There are all sorts of reasons for why college students are attracted to ethical relativism. Any nineteen-year-old who has been raised in a culturally narrow environment and encounters for the first time people who believe substantively different things about God, politics, family life or public manners is bound to discover that an attitude of tolerant curiosity serves him a lot better than making spontaneous critical judgements about the behavior of others. Even those who shy away from riskier social encounters usually end up getting an earful from some charismatic professor who openly criticizes their youthful assumptions about moral goodness. In the former case, a relativistic outlook can come to seem indispensable to one's social well being; in the latter, it can just as easily come to feel like the path of least resistance in one's intellectual life.

Most teachers of university ethics courses throughout the curriculum quickly come to realize these facts. When I first began teaching ethics myself, I felt as though I was performing a genuine service to these sorts of students by alerting them to the cognitive pitfalls of ethical relativism. After a few years, I started to become skeptical of my own self-congratulatory sentiments. What I'll try to do here is explain what I believe are some of the shortcomings of how ethical relativism usually is taught to beginning students of ethics. I'll describe how I overcame these problems in my own classroom, thanks largely to the observation that the extremity of my students’ caution about passing judgement too hastily upon the behavior of others – the very attitude that causes many of them to be attracted to ethical relativism – is more or less precisely matched by an equal degree of concern to choose their own personal friendships with especial care and discretion. I'll also explain a little about how an ancient text on the nature of friendship helped me to accomplish this.
THE INCONSISTENCY ARGUMENT

In his short but useful book *Morality*, Bernard Williams refers to ethical relativism as “the anthropologist’s heresy” (20). Most college students are amateur “anthropologists” in precisely the sense of the word that Williams intends here; the quickest way to get them talking like relativists in the classroom is by asking them for their ethical opinions about the cultural practices of unfamiliar people from faraway times and places. Was polygamy wrong, when practiced by Mormons in the nineteenth century? How about the wearing of Burquas as a sign of modesty in the Arab world, or the treatment of circumcision in sub-Saharan Africa as an obligatory rite of passage? The first few times I asked students these sorts of questions in an introductory ethics class, it didn’t take long for some of them to start talking about the need to recognize the “validity” of other peoples’ “perspectives,” and to argue that this requirement implied a general prohibition against being “judgmental” about the sorts of practices in question.

It was at this point in my classroom discussions of ethical relativism that I used to switch into “lecture mode.” I’d explain to the students that if the truth of all ethical judgements is merely a matter of “perspective,” then this generalization must also apply to the imperative not to pass judgement on the practices of others. But if this were true, then the contrary ethical injunction, viz. “Pass judgement on others whenever you feel like it!” would be just as impossible to criticize as any other. When the inconsistency of so-called “vulgar” relativism1 is pointed out in this way, it usually doesn’t take too long for most attentive undergraduates to concede the point.

I’ve rehearsed the steps that I usually go through when teaching undergraduates about moral relativism here, not because I think that there’s anything especially novel about my own approach,2 but rather because I suspect that many ethics teachers will find the scenario just described extremely familiar. The question that needs to be asked is whether students who have been gently chastened in this way really learn anything valuable from the exercise. Certainly the results look fairly dramatic, at least on the surface: a group of mostly thoughtful people have achieved near-consensus on the truth of a proposition (viz. the fundamental incoherence of ethical relativism) that violates many of their ground-level casuistic intuitions. But none of these intuitions – whether about circumcision, the Mormon Church, their friends’ haircuts or their professors’ anti-clericalism – have been directly challenged. All that the stu-
students are discovering is that a philosophical interpretation of these intuitions that occurs naturally to many of them is internally inconsistent. This fact eventually led me to suspect that many of them were leaving the classroom with the impression that the sorts of topics normally discussed in ethics classes are radically incommensurable with the concerns of everyday life.3

