TEACHING SYMPATHETIC MORAL REASONING

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INTRODUCTION

I offer a new approach to teaching ethics that offers a heuristic for moral reasoning and attempts to inculcate a habitual process of moral reasoning. I use a variety of theories from ethics, philosophy of mind, and psychology to create what I call Sympathetic Moral Reasoning. In this paper, I explain my initial motivations for this approach as well as some of my theoretical inspirations in developing the process. However, the purpose of this paper is not to detail the theoretical background for such an approach, but rather to explain how I designed the course and used the various activities to instill a process of moral reasoning as a habit. Such an approach serves not only to teach students how to reason morally, but enables them to engage in moral reasoning regularly, which is what I take the ultimate purpose of teaching ethics to be.

MOTIVATION

I think that most ethics teachers assume that their courses teach students how to reason morally. That is, they assume that removing Relativistic challenges (among others), delving into moral theories, and applying moral theories to particular issues teaches students how to think about and use moral theories to solve moral dilemmas. The presence of such ethics courses in university curricula nationwide attests not only to this commitment to moral education but also to the endorsement of a particular pedagogy. I also think that many ethics teachers are disappointed with the outcomes of their courses. Exams often reveal students’ inadequate grasp of concepts, and papers reveal an insufficient application of moral theories to issues. Deep conversations in office hours reveal that students, even those who perform well in the course, really do not know how to go about resolving moral dilemmas that arise in their personal lives. These poor outcomes obtain regardless of a teacher’s skill and
knowledge, and I think they reflect the need for new approaches to moral education.

Consequently, I wanted to develop an approach that teaches students an explicit ability or skill for moral reasoning. Moreover, I wanted to develop an approach in which the process of moral reasoning was relatively simple, familiar, and easy to implement so that it could become a habit through regular application. Relying on Humean sentimentalism from ethics and current theories in philosophy of mind and psychology, I developed a process called Sympathetic Moral Reasoning and designed a course to inculcate it as a habitual process of moral reasoning. If the goal of teaching ethics courses is to teach students how to solve moral problems in their own lives and in our society, then a course that teaches them how to do that, as well as which encourages them to do it routinely, would be an improvement over traditional approaches to teaching ethics.

Because I am fortunate enough to be in a department that encourages interdisciplinary work, I teach an ethics course to juvenile delinquents as part of the Mahoning County Juvenile Justice Center (JJC). Although I previously taught an ethics course for inmates who were alleged “violent offenders” (e.g., committed assault, used a weapon such as a gun or knife in a burglary, or were involved in homicides), I recently had the opportunity to teach “high-risk” students as part of the JJC’s Day Reporting Program. Students are categorized as “high-risk” for offenses such as drug possession, physical violence (fights in school or with family members), or theft. Because these students engage in behaviors that lead to more severe crimes, the purpose of teaching an ethics course is to alter their behavior. However, given their youth (approximately 14-17 years old) and the fact that many of them are poor students, traditional approaches to teaching ethics via traditional texts and theoretical lectures would not be effective. A course that 1) develops students’ abilities to reason morally, 2) teaches a heuristic for moral reasoning, and 3) inculcates a process of moral reasoning as a habit may be the only type of course that stands a chance in altering such “high-risk” behaviors.

SMR AS HABITUAL MORAL REASONING

I encourage students to apply Sympathetic Moral Reasoning to any moral scenario because of its simplicity and ease of use. It is literally a heuristic for moral reasoning with only five simple steps: 1) Moral Question, 2) Script, 3) Perspective, 4) Examine, and 5) Answer. It aids students in finding answers to moral dilemmas because it not only helps them
identify a specific moral question, but also provides them with a simple and clear process that returns a direct answer to the posed moral question.

