Teachers of an introductory ethics course must answer numerous difficult questions about course organization and content. Three crucial questions are: Which ethical theories/ethicists to include? What mix of theory and applied cases or issues? Which applied cases or issues? With varying degrees of satisfaction I taught a standard format introductory ethics course focusing on major Western ethical theories and ethicists for more than a dozen years. However, around ten years ago I created a new organizational scheme structured around what I call “traditional ethics,” and have found it to be a more effective way to achieve my course objectives. In this paper I shall define “traditional ethics,” describe how I use it in my class, and explain some of the pedagogical benefits it has provided.

Before I begin, I want to sound two notes. First, the usefulness of this heuristic device probably will be greater to instructors who have substantial freedom in choosing course organization and content. Instructors who are required to address a prescribed set of theories or follow a required format may not be able to use the notion of traditional ethics very much or even at all, and in some cases the tool may introduce unnecessary or unwanted complications within or for other course material deemed essential by the instructor or department. Certainly, the device is no panacea for the many difficult choices ethics instructors face in designing and implementing an introductory class. Nevertheless, I think the concept may be put to good use by some instructors and provide food for thought for others even though they either cannot or choose not to employ it in their classroom.

Second, many instructors of introductory ethics already include in their course one or more of the four elements that go into my notion of traditional ethics. Indeed, I suspect most introductory ethics courses offered in the United States address to some degree two or three of the
four components. So if my notion of traditional ethics has some benefits as a heuristic device, it is not the result of my inventing four new concepts, but rather the combination of them together as an organizational rubric.

WHAT IS "TRADITIONAL ETHICS"?

In my years of teaching and studying ethics, I have found that many long standing ethical traditions—such as Christian ethics, Buddhist ethics, and classical Greek ethics—share four philosophically significant and fundamental features, namely, objectivism, virtue-ethics, altruism, and fulfillment. I call these common features the “four pillars” of traditional ethics since they define (largely) what I mean by a traditional ethical system and constitute a foundation upon which other features of these ethical systems rest.

To be sure, there are significant philosophical debates about how objectivism, virtue-ethics, altruism, and fulfillment should be defined and whether they are true or not. Indeed, this is one of the reasons I find organizing the course around the pillars a valuable teaching approach! I am happy to offer my students only rough-and-ready definitions of the concepts since one of my purposes in introducing them is to stimulate student discussion and research about ethical concepts and principles. Every student has some pre-philosophical familiarity with the four pillars and a majority of students also have pre-formed opinions about their truth or falsity: these are ripe conditions for philosophical picking!

In the first week of class I provide students these rough and ready explanations of the four pillars in a document I call “Traditional Ethics Defined.”

1. **Objectivism (objective ethics):** the belief that some moral claims really are true and false, that some actions really are morally right or morally wrong. Objectivists believe that morality is not based merely in personal opinions or personal taste, nor is it based merely in cultural norms or cultural rules. Objectivists believe that personal tastes and cultural norms do influence moral beliefs and behaviors, but objectivists believe personal tastes and cultural norms do not necessarily justify moral beliefs. At least in some cases, to be justified, the belief or behavior needs to meet an objective or universal standard, a standard that applies to all people, all places, all times.
This does not mean Objectivists believe there is an objective standard for every moral belief or behavior.

**Example 1:** There is no objective norm for which side of a road to drive on. Which side of the road to drive on is a cultural matter. In the U.S.A., on a two-way, two-lane road it is customary to drive on the right side of the road. In England, on the same kind of road it is customary to drive on the left side. It would be silly to discuss whether the right or the left is THE RIGHT side to drive on.

**Example 2:** There is no objective norm for flavors of ice cream. Which flavor is best or which flavors are good is a matter of personal taste. I like vanilla best and dislike cotton candy flavored ice cream, but your tastes might be exactly the opposite. It would be silly to argue whether vanilla or cotton candy ice cream is THE RIGHT ice cream flavor.