How might the introductory ethics teacher get his students to see that the incoherence of ethical relativism really does have some practical relevance to the making of situation-specific moral judgements? One popular and relatively straightforward method would be to remind students that there are some cultural practices – female castration, infanticide or suttee, for example – which they themselves find so appalling that the injunction to suspend ethical judgement loses much of the appeal that it has in other contexts. This is probably the method of teaching ethical relativism that is most commonly endorsed in the pedagogical literature.4 But whenever I’ve tried this approach in the classroom, I’ve always been amazed at how quickly students respond by striking a pose of epistemic humility. One simply can’t help but be horrified (they argue) when one hears about these sorts of practices. But many go on to propose that this fact all by itself doesn’t undermine the general plausibility of relativism; rather, it is merely a regrettable sign of the impossibility of escaping one’s cultural heritage. Students don’t always produce this rather incommensurate inference all by themselves; in fact, it echoes a fairly common refrain from many introductory textbooks in the social sciences.5

Cicero’s Ethics Of Friendship

My own experiences have led me to adopt a more roundabout approach to teaching students about ethical relativism. In addition to assigning a small selection from Williams’ Morality that succinctly points out the logical incoherence of “vulgar” ethical relativism, I’ve also had my students read a modern translation of an ancient philosophical dialogue on friendship by Cicero, the Laelius, or De Amicitia. The dialogue is based loosely on the Platonic model, and was widely influential in the high middle ages. As is the case with many of Cicero’s works, the writing is occasionally turgid and platitudinous. But there are some good, idiomatic modern translations available, and for students with at least a bit of experience reading texts written before 1900, it’s a quick and painless read. More importantly, some of the problems that emerge as the dia-
The main characters of the dialogue are the venerable Roman gentleman, Caius Laelius, and his two nephews, Quintus Mucius and Caius Fannius. Their conversation takes place shortly after the death of Scipio Africanus, the famous general and longtime friend of Laelius. Much of the early part of the dialogue consists of a discussion of whether or not it is appropriate to grieve for a friend’s death, given the assumption that it is “no evil” to die when one’s life has been “glorious.” They agree that to a life like Scipio's, “nothing could be added . . . either in respect of good fortune or of glory” (Cicero, 14).

These observations, taken by themselves, would probably have seemed fairly conventional to most literate, pre-Christian readers of the text. Later on, though, Laelius enters onto more controversial territory. He professes to agree with the Aristotelian thesis that “except amongst the virtuous, friendship does not exist” (Aristotle, 212). But he then introduces an important qualification to this severe doctrine. “Those who inquire with too great nicety into these things,” he remarks,

perhaps with truth on their side, but with little general advantage . . . maintain that there is no good man but the wise man. Be it so; yet they define wisdom to be such as no mortal has ever attained to . . . Wherefore let them keep to themselves the name of wisdom, both invidious and unintelligible (Cicero, 22-23).

In what strikes me as an incongruously folksy way, Laelius proposes that the only necessary condition for being wise in the sense of being “worthy of the appellation of good men” is having the ability to “follow (as far as men are able) nature, which is the best guide to a good life” (Cicero, 24).

So what does “nature” demand of us, when it comes to the business of cultivating friendships? Laelius elaborates:

we are so formed by nature, that there should be a certain social tie among all; stronger, however, as each approaches nearer to us. Accordingly, citizens are preferable to foreigners, and relations to strangers; for with the latter, nature herself has created a friendly feeling, though this has not sufficient strength (Cicero, 24).
Most of my students have shared Cicero’s intuition that friendship is not the exclusive province of the wise. Most are also prepared to go along with his suggestion that both ordinary and extraordinarily “wise” people tend to select their friends from within the sorts of familiar circles that are described in the above passage as being more “natural.” But in the course of discussing this latter claim with students, I have noticed that some have become rather perplexed about why such an appeal to our merely natural affinities is being made within the context of a dialogue that is supposed to be about the difference between good or authentic friendships and undesirable or false friendships.

This is, of course, a normative issue in which most of them have a very considerable spontaneous interest. Unlike the readers in Cicero’s target audience, many new American college students are experiencing real diversity in the company that they keep for the very first time in their lives. No longer are class, geography, or the preferences of their parents acting as a filter through which only some potential friends may pass.

