their own reasoned choices about ethical theories and of employing their own critical thinking skills to make a decision regarding the strengths and weaknesses of ethical theories. It also may be argued that VEA1 is a bit dishonest in that it seems to paint a picture of a field in which there is general agreement about evidence supporting one theory, which is clearly not the case in Ethics. Further, VEA1 has the potential disadvantage of being rather off-putting for those students who may not share the instructor’s preferred view of virtue ethics, and who know that there are other options, especially those who dispute the focus on character over decision-making. I have heard many students complain about instructors in other disciplines whose lectures are more like sermons for positions
rather than presentations of material.) This problem, however, could be overcome by a willingness on the part of the instructor to offer reasons and arguments for his or her favored theory and a willingness on the part of the instructor to discuss objections. But then this would just collapse into a version of VEA2.

In summary, VEA1’s two main advantages are: it best handles time constraints by not spending time on theory diversity, and it offers a built-in way of handling moral relativism. I would argue that the latter advantage can be addressed by approaches presenting a diversity of theories (more on this later) and that the former advantage is not sufficient to warrant a misrepresentation of Ethics or to deprive students of information on other ethical theories. Thus, VEA1, while it has several advantages, does not accurately portray the complexity of ethical decisions and the controversy involved in the field and so is not the best way to teach professional ethics. But what about VEA2?

AIA and VEA2 have some of the same advantages as VEA1 without the major disadvantages, like the one-sided objection. AIA and VEA2 have a further unique advantage noted by an advocate of AIA\textsuperscript{16}—they allow students the chance to see an “ethicist in action” engaged in theory evaluation and employing relevant critical thinking skills. This is clearly an advantage for these approaches in achieving what I take to be the main goal of instruction in professional ethics, namely, helping students to gain the necessary skills and information regarding ethical theories and principles for making ethical decisions in their professional lives. But does an instructor need to disclose his or her own theory preference to achieve this end? OIA may be able to achieve the same end by discussing the available options in case studies and having the instructor discuss reasons for choosing one course of action in comparison to others available. But we will return to this shortly. What else can be said about AIA and VEA2?

The only real difference in the two variables we are considering between VEA2 and AIA, as opposed to OIA, is instructor disclosure. Are there any other reasons besides benefit to students gained from exposure to witnessing an ethicist at work than can be gained from instructor disclosure? One possible benefit of instructor disclosure is honesty. Proponents of instructor disclosure can surely argue that it isn’t really possible to objectively present ethical theories when the instructor favors one over the others. Let us examine OIA before evaluating this claim.
Turning to OIA, we should first examine any unique benefits and then ascertain whether it can address the two advantages VEA and AIA seem to have on the variable of instructor disclosure. OIA has the obvious advantage of avoiding bias in instructing students towards one theory or type of theory. It thus seems to allow for clearer decision making on the part of the students when they are not bogged down by or struggling against the explicit views or biases of the instructor.

As already noted, the first disadvantage, in comparison to the alternate approaches that employ instructor disclosure, lies in depriving the students of some of the relevant knowledge and expertise of the instructor—knowledge and expertise that would be employed when the instructor discusses his or her own theory choice. A second problem is that we might reasonably question whether it is ever possible to present material, especially material about which the instructor has strong preferences or aversions, in a truly unbiased fashion. It would be rather difficult for an instructor who fashions herself a utilitarian, for example, to present deontological theories with the same enthusiasm with which she presents utilitarianism. And so it may be argued that since such unbiased objective presentation of ethical theories is unlikely if not impossible, the instructor should be honest about this lack of objectivity. Further, an opponent of OIA could argue that the students deserve to see the instructor’s evidence and have their choices explained to allow them better decision making, rather than hidden, to whatever extent, in the purportedly objective presentation of ethical theories.

A proponent of OIA thus has these two main objections with which to contend: OIA deprives students of witnessing an ethicist “in action”, so to speak, and OIA entails that a truly objective presentation of ethical theories is possible, which it is not. OIA also faces a time constraint problem, as does VEA2 and AIA, in comparison to alternatives that do not involve the presentation of a range of ethical theories like VEA1.

Can an instructor working within OIA overcome the objection that it deprives students of witnessing an ethicist “in action”? This objection can be handled by theory application. In giving examples of applying moral theories and principles, and ethical codes, the instructor can give students a glimpse of how philosophers work (or applied ethicists, at least!). And I’m willing to argue that in the majority of case studies, save the most controversial ones, mainstream ethical theories and codes of ethics will point to a similar group of permissible options. Thus, applying theories can address both the worry of student-perceived
relativism and the worry of depriving students of witnessing how an ethicist works.

As we have already noted, witnessing an ethicist evaluate ethical theories would surely be an advantage, however, I would argue that witnessing an ethicist evaluating actual cases of moral decision making within a profession would be at least as useful in terms of the goals for professional ethics courses. The aforementioned goal of professional ethics instruction of apprising students of the kinds of ethical decisions they may face in their future professional lives while equipping them with the tools to make such decisions is best addressed with moral theory and codes of ethics application. Witnessing an ethicist address real ethical problems in the workplace should be more helpful in attaining this goal than witnessing an ethicist discuss ethical theory preferences.