Objectivists are saying, however, that there are some objective rules/standards. The most common candidates include (I’m borrowing most of these from a list by Prof. Louis Pojman):

- It is wrong to kill an innocent person.
- It is wrong to cause unnecessary pain or suffering.
- It is wrong to cheat or steal.
- It is right to keep your promises and honor your contracts.
- It is right to treat people fairly.
- It is right to tell the truth.
- It is right to help other people in need, at least when the cost to oneself is minimal.
- It is right to show gratitude for services rendered.

The Objectivist is saying that these standards (or standards like them, the lists vary) apply to all people (whether you are an American or Nigerian or Indian or Ukrainian), apply to all times (whether you live now or a thousand years ago, or a thousand years into the future), and apply to all places (home, work, leisure, etc.)

Although these standards are objective, they are not necessarily absolute. Some objectivists, whom we shall call absolutists, view such standards as having no exceptions. Other objectivists, whom we shall call non-absolutists, believe these standards have exceptions.

**Example 1:** Terrorists often use the tactic of hiding amongst or shielding themselves with innocent civilians. Stopping the terrorist then means killing innocent civilians. In modern lingo, innocent civilians killed
in military strikes against the enemy are called “collateral damage.” An absolutist about #1 above, would insist such deaths are never justified because #1 is an absolute principle, it allows for no exceptions. A non-absolutist would be open to the possibility that such deaths might be justified under the right circumstances. Their argument might be that such a sacrifice is necessary in order to save a greater number of innocent civilians in the long term.

**Example 2:** The principles might conflict and we should have to make an exception to one in order to preserve the other. For example, what if the only way to save an innocent person was to tell a lie—should we put saving the innocent person above telling the truth, or vice versa? Again: what if the only way to treat people fairly was to break a promise—should we value fairness over promise-keeping, or vice versa?

2. **Virtue ethics:** the belief that being ethical is primarily a matter of being a virtuous person (that is, having good character, having the right qualities as a person), not a matter of knowing or following the right rules.

Virtues are good characteristics, such as being wise, fair, honest, responsible, and so on. Vices are bad characteristics, such as being ignorant, a cheater, a liar, and irresponsible. Traditional ethical systems always discuss a set of virtues and vices. As you will see in the coming weeks, the lists do not vary a lot, but there are some disagreements and differences in how important various virtues are.

Philosophically, the main point to understand here is that virtue ethics denies there is any set of rules or any one “master rule” that completely captures being ethical. (Later, when we talk about Utilitarianism and Immanuel Kant we will see they disagree with this and attempt to identify and defend a “master rule” that distinguishes right from wrong.) An ethical system that reduces ethical decision-making to a master rule is usually called a Rule-based Ethic. One argument supporting virtue-based ethics and undermining a rule-based ethic goes like this:

P1: Suppose we identified the correct master rule.

P2: Now, suppose we give this rule to a bad person. Of course, the bad person would misuse the rule.

P3: Now, suppose we give something less than the correct master rule to a good person. Of course, the good person will still manage to do the right thing; thus
C1: It is not the rule that matters so much as the virtue (or lack thereof) of the person; thus

C2: Virtue ethics is true.

3. **Altruism (altruistic ethics):** the view that at least sometimes, we must make sacrifices for the well-being of others without regard to what we might gain from the action. All traditional ethical systems emphasize the need to be unselfish and criticize selfishness. All traditional ethical systems oppose both psychological egoism (the view that in fact all people are hard-wired to be selfish) and ethical egoism (the view that people can act unselfishly, but they are wrong to do so, they should act selfishly). Traditional ethical systems teach both that people can be unselfish and they should be unselfish. This much is clear.

What is not so clear in traditional ethics is extent of altruism and the limitations of selfishness. Should we always act altruistically, or only sometimes? If only some of the time, how do we know when we should act altruistically and when we should not? Is it always wrong to be selfish? Are there some situations where selfishness is morally okay? What about a case where I do something that benefits someone else, but I benefit from it too? Is that act altruistic or egoistic? These are questions and issues we will consider as we examine the various traditional ethical systems.