Although the purpose of the course was to teach students the process of SMR, this requires more than simply explaining the steps and the process. One student demonstrated his incomplete understanding rather nicely when he stated at the end of the lecture on SMR, “Oh, I get it. You just want us to think about the consequences.” Teaching SMR as a habitual process of moral reasoning requires 1) developing each underlying ability, and 2) pushing the students to practice implementing the process in presented moral scenarios. Given that a habit is an action or process performed consistently and reliably through time, SMR can function as a habitual process of moral reasoning only if students actually have the ability to perform each step. Developing students’ abilities enables them to perform each step, which thereby makes the creation of a habit possible. Pushing the students to practice implementing the process ensures that it is performed consistently and reliably, and that with continued implementation through time, it will congeal into a habit.

I hold that there are three general types of abilities that underlie Sympathetic Moral Reasoning. Insofar as each developed ability embodies a specific type of knowledge, I claim that each ability can be thought of as a form of literacy. The first type is one’s ability to recognize emotions accurately and reliably in both the self and others. Developing this ability expands one’s “emotional literacy” in that one has additional information to use in perceiving, evaluating, and interpreting emotional states. The second type is the imaginative ability to build scripts as hypothetical scenarios with vividness, detail, and realism. Developing this ability expands one’s “contextual literacy” in that one has a treasure-trove of information about possible actors, interactions, dialogue, etc. to use when imaginatively creating and building a script. The third is the ability to adopt roles and perspectives (both first and third person). Developing this ability expands one’s “moral literacy” in that one gains information about objective similarities across persons to use when examining what another person would feel in a given case, and which can provide an experiential and evidential ground for some moral concepts.

THEORETICAL BASIS

I gleaned several fundamental insights from ethics, philosophy of mind, and psychology which 1) shaped my thinking about Sympathetic
Moral Reasoning as a heuristic for moral reasoning, and 2) guided how I developed the course to teach the underlying abilities of SMR and to inculcate SMR as a process of habitual moral reasoning. Hume’s (1888/1978) account of human nature and of sympathy as a natural capacity for moral judgments provides the cornerstone for SMR. The first insight I take from Hume is that there are basic physical and psychological capacities that all humans share in virtue of their common nature, or physical and mental constitution. Sympathy is one such common capacity, and it is a natural psychological, quasi-perceptual capacity to make moral judgments. A second insight I take from Hume is the idea that such basic capacities or abilities can be developed, and can yield habits through routine use and practice.

For Hume, moral judgments are not produced via abstract and theoretical reasoning, but from the moral sentiments of approbation and disapprobation. Approbation is an internal perception or awareness of pleasure (e.g., satisfaction or a positive emotive state), and disapprobation is an internal perception or awareness of pain (e.g., uneasiness or an uncomfortable emotive state). One experiences either approbation or disapprobation in response to the properties or character of events, which constitutes an evaluation or judgment of the event. Given that humans have the same basic physical and mental constitution as well as the same basic capacities, this event should elicit a similar response in others. Consequently, observing others’ affective or emotive responses displayed in facial expressions, bodily postures, or through language causes me to have an idea about their sentiment. For example, I infer that another is disgusted and horrified when I observe his shocked expression and corresponding grimace. My idea of his disgust and horror may be so vivid that I then sympathize with him, and also feel disgust and horror. However, Hume is quite clear that one does not actually need to observe another person in order to have a sympathetic response: observing or imagining a scenario may itself elicit a sympathetic response for someone in such circumstances. Insofar as sympathetic responses are emotive evaluations of actions and events, developing the students’ sympathy as a natural capacity should also develop their emotive capacities and responses.

Simulation Theory from philosophy of mind provides another source of insight. There are some important theoretical differences between simulation theorists, and my account of SMR differs from simulation theory in important ways. However, I think simulation theorists are right to focus on the imaginative capacity as an essential component of many cognitive processes (for examples, see Goldman, 1995; Gordon,
The second insight from simulation theory is that there is an important difference between first and third person identifications with either a person or a circumstance. As will become clear, I think that both first and third-person perspectives are essential, and that explicit cognitive shifting between perspectives creates an explicit theoretical understanding of situations, agents, mental states, and behaviors.