Cicero does eventually provide some solidly normative recommendations about how to avoid choosing one’s friends poorly. These passages are some of the most famous and puzzling in the dialogue. Laelius begins by lamenting the sheer lack of prudence that most people exhibit when choosing their friends:

[E]very man could tell how many goats or how many sheep he possessed, yet how many friends he had he could not tell; and in procuring the former, men employed carefulness, while in selecting their friends they were negligent, nor had they, as it were, any signs or marks by which they determined who were suited to friendship (Cicero, 70).

He suggests that the practice of “the prudent man” with respect to his friendships, will be

   to check the impetus of his kindly feeling as he would his chariot, that we may have his friendships, like our horses, firmly proved, when the character of our friends has been in some measure tested (Cicero, 70-1).

Laelius goes on to propose some concrete tests that one might actually perform on potential friends who have not yet quite managed to elicit one’s “kindly feeling.” If they should exhibit a preference for either small or large sums of money (Laelius says “I suggest trying both”) or “high offices,” then these parties will never make good friends. Furthermore, if
those whom one has already chosen as friends display these sorts of moral lapses, Laelius argues that they should be subjected to open rebuke (Cicero, 52).

This latter recommendation of Cicero’s was significantly out of step with the conventional morality of his own day, according to which the overt criticism of friends was deemed to be highly inappropriate unless they belonged to a different social class. But it is the first of these two suggestions – viz. that one should subject potential friends to deliberate tests of character – that conflicts most noticeably with the beliefs that most of my students have about the norms that govern friendship.

Certainly, it’s a bit difficult to imagine oneself orchestrating this sort of thing outside the culture of high-stakes political intrigue that Cicero himself took part in. And if one were to get found out in the process of (say) trying to arrange a bribe or a promotion for some prospective friend, such behavior would be bound to seem pathological, rather than merely “prudent.” But what about a more passive version of the same doctrine? At this point in classroom discussion I put forward the suggestion that, if it’s truly as important as Laelius claims it is to choose one’s friends carefully, and if he’s right that “nature” already imposes utterly arbitrary limitations upon the process by making us more attracted to familiar faces than strangers, then we should at the very least be willing to view a potential friend’s decisions about things like money and career from a perspective according to which such events might as well constitute tests of worthiness.

It is usually at this point in the discussion that my students’ intuitions begin to vary. Some of them want to insist that true friendship is by its very nature “non-judgmental,” and that there is therefore something repugnant about treating it as conditional upon another person’s ability to resist the temptations of fairly conventional, small-scale opportunities to be immoral. Others declare just as adamantly that friendship itself could hardly be considered valuable unless it was subject to at least something like the sorts of tests that Cicero recommends. Students who belong to the first group will often be similarly dismissive of Cicero’s proposal that one should openly rebuke one’s friends. When pressed on this issue, they will argue that if a friend’s behavior ever descends into outright depravity, then rather than trying to correct the friend’s behavior, one should simply sever the relationship.

It is perhaps worth pointing out that these two schools of thought about the extent to which judgement is a necessary element in friendship do not by any means represent a logically exhaustive set of all possible
responses to Cicero’s proposal. One could, for example, retreat to the Aristotelian position that only those who have acquired all of the virtues, including “wisdom,” can be true friends. As a fairly devout Hellenist myself, I am inclined to read the De Amicitia as representing an unintentional reductio of theories of friendship that reject Aristotle’s austere doctrine in the name of greater inclusiveness. One could also perhaps try to defend the eccentric, but interesting view that the value of friendship derives entirely from what goes on between already-established friends, on the grounds that decisions about which friendships are worth cultivating and sustaining are too dependent upon luck to have any genuine axiological significance whatsoever.