4. **Fulfillment (ethics):** the view that being an ethical person is fulfilling (rewarding, benefits) both the individual and the community and that being an unethical a person is unfulfilling (unrewarding, costly) both to the individual and the community. The benefits need not be in this life, as many traditional ethical systems—such as Christianity and Islam—emphasize the rewards in the afterlife to those who are ethical in this life. However, traditional ethics does claim there (usually) are benefits in this life. Cheaters usually get discovered and punished. Hard work usually is rewarded. Sometimes it is described in this way: true happiness (in this life) is not material wealth or worldly success or fame acquired by dirty methods, but rather inner peace and contentment achieved through good behavior, the knowledge that one has clean hands and a clean conscience.

As I suggested earlier, it seems likely that many or most introductory ethics courses address ethical objectivism, altruism and/or virtue ethics to some extent. Likely, the only idea that may lack some ring of familiarity
is fulfillment ethics. But whatever the case may actually be as to their current usage, I have found that packaging these ideas into the more general concept of traditional ethics serves as an excellent foundation for discussion and debate about the concepts themselves as well as a basis for comparing and contrasting ethical systems throughout the semester. Consider a few brief examples.

Discussion of Concepts:

Every semester a fairly sophisticated discussion arises around the meaning and truth of altruism. Often the discussion begins with a student comment that assumes altruism is a function of the agent’s motive (i.e., an altruistic action = an act whose motive is 100% non-self regarding). Invariably, some students will object that if altruism is a function of the agent’s motive, then no one is ever altruistic since psychological egoism is true (the agent’s motive always includes some element of self-interest or self-regard). Some students will add the claim that “altruism” must have some meaning—else the comparative term “egoism” could not have any meaning—and thus that altruism must be understood in terms of the consequences, that is, an altruistic act = an act that benefits others, regardless of the motive. Every semester some student will ask whether an altruistic action can benefit the actor too, or whether it must only benefit others. Further objections, counter-arguments, controversial examples and spinoff issues abound.

Of course the real life discussion is far messier than what I have laid out here and I must use some of my own philosophical acumen to keep the discussion focused and moving forward. To be sure, the discussion does not conclude with student consensus about the definition or truth of altruism. Rather, students learn to “do” philosophy and develop their own views by exploring and evaluating various meanings of an ethical concept and generating quality examples and counterexamples.

Comparing and Contrasting:

The four pillars of traditional ethics provide bridges to connect not only the traditional ethical systems with each other (e.g., how Christian ethics and Buddhist ethics are alike and different with regard to their understanding of ethical objectivism) but also the traditional ethical systems with non-traditional ethical systems. Consider the case of ethical egoism. Because traditional ethics emphasizes altruism and most students were raised in a family and society that promotes a traditional ethical system, students begin to recognize why so many people simply
assume without argument that egoism is unethical—accusing someone of being selfish is one of the most common and basic ethical criticisms. However, because students have already learned that altruism is a contested concept even within traditional ethics, there is an open door to exploring how ethical action might actually require some self-regarding action, that is, some balance of self-regarding and other-regarding motives and/or benefits. Given our prior discussion of psychological and ethical egoism, some students who believe psychological egoism is true will go on to argue (as some famous philosophers have) that ethical egoism is true too.

Other students notice ways to compare and contrast ethical egoism with the three other pillars of traditional ethics. For example, most recognize quickly that ethical egoism offers a rule-based ethical system whereas the traditional systems are virtue-based. This usually produces a discussion about the similarities and differences, as well as the pros and cons, of virtue-based systems and rule-based systems, and how the human qualities praised and blamed in traditional systems differ from the human qualities praised and blamed in non-traditional systems (for example, Friedrich Nietzsche’s discussion of master morality and slave morality).

Since my goals in the introductory ethics course include promoting philosophical curiosity and acumen as well as an understanding why ethics is a subject that often requires careful analysis and justification, these examples may give instructors with similar goals a glimpse into the usefulness of “traditional ethics.”

**HOW I USE "TRADITIONAL ETHICS" IN MY COURSE**

At the risk of sounding cliché, I suggest there are as many ways an instructor might use the concept of traditional ethics in their course content and organization as there are instructors. I use it as the main rubric for organizing the whole course, but this is not the only way it can be used. However, I shall leave alternative uses to the reader to explore on their own in order that I may stay focused in this brief article on what I have learned through experience.

