TEACHING ETHICS IN A CORE CURRICULUM:
SOME OBSERVATIONS
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INTRODUCTION

The teaching of ethical theories across the curriculum poses a number of challenges, some of which are addressed more fully by the other papers at this second annual conference on Ethics Across the Curriculum. Those challenges are somehow compounded when the context in which this teaching takes place is a core curriculum as is the case at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles where I teach. My paper will focus on this specific set of challenges. I will, however, also take the opportunity to comment on the previous discussions here at the conference that touched on a number of the issues that I will be exploring in this paper.

All students at LMU are required to take an upper-division philosophy course in ethical theories before they can graduate. Thus, in addition to having to address the complexities of communicating philosophical ideas to students who come from different academic backgrounds, the teacher of this course has to take account of the fact that a number of the students need to be convinced of the importance and relevance of the course. Those students who have their professional or practical interests already clearly set out before them understandably wonder why they still have to engage in what they consider “rather abstract thinking about matters that do not concern them now or after graduation.” Since I do not believe that this situation is unique to LMU, this paper aims to share a reflection on what has been an effective methodological starting point for my teaching of ethical theories not only across the traditional academic disciplines but also in a core curriculum.

This paper has another aim, a more philosophical one. I also want to demonstrate that while certain ethical considerations do arise in specific professional contexts, e.g. engineering, medical, business, the primary context is our human nature. That is to say, ethical questions arise because we are first and foremost human beings in search of answers as to how we ought to behave as engineers, as medics or as business people. I hope to develop the
argument that ethical inquiry, no matter in what field, must be rooted in an examination of what it means to be a human being in a concrete world. If this observation is correct then the teaching of ethics by its nature not only cuts across the whole curriculum but also undergirds it. The exploration of specific ethical questions such as is done in engineering ethics, medical ethics and business ethics and of more philosophical questions stands on common ground. In this sense, I maintain that the term “applied ethics” is rather a misnomer since what is involved is not so much an application but a “refinement” of what the ethical inquiry is. Furthermore, it would seem that the debate regarding the contribution of professional ethics to “philosophy proper” neglects to take into account the common starting point of both the ethical inquiry and “the act of philosophizing.”

**Starting with a Question**

“What ought I to do?” is a central question in ethics. It is for this reason that, despite certain assumptions on the part of a number of students regarding any philosophical study, the study of ethics within philosophy is after all a practical discipline. It leads to action. It is more than that of course, because this question is intended to lead to a specific kind of action; namely, one that can be characterized as good, moral or ethical. Despite varying answers as to which actions can be so characterized, given the competing ethical criteria put forward by philosophers, the question in the context of an ethical inquiry is a search for a definite kind of action. “What ought I to do?” translates into “What course of action should I pursue such that I can be said to be acting responsibly?”

The practicality of this question in ethics inevitably leads to the expectation of a solution. This is definitely the case when we examine specific situations, like continuing to keep a promise of confidentiality when other lives are at stake or supporting research into cloning. Given the particular circumstances and the clash of moral principles in such a situation, should one keep one’s promise of confidentiality or not, or should one actively promote experimentation in cloning? Ultimately, one can rightly expect that the end result of such an inquiry is a definite yes or no. Thus, this dimension of the question has led to the understanding that ethics is in the final analysis a matter of choice, a specific decision-making that hopefully is the right one. What all this amounts to is that the practicality of ethics and the urgency of certain situations lead some to equate ethics with a process of fact-finding, information-gathering, and the provision of definite guidelines that will enable those who find themselves in a moral dilemma not only to know the facts of the situa-
tion but also, and more importantly, to respond to it in an ethical way. It seems to me that the concentration of the ethical inquiry in fields such as medicine, business, engineering and others, stem from this need to address the specificity and practicality of the question “What ought I to do?” The expected answer has to be a definite one, a solution.

The nature of this question in ethics thus makes some students question the study of ethical theories, especially when they discover not only that there are a number of them but also that they even contradict one another. As far as these students are concerned, if ethics is meant to answer the question “What ought I to do?” would it not be a lot easier if they were given the “right solutions?” At least, they would know whether they are acting correctly or not as medical or business people or as engineers. Furthermore, the word “theory” itself seems incompatible with the practicality and specificity of this ethical question. Instead it gives support to these students’ misgivings about the relevance of a course in ethical theories in what they consider to be “the real world.”

