COMMON MORALITY: AS A SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT

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INTRODUCTION

Incorporating a discussion of morality or ethics into a variety of courses can provide for lively discussion and a wonderful learning experience, but the problem is how to give students a sufficient grounding to be able to discuss and analyze situations from an ethical or moral perspective. Assuming the students are not philosophy majors or have not already enjoyed a course in ethics, it is difficult to avoid presentations and arguments which deteriorate into little more than op-ed pieces.

Also problematic is trying to present to the students an overview of a variety of ethical or philosophical systems. Delving too deeply into various moral theories can require entirely too much time and too much effort for most undergraduates in non-philosophy courses. Selecting a few systems and providing a cursory overview can result in a woeful lack of understanding and can produce illogical generalizations and poor scholarship. One can end up trying to sort through a series of unfounded arguments, conclusions based upon anecdotes, and something approximating a poorly crafted letter to the editor.

What is needed is a readable approach to moral theory; an approach which recognizes that trying to shoe horn a variety of issues and concerns into a classical ethical approach may be futile. What is needed is a common sense look at morality, which a beginning philosophy or non-philosophy student can read and understand well enough to effectively analyze an issue from an ethical perspective.

One such possible supplemental reference is Bernard Gert’s deceptively short and easily read Common Morality. It should be noted that “easily read,” does not imply easily understood. A quick read of Gert’s text will likely result in missing the subtleties and depth of meaning which is contained in this handy, small book.
GROUNDING AND FREEING

Rather than taking the more standard approach of relying upon the writings of a variety of philosophers, or even a selected few philosophers, and then expecting students to analyze or argue from an historic ethical viewpoint, Bernard Gert frees the student immediately by recognizing there may not be one correct, or even best, ethical system upon which to base decisions in all circumstances (viii). He tells the reader that ethics is implicit in thoughtful decision making for most people, and that while he does not deny the usefulness of understanding classical thinking, he does not insist it is required for well-founded ethical judgments (4).

To provide a basis from which to work, he offers ten moral rules, and then collapses these into the two general guidelines of “do not cause harm” and “do not violate trust” (20). This gives students a fundamental grounding from which a basic argument or analysis can be created. He also points out that moral rules are not absolute. They may be broken if an action is appropriately justified (10).

This step away from absolutism allows the reader to rely upon personal rationality and even opinion when approaching an ethical or moral issue. However, not leaving one completely to one’s one devices, Gert offers a two-step procedure for deciding whether it is justified to violate a moral rule (19). Using this guide, and relying upon the basic moral rules, 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. He even provides decision trees in the form of flow charts for deciding if actions are objectively irrational, personally irrational, immoral, or morally good (151-152).

I can imagine some criticism of trying to oversimplify some very complex concepts, but I believe the flow charts will prove an excellent aid for the students.

PROBLEMS AND CONCERNS

As with any attempt to introduce complex subjects to a less-than-prepared audience, Common Morality is not without some problems. There are references to philosophers and philosophical systems throughout the text. Admittedly, this may be unavoidable, especially if the text is to be meaningful for the more sophisticated reader, but for the student venturing for the first time into the field of ethics and morality, many of the references will be confusing or simply unmeaningful. As a new reader, am I
supposed to know who Kant, Mill, Bentham, Hobbes, Rawls, and others are? When reference is made to something called a Categorical Imperative, is that supposed to mean something? Is the “veil of ignorance” what I am experiencing reading portions of this book?

I referred to *Common Morality* as being deceptively short. I say this, because it presents some very complex concepts in a straightforward, easily read manner. Presenting them this way and implying that the concepts are intuitively clear to thoughtful, rational agents does not make them less complex or more easily understood.

I personally enjoyed Gert’s treatment of impartiality, but I would likely not place a great deal of emphasis on this with a non-initiated class. He offers a very good discussion of impartiality, consistency, and unanimity. He also laments that impartiality has too often been neglected by philosophers (116). Well, for a non-ethics class, this may be one area receiving additional neglect.

**Summary**

In summary, I think *Common Morality* could serve quite well as a supplemental text for a non-ethics class. I believe it could also serve very well as a basic text in an introductory ethics course. There would be challenges for both the faculty member and the students, if they had no previous understanding of the study of ethics or morality, but I believe it would be superior to trying to present condensed versions of an array of ethical systems and expecting the students to select from them for use in an ethical analysis.