When I first introduced traditional ethics and its four pillars into my introductory ethics course, I used this organizational scheme (hereafter, Version 1):

- In Unit 1 students were introduced to ethics in general and the four pillars of traditional ethics, and studied four examples of traditional
ethical systems, namely, Christian ethics, Islamic ethics, Amerindian ethics (as explained by Ed McGaa/ Eagle Man) and Buddhist ethics.

- In Unit 2 we turned to some of the major challenges to traditional ethics. These included the subjectivist and relativist arguments against ethical objectivism, the egoist's objections to altruism, and the utilitarian and Kantian rule-based challenges to virtue-based ethics.

- In Unit 3 students explored different ways both traditional and non-traditional thinkers have explained human fulfillment, including the Classical Greek notion of eudaimonia, Jeremy Bentham's hedonism, B.F. Skinner's behaviorism, and the Buddhist notion of nirvana.

- In Unit 4 we concluded with discussions of various virtues in action. In practical situations, when and how should we seek to avoid harming others? What does it mean to have integrity, to be honest, to have self-discipline, to be fair, to show tolerance, to be a friend, to have courage? What is success?

However, within two years I modified the organizational structure of the course in this way (hereafter, Version 2):

We still begin the semester with an introduction to ethics, the four pillars of traditional ethics and various systems that qualify as traditional ethical systems. However, I now limit Unit 1 to three traditional systems based in a religious perspective, namely, Christian Ethics, Islamic ethics, and Eagle Man's Amerindian ethics. By “based in religion” I mean the ethical claims and standards of the systems are ultimately justified by the nature and/or commands of some divine being or beings. Students can easily identify ways in which each of these systems advocates objectivism, virtue, altruism and fulfillment.

In Version 2, Unit 2 focuses on traditional ethical systems not based in a religious perspective, namely, classical Greek, Buddhist, and Confucian ethics. To be sure, each of these systems includes (at least to some degree) beliefs about divine beings; however, the ethical claims and standards of each are ultimately justified by their conception of human nature not by the nature and/or commands of some divine being or beings. Socrates famously poses a dilemma in the Euthyphro to question the connection between piety and the gods, and Plato grounds his ethical system in the Republic on the four cardinal virtues of wisdom, courage, moderation and justice which correspond to the proper functioning of the human tripartite soul. The Buddha grounds his ethical system on the fact of human dukkha (suffering, dissatisfaction, a “wheel out of kilter”)
and the virtues of wisdom, compassion and mental discipline necessary to overcome the ignorance and cravings that produce dukkha. And Confucius emphasizes such human qualities as xiao (filial piety), yi (the ability to discern right from wrong and desire to do right), li (devotion to etiquette and ritual) and xin (faithfulness or sincerity) which are derived from jen (humaneness, human-centeredness, the human capacity to empathize and sympathize).

In Unit 3 of Version 2, students study major challenges to traditional ethics. They first discuss Friedrich Nietzsche’s critique of Christian ethics and analyses of master morality and slave morality. They move to Ayn Rand’s defense of ethical egoism and attack on ethical altruism. And they finish with Ruth Benedict’s defense of ethical relativism.

The class concludes in Unit 4 of Version 2 with the two major modern Western ethical systems, Utilitarianism and Kant’s deontology.

There were four main reasons I moved from Version 1 to Version 2.

1. Version 1 failed to make clear enough to students the difference between religious traditional ethical systems and secular traditional ethical systems. Version 2 does a much better job explaining the difference and the debates between divine-based ethical systems and human-based ethical systems. This rearrangement also allowed me to bring another non-Western traditional ethical system (Confucian ethics) into the course and to move classical Greek ethics into our discussion of traditional ethics.

2. Version 1 did not give sufficient attention to Utilitarianism and Kant’s deontology, the two predominant Western ethical theories of the modern era. More time was needed for students to grasp the debate between these two fundamental approaches, their relationship to traditional ethics, and how they apply. I had the further motivation of knowing that an increasing number of instructors in many disciplines across campus were including some treatment of utilitarianism and Kant’s deontology as ethics across the curriculum gains momentum on our campus.