Script or schema theory from psychology provides another foundational insight. As before, there are important theoretical differences between script/schema theorists, but as will become clear, I find the basic concept of a script invaluable. Scripts are considered to be implicit and abstract knowledge of protocols, procedures, emotions, and behaviors in conversation and events that individuals use to guide their own behavior and to interact with and interpret the behavior of others (for examples, see Fehr et al., 1999; Gioia and Poole, 1984; Greenberg et al., 1998; Greenwood et al., 2000; and Wenzel and Holt, 2003). For example, one uses a script when dining at a restaurant: you understand the role of the waitstaff, how to place an order, that one pays for the food at the end of the meal and not halfway through, that one may return an undercooked steak but not launch it at the waitstaff, etc. The insight I take from script theory is that there are such mental representations that embody a complex of types of implicit knowledge, and that individuals use such scripts in both imaginative scenarios and actual situations.

**DEVELOPING COMPONENT ABILITIES: RECOGNIZING EMOTIONS**

To develop the students’ ability to recognize emotions in themselves and others, I created a variety of competitive team activities and combined them with small group activities and large class discussions. For an activity I call “Emotion Listing,” I divided the students into small groups to brainstorm lists of emotions. To win, a team needed to have the greatest number of original and non-duplicated emotion terms. Because the students created the lists, the activity supplied the basic emotion terms we used in subsequent discussions. In addition, their lively discussion during the activity expanded the emotional vocabulary for some students. In their attempt to amass points, they argued over whether feeling “alienated” should be counted separately from feeling “sad,” and what the distinction truly was between feeling “violated” and “betrayed.”

In the “Cluster Mapping” activity, the students had to consider the master list of emotions we had created, and to type the emotions into
groups or clusters according to their degree of similarity. Using Damasio’s theory of emotion (1994, 1999), I had the students consider the physiological effects for each emotion cluster, and type emotion terms based on their physiological manifestations. For example, an increased heart rate, shallower breaths, clenched fists, etc. may be common to “anxiety,” “anger,” “rage,” and “jealousy.” Charting the relations between emotion terms based on their common features provided students with a relational context for understanding unfamiliar terms (i.e., the activity expanded their emotional vocabularies), and provided them with explicit features to use when trying to identify emotions in themselves or others.

Because faces are so emotionally expressive, the next activity focused on the identification of emotion in facial expressions. Using Ekman’s theory of universal basic emotions (Ekman, 1993; Rosenberg and Ekman, 1995), I presented students with a variety of photographs gleaned from the Internet. For each photograph, we discussed what emotions were displayed, and what features provided evidence of that emotion rather than another. For example, while a furrowed brow may be common to expressions of anger and concentration, a clenched jaw may be the determining difference. Although the students had more fun trying to identify the famous models, actors, and sports players, the activity pushed them to consider explicit facial features and the relation between those features for identifying facial emotional expressions.

For the final activity for this section of the course, I created a version of “Emotional Charades,” which enabled students to practice identifying both bodily and facial emotional stimuli. Similarly to regular charades, students received cards with various emotion terms and had to act out those emotions for their teammates without the use of words or sounds. This activity required the students to recall, use, and integrate all the information they learned from previous activities (e.g., expansion of emotional vocabularies, deepening of emotional concepts, identification of emotional stimuli in themselves and others). Most importantly, it enabled students to practice displaying and identifying emotions, a fundamental component ability underlying habitual moral reasoning.

**DEVELOPING COMPONENT ABILITIES: BUILDING SCRIPTS**

To develop the students’ ability to build scripts imaginatively, I had students work in small groups to write scripts for a variety of cases. For example, Case 1 presents the following scenario: “You are in a line at a
convenience store and the person ahead of you accidentally leaves his wallet on the counter.” Notice that the script is open-ended: students may choose to take the wallet, turn it over to the cashier for safe-keeping, dash out of the store to find the previous customer, etc. The assignment was to create a script detailing the event and whatever would happen next. In writing the script, students had to create a context, story line, actors, and specify the dialogue, actions, and interactions of the actors. To encourage them to take the assignment seriously, I explained that they would perform their scripts for the class in an “American Idol” style competition, the criteria for which would be 1) the quality of the acting, 2) the detail of the script, and 3) the realism/believability of the script (to exclude the appearance of aliens, etc.).