EXPLORING THE QUESTION

In addressing these concerns of the students regarding a required course in ethics, I have found that a helpful way of going forward is actually to retrace one’s steps! In this case it means revisiting our starting point by examining the basis and the nature of this question in ethics. “What ought I to do?” asked in the context of the discussion of a moral dilemma—which the class and I carry out at the very beginning of the course—can be very effective in showing that the question and the expected answer are not as straightforward as they are in another context. In probing into the initial views of the students on what one should do in that particular situation, the teacher can show that several factors have to be taken into account, e.g. intention, circumstances, values, and so on. More importantly, however, it can lead to a more prolonged discussion on the very nature of moral decision-making.

This ethical question, associated with the process of making a decision, is one that resonates well with the students’ own experiences although not always in such a dramatic manner. Students readily appreciate that everyday we find ourselves in various situations where we need to pursue a particular course of action. But as we explore this ethical question, it inevitably leads to further questions: what is the basis for one’s judgment and why does the question arise in the first place? As students grapple with these further questions, I invite them to investigate with me the thoughts of various philosophers who had dealt with these questions far more extensively and at greater
depth than we can possibly do in class. At this point I find it beneficial to show to the class that by asking and pursuing this ethical question what we are engaged in is an “act of philosophizing”—which every human being does at different levels—and “learning from the philosophers”—which we do in a philosophy class. It is the stage where I can illustrate the correlation between an ethical inquiry and the philosophical act. Both acts arise and are developed because we want to “think through” the question itself and any answer that may be given.

The term “ethical theories” will obviously feature. At this stage I have learned that students need to be shown that such theories can be understood to have arisen and to have been developed in an attempt to provide a more consistent and more systematic answer. In some cases the answer to the question “What ought I to do?” has to be a quick and even instinctive one. But in the ethical context, one’s answer should be much more thoughtful. This does not mean that every time we find ourselves in an ethical situation, we cannot and should not act until we have undergone a prolonged and thorough process of thinking about the matter. Many cases, particularly medical ones, do not allow us that luxury for every problem. This is where ethical theories—and the study of these—can be of paramount importance as they can serve as a “theoretical framework” that enables us to work out an ethical solution to the problem. The basis for one’s judgment, even those made in a hurry, can be more firmly grounded. In any ethical decision, there are underlying theoretical assumptions. What the study of ethical theories does is to expose those and subject them to a critical evaluation, thus giving us an “early lead” as it were in urgent cases.

In a way this is what is involved in the study of philosophy generally. The sense of wonder that stirred in Socrates, Confucius, the Buddha and the other philosophers down through the ages also prodded them—and continues to do so in our times—to form and develop more reflective answers to the questions that interested them. Philosophical thinking can be described as, among other definitions, bringing to the fore with a view to scrutinizing more critically, not just the questions we are asking but also, and more importantly, disclosing the underlying assumptions behind those questions. Furthermore, just as an ethical theory sets before us a framework in our investigation of moral matters, philosophy generally—or at least as understood in certain quarters—aims to provide us with a vision that enables us to view and appreciate reality more profoundly and more extensively. While an ethical inquiry is more focused and philosophical thinking is more extensive, the two complement and enrich one another since both are based in the same quest for “a more substantial answer.”
A HUMAN QUESTION

Pursuing the question “What ought I to do?” in the ethical context also leads to a consideration of the nature of the questioner not just in terms of the nature of the “I” but also in regard to why the question arises in the first place. As my students and I follow through with our ethical discussion based on a moral dilemma, we also take a closer look at why the discussion is taking place at all. The ethical issues are issues for us human beings and because we are human beings. “What ought I to do?” is a human question, and it arises because we are the kind of beings that can distinguish between what is and what ought to be. Although we do not always know what ought to be, nevertheless we are aware that it differs from doing just anything. There is something about our make-up that leads us to make such a crucial distinction. It is a more fundamental sense than merely the desire to arrive at a definite answer in cases when we are looking for the right choice to be made as medical or business people or as engineers. In short, the moral sense is a human feature.