3. Version 1 missed valuable opportunities to discuss important applications of the systems as we moved through them. Version 2 enables me to raise substantive application issues as we address each system. Consider three examples: one of the applications of Christian ethics we discuss is pacifism. One of the applications we discuss with Islamic ethics is religious accommodation in the
workplace and education. And one of the applications we discuss with utilitarianism and Kantian deontology is physician-assisted suicide.

4. Version 1 with its thirteen main perspectives was a bit too overwhelming in my comprehensive approach. By comprehensive I mean that we continue to use the major concepts and examples from each course unit throughout the semester. (I have found a comprehensive approach greatly enhances student retention of material from earlier units and enables them to better incorporate course ideas into their own personal code of ethics.) Thus, in Version 1 when we discussed the virtues in action in Unit 4, I expected students to be able to apply all the views discussed in the first three units to every case. To be sure, Version 2 still has eleven main perspectives, only two fewer than Version 1; however, there has been a small but noticeable improvement in student retention and performance. I suspect part of this improvement also is due to reason (3), including substantive applications as we work through the material.

I have stuck with Version 2 for 5 years now and discovered that it translates effectively into a 100% online course format.

**PEDAGOGICAL BENEFITS**

My experience suggests that my students benefit from organizing the course around the heuristic device of “traditional ethics” in at least three ways. Admittedly, my perception of these benefits is grounded in (i) my own observations of student participation and learning in and out of class, (ii) official student course evaluations, and (iii) unofficial student feedback forms on the course I collect; it is not grounded in a systematic, empirically valid study. But perhaps my reflections on the benefits these instruments reveal will strike a chord with the experiences of some other instructors of introductory ethics courses.

First, students identify more strongly with the course material and overall structure. Students have a pre-existing familiarity with the four pillars of traditional ethics that enables them to transition more swiftly and intuitively into ethical discussion and debate and leads many to do extra research (especially in the online course) to bring to the table. The pillars then serve as reference points for students to understand
alternative ethical systems at a more fundamental level and as a tool for organizing their knowledge about the details of each particular ethical system we study. For example, I have created worksheets to accompany all the readings and worksheet questions include such items as:

- Explain three objective principles in Amerindian ethics.
- Explain two ways in which Confucian ethics is altruistic.
- Explain the four major virtues in classical Greek ethics.
- Explain two ways in which Christian ethics is a fulfillment ethic.

Second, students engage more readily in conceptual analysis and critical thinking. I mentioned earlier student discussion of the meaning and truth of altruism. The same kind of discussion arises for objectivism, virtue-based ethics and fulfillment ethics. Since many students feel a personal investment in the meaning and truth of all these concepts, debates spontaneously arise in which they challenge each other to consider alternatives and investigate their strengths and weaknesses. Perhaps you will not be surprised to learn that fulfillment ethics is the most disputed of the four pillars. Many of my students find it hard to agree that ethical behavior is ultimately rewarded in some way and that unethical behavior is ultimately punished in some ways.

Third and last, they understand better the relationships between the various ethical systems. The four pillars provide an explicit and convenient framework for comparing and contrasting my selected theories. Perhaps this is particularly useful if the instructor includes—like I do—non-Western ethical traditions or theories in their introductory ethics course. In addition to questions asking students to explain how the four pillars relate to each particular ethical tradition or theory, they also include questions asking students to relate the traditions and theories to each other. For examples:

- Explain how Christian ethics and Islamic ethics have a similar objective basis.
- Explain how Christian ethics and Confucian ethics have a different ethical basis.
- Explain how both Amerindian and Buddhist ethics are altruistic. Is there any difference in the role altruism plays in each tradition?
- Use the four pillars of traditional ethics to explain one similarity and one difference between utilitarianism and egoism.
Comparative questions like these enable students to retain key information from earlier units as we proceed through the semester and understand the various traditions and theories at a “deeper” level.

CONCLUSION

I have found the concept of traditional ethics with its four pillars to be a useful heuristic device in teaching introductory ethics. It is original only in the sense that it packages four important and familiar ethical concepts in a new way, but it provides an effective method for increasing student identification with the course and course material, engaging in conceptual analysis and critical thinking, and understanding the relationships between different ethical systems. Perhaps you too will find some aspect of traditional ethics beneficial to student learning in your introductory ethics class.