The “Script Writing” activity serves a number of pedagogical goals, the first of which is to create scripts to use in subsequent activities. The second goal is to establish a baseline for students’ prior moral attitudes and behaviors as exhibited in the scripts: the scripts provide valuable insights as to the pre-theoretic actions and behaviors students find plausible and acceptable. Although students have the ability to imagine, the third goal is to develop their imaginative faculty beyond the simple consideration of a hypothetical scenario to a sophisticated cognitive ability to visualize and maintain focus on a complex, detailed, successive, and realistic scenario. Having students think about the details of characters, their actions, emotions, thoughts, speech, and interactions gives a degree of realism and gravity to moral cases beyond that of simply presenting students with hypothetical thought experiments. Further, seeing the moral scenario as an evolving story unfolding in time encourages students to see any given action as being part of a larger nexus of events. The fourth goal is to have the students practice this sophisticated imaginative process repeatedly through creating scripts for a variety of cases.

Although the ostensible reason for the “American Idol” competition was to motivate the students, performing the scripts also serves to develop the students’ ability to build scripts imaginatively. Even in the process of performing the scripts, the students added actions or dialogue spontaneously, enhancing their original scripts and making them more realistic. In addition, seeing how another team built a script for a given scenario provides the students with alternatives for possible actions, emotions, speech, etc., and also serves to expand their store of contextual knowledge. For example, one team included a scene in which police bust a party of underage drinkers and two of the characters are sent to jail. This script reflected details from the students’ actual lived experience in a
unique way (given that each of them had served time in a juvenile detention center), and served to remind them of possible actions and subsequent events unfolding in time.

The scripts also served as an entry point for interesting discussions about the various moral scenarios and the identification of moral questions. For example, one case stated that: “You are going to go out with friends, but you don’t have any money. You know your mom stashes some money under the mattress.” In this scenario, an actor needs and knows the location of money, and is now faced with a choice of whether he should take the money. Treating moral scenarios as movie scripts yields helpful metaphors; for example, one can encourage students to “pause” the script at any point at which an actor would have a choice to make. Getting the students to pause the script and engage in deliberation makes the choice momentous and helps to identify the moral question: “Should I take my mother’s money?”

DEVELOPING COMPONENT ABILITIES: ADOPTING ROLES AND PERSPECTIVES

To help develop the students’ ability to imaginatively adopt roles and to shift between first and third person perspectives, I instituted a “Switching Game.” The whole class worked together to create a script for a new scenario, and then members from each team began to act out the script. However, at any point, I could call out “switch!” and the two students instantly had to adopt the other role within the script, carrying on with the same dialogue, actions, storyline, etc. as before. To ensure that all team members had practice switching roles, the team captain could substitute one team member for a floundering member. Some students had to exchange roles multiple times before being relieved by the team captain. To motivate the students, I used acting quality, adoption of the new role, and maintaining the continuity of the script as criteria to select the winning team.

Although this activity quickly became complex, it is invaluable. While students did imaginatively adopt roles and perspectives to build scripts in the Script Writing activity, the process of composing scripts is fairly passive, and they had ample time to sit and think about the characters, actions, dialogue, etc. In contrast, the Switching Game pushes students to adopt and change roles literally by stepping into the shoes of another. Rather than a passive imaginative adoption of roles, this activity
engages the students in the roles and allows them to practice instantaneously switching between multiple roles and perspectives.

I used a game called “Social Monopoly” to enhance shifting between first and third person perspectives. I played this game years ago, and so cannot take credit for it, but I cannot find its source. Each team receives an initial stock of money and supplies, as well as a “territory” delimited by masking tape boundaries on the floor. I told the students to envision and then build their ideal city/society, and that I would use the criteria of realism/detail (i.e., housing structures are necessary), complexity, and originality to select the winning team. What the students did not know is that the game was fixed: I selected one team to “privilege,” another to treat “fairly,” and a third to “disadvantage.” At the beginning of the game, each team was treated fairly, but the privileged team was increasingly and unfairly advantaged over the course of the game.