Can a proponent of OIA respond to the charge of the impossibility of objectivity in presenting moral theories? I believe that a reasonably objective presentation of ethical theories is possible, although I can offer only anecdotal evidence here. I have on many occasions asked my students to guess at the end of a semester which ethical theory I find most plausible. They are wrong at least 95% of the time. Again this is merely anecdotal evidence that some semblance of objectivity is possible, but I find it compelling nonetheless. Even if objectivity is not completely possible, this doesn't entail that we shouldn't strive for it. But OIA needs to be tempered with a discussion of moral relativism as well, lest the students conclude that, since their instructor doesn't express his or her opinion, the instructor thus feels that there isn't an approach that is most viable. Also, by making it clear to students that the instructor does have a theory preference but will not convey it to students, this can be a challenge to students to give more careful consideration to the options and reasons. And, in a sense, students “own” their decisions to a greater extent when they are made more freely.

To summarize, the three main disadvantages of OIA are: depriving students of instructor expertise, pretending there is objectivity in theory presentation, and wasting precious time on theory diversity. I believe the first two objections have been adequately addressed. The last objection of time constraints is also a problem for VEA2 and AIA, and OIA has advantages that these approaches lack. And in comparing OIA to VEA1, the choice against theory diversity inherent in VEA1 renders it susceptible to the most serious objections herein discussed.
CONCLUSION

This paper contends that “best” approach to teaching professional ethics is OIA. In addressing the question of theory diversity, I argue that choosing against presenting a range of ethical theories appears disingenuous in that it fails to introduce students to a field that contains inherent controversy regarding the choice of ethical theory. The concern over time constraints still remains, although saving time by not presenting a range of ethical theories is not the answer. In addressing the question of instructor disclosure, I argue that the main advantage to be gained from an instructor disclosing a theory choice, namely, the students are exposed to an “ethicist in action,” can equally be accomplished in the “solving” of case studies by the instructor, which may also help in addressing concerns of student relativism.

NOTES

1 In most ways, my students are like those at other primarily commuter campuses, many are bright, hard-working, and first-generation college students, and many have expectations of a “trade” or “profession” of some sort that they can enter immediately upon graduation. The university where I teach is also designated as a “Hispanic Serving Institution” and typically ranks in the top two or three institutions in the country for the number of undergraduate and graduate degrees awarded to Hispanics.


4 It is possible that rather than a generally “best” approach, there is a “best” approach for each individual instructor or each general kind of instructor. This paper assumes that there is a generally best approach to teaching professional ethics in relation to the two pedagogical decisions on theory diversity and instructor disclosure.

5 I am grateful for comments received on a draft of this paper at the 2009 Annual Meeting of the Association for Practical and Professional Ethics, where it was suggested that instructor disclosure may be more significant in upper-level courses geared towards philosophy majors and minors as the
information gleaned from “seeing an ethicist in action” would be more important in these courses. It was further suggested that the amount of instructor disclosure required may be directly proportional to the amount of knowledge of the topic the students possess, making it problematic for an instructor to refrain from disclosing theory preference in a graduate course, for example.

6 The fourth category on this chart would entail an instructor choosing against disclosing their own theory preference to students and choosing against presenting the range of ethical theories. Essentially, the instructor only presents one ethical theory and doesn’t explain to students that there are other viable options. I have not seen such an approach defended in the literature, probably for obvious reasons, and so I will here assume it is not a viable option. The other three categories encompass the four positions discussed herein.

7 Of course there may be debate over which ethical theories count as plausible. A simple, but by no means infallible, way to reasonably delineate between ethical theories that are plausible and those that are not might be to include in the former class those theories that are generally included in ethics textbooks.

8 I attribute this approach to Thomas Pearson, a senior colleague of mine who employs and strongly advocates a virtue ethics approach (VEA1) to teaching professional ethics.

9 Markie, op. cit.

10 It may be that different types of students would gain different benefits from a professional ethics class taught from each of these three approaches. Philosophy majors or minors, for example, would probably learn more from AIA than the average student since it could enable them to achieve a deeper understanding of the theories and of applying critical thinking skills. Further, perhaps some students at the other end of the spectrum who are struggling with the required skills for a philosophy class would be well-served to see how the instructor reasons through difficult decisions. But for the sake of this paper, I will assume that we have the “average” student taking only one philosophy class and I will tailor my comments regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the three approaches with this target audience in mind.

11 Of course there could be other reasons for such omissions.

12 Although it is possible that such constraints exist in fields with which I am not familiar.

13 Although decision making techniques can easily be taught in VEA1 and VEA2 as well. Specifying decision making techniques broadly, therefore, doesn’t help to narrow the field while specifying them too narrowly may be question-begging.

14 Gould, op.cit.

15 Gould, op.cit.

16 See Markie, op.cit., especially pages 50-52.

17 Markie, op. cit.
Many instructors teaching professional or applied ethics are, of course, not philosophers by training. I would argue, however, that these non-philosopher ethicists employ similar critical thinking skills and that their explanations of reasoning in case studies are equally illuminating for students.

I would argue that professional codes are not only necessary from a legalistic perspective but are often useful for instructors, students of a profession, and professionals alike in offering insight to the shared values of a profession.

REFERENCES