The practicality of the question “What ought I to do” should not mislead us into concluding that the ethical choice is essentially about ready solutions. Here I draw the students’ attention to the distinction between a superficial and a profound answer to that question. Inevitably, they put forward the importance of having all the relevant facts before one makes a decision. But as the discussion progresses and more questions are considered, they begin to realize that the gathering of facts itself presupposes an implied evaluation of those facts (even just the matter of “what counts” and “what does not”). Although it does not always emerge as readily as one would wish, the description of what is a profound answer to the question “What ought I to do?” changes to “where much thought has been given to it.” This of course leads to further questions: Why does it matter that we put much thought to our answer? When can one say that one has given it sufficient thought? Who judges ultimately that enough thought has been given to the answer that one has arrived at? What these and other questions disclose is that in our attempt to answer the ethical question “What ought I to do?” we do fall back, although not always consciously, not just on our desire to arrive at answers but also on our ability to give a more considered kind of answer. We are the sort of beings to whom this situation applies. We are, as Aristotle had pointed out, rational animals.

As we examine who we are in the light of the question “What ought I to do?” I try to show the students that the significance of the question, in the context of an ethical choice, does not lie in its functionality (as would be the case if I were merely faced with having to decide on alternative routes to a
specified destination). Rather, it consists in its being grounded in our very rationality. Thus, not only does it arise because, as rational beings, we are inclined to ask questions but the kind of answer that one can expect from us also reflects our very nature. This can be a useful lead to a discussion of what is involved in characterizing us as rational animals.14

In pursuing the question “What ought I to do?” back to the questioner himself/herself, I am also suggesting—presuming that I am on the right track—that the issues that concern us in so-called “applied ethics” are really more of a refinement of the same kind of question that I have been exploring here.15 The term “applied” gives the connotation that there are moral principles which “we put into practice” when we examine specific cases. Such an understanding misses the context in which the ethical question arises. Again, if my methodology is right, then exploring the ethical question itself is an act of philosophizing. Both are activities that we are engaged in precisely because we are human beings. If that is so, ethics across the curriculum has its place in the education of the human person, no matter what specialization one is interested in.16

**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

In this paper I have shared some reflections on my teaching of ethical theories in a core curriculum. I have used the context of teaching students from various academic disciplines with differing expectations, as would be the case in a core curriculum course, to comment on the wider philosophical and pedagogical issues that arise in the teaching of ethics across the curriculum. I have suggested that certain connections can be made when we examine the very basis and nature of the ethical inquiry itself—it starts with a question that concerns us all because we are human beings.

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NOTES

1This was held in Salt Lake City in October 2000. This paper complements a previous one that I gave at last year’s conference at Rochester. The title of that paper was “Teaching Ethical Theories in a University Core Curriculum: Some Methodological Considerations.”

2This course is known as PHIL 320. Alternatively, students may take a course in PHIL 330 that is known as Contemporary Moral Problems. The vast majority of students, however, opt for PHIL 320.

3It is rather interesting to note the attitude of some students, admittedly and fortunately not the majority, to taking this course. Some want to take it as early as possible “to get it out of the way” leaving them free to concentrate on their major. Others leave it until the last semester, or even during the summer, almost as if they needed all their energy for courses in their major.

4The claim to its being “effective” is based on my own judgement, rather than on any scientific study, following student evaluations and comments over the years.

5I am aware that the notion of human nature is itself problematic. I am using it here merely to mean our humanity.

6I do have to admit that I do not yet have a more appropriate alternative to the description ‘Applied Ethics.’ ‘Contemporary Moral Problems’ or even just ‘Ethical Situations’ come to mind.

7I do not mean to claim that “What ought I to do?” is the question in ethics nor that asking “What ought I to do?” is necessarily an ethical question.

8This is not to say that the answer is a definitive or a clear one. I simply mean that it leads to a specific course of action.

9Over the years I have learned that the most productive discussion comes with the Heinz dilemma from Laurence Kohlberg.

10A question which I tend to ask students to consider is: If we are already engaged in ethical thinking in daily life, what value is there in turning to an ethical theory such as Aristotle’s or Confucius’?

11This is not, of course, true with every ethical theory, e.g. Aquinas’s natural law theory, insofar as his ethical theory starts with a more metaphysical vision.

12This is not to ignore the variety of answers that can be given as to what philosophy is.

13In other words, it is not, and should not be, merely like the ad of a well-known sporting company: “Just do it!”

14PHIL 320 students are supposed to have done another philosophy core course at the lower-division level, PHIL 120 which is called Philosophy of Human Nature. The upper-division course in ethical theories is meant to build on that. However, this is not always true because in some cases, e.g. transfer students, they are exempt from having to take it. In a few isolated cases, e.g. because of the demands on their timetable, students do manage to “slip” into the upper-division course before they take the course in Philosophy of Human Nature.

15The underlying argumentation here is influenced by Aquinas’s theory of natural law. He claims that there are different precepts of the natural law.