The privileged team received special “deals” on their supplies (price breaks, and sometimes free supplies), additional help (the interns joined the group and worked with them), additional materials (tape, markers, cardstock that other teams were denied), and increased territory (the intern working with the team moved the tape boundary and encroached on the territory of all the surrounding groups). The team treated fairly had fixed prices for materials throughout, they received advice but no help from the interns, and barring the fact that they lost a bit of their territory, were undisturbed in building their city/society. The disadvantaged team was subject to wildly fluctuating prices for materials, refusal to sell them materials at all (toward the end of the game), denial of any materials beyond those available for purchase, encroachment of their territory, and destruction of their projects (an intern “accidentally” tripped and scattered a portion of their city). At the beginning of the game, each team focused on the task industriously. As the game progressed, the privileged team maintained their focus and drive, busily buying supplies and brainstorming new things to build. The team treated fairly simply focused on their task, but the disadvantaged team became increasingly upset and began protesting. Before things devolved into chaos, I stopped the game, declared the “winner” (which really upset the disadvantaged team), and then debriefed the students on the game. This activity is a gold mine for contentful discussions about the nature of social injustice, undeserved advantage, etc., and poignant particularly for students who are African American given that Youngstown is such a racially divided city.

In addition to the fantastic discussions this activity affords, it provides students with yet another opportunity to practice adopting roles
and switching perspectives. Students from the privileged team are proud of their success and point to the “obvious” complexity and originality of their city. Students from the disadvantaged team are angry and resentful, and protest that they could have won, but that their project was sabotaged deliberately and that they were denied opportunities. Privileged students are surprised when others declare the game unfair and accuse them of cheating, because they were so busy and focused on their personal projects that they did not even notice what was happening to the other teams. Disadvantaged students are surprised to discover that those from the privileged and fairly treated teams were oblivious to their plight, rather than knowingly and willfully taking advantage of unfair opportunities. The moment students consider their personal experience and actions from another perspective, their emotions and attitudes change entirely. Students may imaginatively adopt the role of another and think about what it would have been like to, for example, be a member of the disadvantaged team, and then consider their own actions as a privileged team member from that first-person perspective. Alternatively, students may shift from first-personal experience to a third-person perspective on their own experience and actions. Either way, students undergo a profound shift in their emotional responses as a consequence of adopting another role or shifting their perspectives, and the Social Monopoly game serves as a powerful pedagogical tool.

**Sympathetic Moral Reasoning: Putting It All Together**

Given the course design, the students now have the ability to perform each step of the process of SMR and have practiced doing what is required in each step.

**Step 1: Moral Question**

The first step encourages students to identify a moral question(s) in a given scenario, and to state that question explicitly to help focus their subsequent reasoning about the case. Given the focus on teaching students to think of moral scenarios as movie scripts, this step involves asking students to “pause” the scenario at any point at which an actor would have a choice to make.

**Step 2: Script**

The second step encourages students to think of the moral case or scenario precisely as a script, which involves thinking about the charac-
ters, their actions, emotions, thoughts, speech, interactions, and consequences in as much detail as a story unfolding in time on a screen. This step is important because it transfigures moral scenarios from mere abstract hypothetical cases into considerations of real complexity, import, and consequence.

Step 3: Perspective

The third step encourages students to take the imaginative perspective of various actors in the unfolding story. Students can think about themselves as actors in the script, which enables them to examine their own actions, emotions, thoughts, speech, and interactions from a third-person perspective. Students can also take the perspective of other actors within the script, and examine the actions, emotions, thoughts, speech, and interactions for someone in that role. In addition, students can either think about the details of an actor in that role from a third-person perspective, or they can also imagine what it would be like to be someone in that role from a first-person perspective. The importance of this step is that it 1) reinforces thinking about the details of actors’ roles and actions in a script, 2) encourages students to think about others and not merely themselves in moral scenarios, and 3) encourages students to use both first and third-person perspectives, which is important in eliciting and understanding emotional states.