Both of these views, however, are bound to seem pretty abstruse from the perspective of most contemporary undergraduates. Few of them are inclined to have much sympathy with the notion that wisdom is a precondition for all the other virtues, and most are also considerably preoccupied in their private lives with decisions about which of their current friendships are worth preserving, decisions that strike most of them as being fairly weighty and character-determining. For most of them, there seems to be a fairly stark dichotomy between the injunction to test one’s friends and the prohibition against “judgmental” behavior. By the time that classroom discussion has reached this point, then, all that is left for me to do is to draw the obvious analogy between the question under discussion (i.e. “what role does ethical judgement play in true friendship?”) and the philosophical debate about moral relativism. As I mentioned earlier on, the main difficulty that I have always had when teaching moral relativism is getting students to see a connection between the logical incoherence of so-called “vulgar” relativism and their intuitions about a general need for tolerance and the suspension of judgement in everyday casuistry. What reflection upon the doctrines discussed in the De Amicitia provides is a provocative indication of the real intellectual costs that are associated with trying to sustain a relativistic attitude toward morality in one’s personal life. Such an attitude requires one to think that there is something illicit about formulating any sorts of normative standards whatsoever for choosing one’s friends, and also that, once such choices have been made, there is simply no place for even the gentlest forms of moral criticism between friends.

Even at this point, there are some students in my introductory ethics classes who will be prepared to bite the bullet and argue that recognizing an obligation to be utterly non-judgmental is part of what constitutes “true” friendship. Such a view has had its defenders in the western philo-
sophical tradition. But over the course of class discussions, most of my students eventually come to reject this oddly neutralist understanding of the nature of friendship. Those who have been brought to this point in their own reflections about what it takes to be a “true” friend will have also come to realize, I think, that the problems with ethical relativism are not merely logical, but have to do with (dubious) assumptions that the relativist makes about how people with a genuine interest in improving the quality of their relationships should manage their interactions with one another.

RELATIVISM AND COMMON SENSE

The approach to teaching ethical relativism to undergraduates that I have just described is not for everybody. One would need to be fairly confident that one’s students had the attentiveness and stamina to engage in a long conversation about friendship that would at first be bound to seem pretty digressive, especially in ethics courses located outside of the standard liberal arts curriculum. One would also need to be convinced that one’s students were not likely to be confused by a text as old and historically idiosyncratic as the De Amicitia. But whatever approach one does end up taking to the pedagogy of ethical relativism, I do think that it’s of the utmost importance to beware of making academic discourse about morality seem unduly remote from normative common sense – or, at least, from the common sense of the thoughtful contemporary twenty-something. Far too many textbook treatments of the topic of relativism seem to me to be guilty of ignoring this problem. My hope is that the approach I’ve described here at least suggests the possibility of taking a less hackneyed, more sensitive approach to this issue in the modern pedagogy of ethics.8

NOTES

1 The term is Williams’ (20).
2 The approach to teaching relativism by emphasizing its logical inconsistency is endorsed by Richard Momeyer. Momeyer does mention, though, that this sort of argument against relativism is usually regarded as “the clincher by teachers . . . not by students” (309). And Stephen Satris points out that the
approach arises from a natural but unjustified predilection to treat the relativism of students as a genuine philosophical position rather than a less organized cluster of ambiguous commitments (193-4).

3 Of course, it's possible that this impression that students often receive might also be an inevitable side-effect of the pedagogical decision to treat ethics as a specialized academic discipline, rather than a pervasive concern in every area of study. For some interesting suggestions along these lines, see Rhodes (63-4).

4 Carson and Momeyer both provide some detailed and useful suggestions about how a classroom discussion of the Holocaust might help to achieve this end (Carson, 175-81; Momeyer, 309).

5 Consider, for example, the following passage from Metta Spencer’s *Foundations of Modern Sociology*: “Today most scholars, while they admit that their judgement could be imperfect and that there could be no perfection anyway, recognize that it is impossible to avoid making judgements about other cultures . . . it is no longer possible for many of us to maintain a totally relativistic viewpoint . . . Nevertheless the relativists are correct on one point: we can’t be entirely sure that our judgements will hold up or that our policies will be helpful” (183).

6 For a lengthier discussion of this interesting feature of the Romans’ conception of friendship amongst the *boni*, see Habinek (170-85).

7 This seems, for example, to be the view that is defended by Schmitt, according to whom the “antithesis” between friend and enemy “can neither be based on any one antithesis or any combination of other antitheses,” including (he says) the “antithesis between good and evil” (26).

8 I’m grateful to Heidi Silcox, Courtney Lewis and Jon Cogburn for helpful advice and suggestions. Thanks are also owed to Angela Keckler, who allowed me to use her students as guinea pigs.

REFERENCES