Step 4: Examine

The fourth step encourages students to examine the emotions they would feel either as themselves or if they were one of the other actors in the script. While previous steps encouraged students to think of the details of the script from a third-person perspective in order to generate detail, realism, gravity, and consideration of others, this step encourages students to think about the actions, thoughts, and emotions of a script only from a first-person perspective. By imaginatively placing themselves in any given role and adopting a first-person perspective, students should be able to examine how they themselves would feel in such a role. Insofar as this step uses a first-person perspective to invoke emotional responses, it depends on sympathy as a natural faculty.

Step 5: Answer

The fifth step encourages students to observe and examine their emotive responses, and to use those responses as answers to the moral question posed in the first step. This step explicitly introduces Humean
sentimentalism in that the students use their positive (approbations) or negative (disapprobations) emotional responses to answer the posed moral question either positively or negatively, and thereby answer whether they should do the proposed action. The previous steps yield reliable answers to the posed moral question precisely because they impose a limit on purely subjective or idiosyncratic responses: the steps force students to think about realistic details and probable consequences, thoughts, actions, and emotions unfolding in time for other actors as well as themselves.

SYMPATHETIC MORAL REASONING: PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

Because the course explicitly develops each underlying ability of Sympathetic Moral Reasoning, the students implicitly learn how to perform each step as the course progresses. The final section of the course teaches students how to integrate each of the steps into a single, cohesive process, and then makes them practice applying it. In the “Script Revision” activity, students return to the scripts they wrote earlier in the course and rewrite them to include Sympathetic Moral Reasoning. The only requirement is that at some point in the script, at least one actor must implement each of the steps. I explain that the insertion of SMR will likely change what occurs in the script (as would the introduction of any new element), and that the degree to which the script changes depends on where they decide to insert SMR (e.g., at the beginning or at the end), but that there are no restrictions on the content of the script. As before, performance follows writing. Once the students rewrite their scripts, I have them perform the scripts for the class, but this time, they are evaluated based on 1) the quality of the acting, 2) the realism/believability of the script, and 3) the use and correct implementation of SMR.

Students learn how to implement SMR through the process of rewriting scripts; they argue with each other about what the steps are, where to insert it (which provides them with additional practice at identifying moral questions), and how to insert it (what the actors would do or say for each step). They practice using SMR when they perform the scripts; at least one student must enact the steps through a soliloquy, or multiple students enact the steps in a conversation. The script performances also serve to teach by example; in watching other teams perform, students can see examples of how SMR may be enacted. Students integrate the component abilities developed in the course by performing each step of Sympathetic Moral Reasoning, and rewriting and then per-
forming the scripts allows the students to practice implementing SMR as a process.

**Teaching Sympathetic Moral Reasoning**

Because the course is designed to 1) develop the abilities underlying the process of SMR, 2) teach the students how to do each step, 3) show the students how to integrate each step into a seamless process, and 4) instill the steps and the process through practice, students should engage in a greater incidence of moral reasoning than they did prior to taking the course. Demonstrating an increased incidence of moral reasoning requires not only developing means of measuring students’ progress in the course itself, but also ways of tracking their performance after the completion of the course. Such measurement is an empirical issue beyond the scope of this paper, but will be an important part of this continuing project.

However, the broader question is whether SMR is more likely to yield moral reasoning than other approaches to teaching ethics. I argue that the simplicity of SMR as a heuristic for moral reasoning, as well as the commitment to developing abilities and instilling the process through practice, provide good reasons to prefer SMR. If the goal of teaching ethics is to enable students to reason morally and to encourage them to engage in it routinely, then Sympathetic Moral Reasoning is a preferable approach to moral education.

**Notes**

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REFERENCES


