MORAL LITERACY

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Social critics, ranging from William Bennett to Derek Bok, have lamented the demise of formal moral education in American schools and universities. Ethics had once been such a major focus of higher education, they point out, that college seniors were required to take a year-long capstone course in moral philosophy. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, however, ethics training of any sort became conspicuously absent, except for the occasional college ethics course. Although various efforts to revive ethics education have been attempted in recent years, it does seem that basic moral literacy, referring to a minimal ability to make considered decisions of right and wrong, is a skill that most people today lack, to varying degrees. Not that they are immoral, but moral decisions are usually reached through rough appeals to custom, largely blind adherence to religious dicta, or even “gut” feelings of what is right and wrong. By way of illustration, consider former President George W. Bush’s assessment of the moral character of Vladimir Putin, “He’s a good man. I feel it in my heart.” In fact, arguably few adults, even otherwise educated ones, are able to fully articulate the reasons for their decisions, much less to critically evaluate those decisions or defend them rationally against counter views. My purpose in this paper is not to try to diagnose the causes of the current dilemma regarding moral education, but rather, simply, to lay down the basic requirements of moral literacy, as well as offer some suggestions for how such literacy might be inculcated.

For nearly two decades of teaching courses in practical ethics, I have witnessed the lack of moral literacy manifest itself in a number of ways. To use an analogy that I think not too hyperbolic, trying to teach a college course in, say, business ethics to students who lack basic moral literacy is not unlike trying to teach an English literature course to students who cannot read or write. Most (by far) of the students I teach have difficulty articulating or even conceiving of the need for reasons why they feel the way they do about something (for example, gay
marriage) beyond the fact that they feel that way or just think it is wrong (or right). In fact, the idea that one should have to offer reasons for one’s moral beliefs seems strange and even anathema to them. They often hold views which are at once absolutist and dogmatic while still adhering to some form of moral relativism, wherein morality is considered to be just a matter of personal opinion and all opinions are equally good, with little or no appreciation for the contradictions and inconsistencies entailed by holding these views together. They typically demonstrate little or no understanding of the cognitive processes involved in coming to moral decisions. And they routinely show little or no understanding of the broader repercussions of their decisions. (Also, in the Deep South where I teach, one cannot overestimate the strength of cultural pressures not to question one’s beliefs and to follow the moral injunctions of religion as a matter of faith.)

Broadly considered, college courses in practical ethics require the instructor to teach students various ethical theories and how to apply them to so-called real world situations. But, even here, the lack of moral literacy puts up major barriers. First of all, there is a real disconnect between the study of moral theories—natural law ethics, virtue ethics, utilitarianism, deontological theory, whatever—and the recognition on the part of the students that these theories might actually enrich and give direction to their own moral lives. For most of them, it is a purely academic and formal exercise. Admittedly, most students make a genuine effort to understand the theory and how it applies to given cases supplied by the professor. They can be made to parrot back the application of Kant’s principle of universality, for example, in such a way that demonstrates the immorality of cheating on an exam or defrauding customers. But they have difficulty translating that knowledge to situations not formally introduced and orchestrated by the professor. And they are quick to fall back upon their old rough and ready modes of moral decision-making when the grade sword no longer dangles above their heads. This is due in part to the fact that moral theory is for the majority of students very abstract and speculative, not at all the exercise in practical reason that moral theorists as diverse as Aristotle and Kant understood it to be. As such, students routinely find moral theory alienating and even intimidating.

Hence, it is important to lay a foundation for the study of moral theory that is at once more basic and more practical for the student of ethics. In other words, teachers of ethics would do well to help their students develop moral literacy before, or in the context of, exposing
them to the fineries of ethical theory and its application. Here we should
distinguish between moral literacy and moral expertise. The object of
moral literacy is not to turn students into professional philosophers,
amore than conventional literacy turns one into an English professor
or literary theorist. Nor does acquiring moral literacy equip one to answer
certain higher-order, let us say meta-ethical questions such as, “what is
the true meaning of ‘good,’” or “why be moral?” Nevertheless, it is
reasonable to assume that moral literacy would encourage, or at least lay
the groundwork for, debate about such issues. Moreover, it gives the
student a way to understand and appreciate the strengths, weaknesses,
scope and limitations of any given moral framework, at least in a
preliminary way. But the main goal or purpose of moral literacy is simply
to help students to develop the skills they need to become more rounded
moral citizens. In the section that follows, I lay down the basic conditions
or standards that must be met to be considered morally literate.

I. THE STANDARDS OF MORAL LITERACY

For the project of teaching moral literacy to be successful, an
instructor in ethics must overcome certain obstinate prejudices on the
part of students. Among these are the convictions that ethics cannot be
taught, that it is a personal matter, and, most pernicious, that there are no
objective standards by which to adjudicate between conflicting moral
claims. All these prejudices boil down to a lack of faith in the objectivity
of ethics, the suspicion that moral claims can never be proven true or
false in the way that scientific claims can.

Thus, the first step toward becoming morally literate is to learn
certain objective standards by which various moral positions can be
evaluated. The following are criteria or standards that any moral claim
must meet to be taken seriously:

1) Disputability:

Any moral claim or position must meet the criterion of
“disputability.” Similar to the condition of “falsifiability” that the
philosopher of science, Karl Popper, laid down for scientific claims, it
must be possible to dispute, in principal at least, the reasons given for
any moral claim. Reasons most commonly given, such as, “I just feel that
way,” or “I was raised to believe that,” or “people have always done it that
way” do not meet the disputability condition. You may feel that way, but
that doesn’t, by itself, tell me why I or you or anyone else should feel that
way. I may feel, for example, that busing is wrong because it goes against Southern traditions of segregating students by race, but obviously the mere fact that a given practice is different does not thereby make it wrong or right, although we certainly cannot deny that it may run counter to customs that are decades or even centuries old. By contrast, the claim that a given practice, say waterboarding, violates basic human rights does meet the condition of disputability. In other words, you may dispute my claim by asserting that the overall safety of the public justifies the suspension of the rights of the person being waterboarded. We have now established the basic grounds for moral debate about the issue. But your position fails the standard of disputability, and thus fails to address my claim, if you base your desire to waterboard on the assertion that it has been used successfully in the past, even if the claim is true.

While it is obviously the case that someone could dispute the veracity of my claim that I was raised to believe such and such, or that a given practice has a long tradition, this misses the point with respect to whether or not such claims are offered as reasons for the assertion that the practice is morally right or wrong. In fact, it is precisely because such claims cannot, by themselves, count as evidence for the morality of any practice that they fail the condition of disputability. Unless, for example, we can show that following custom merely for custom’s sake is always morally good, then the appeal to custom, or belief, or feeling, will always fail the disputability condition. The argument that such appeals may imply some further, as yet unstated, moral principle does not thereby justify such appeals. The point of moral literacy, after all, is to help individuals unearth the underlying principles, if any, and to be able to subject them to rational scrutiny.

The disputability condition is important, among other reasons, because without it, questions of justification never get off the ground. Students have to be made to see immediately that, not only are not all reasons as good as others when it comes to ethics, some cannot even count as reasons at all. The disputability condition allows us to rule out a whole range of specious, if typical, positions, without having to consider the specific weaknesses of each individual one. Whereas Popper made it possible to rule out certain claims as unscientific because they could not in principle be proven true or false (for example, astrological predictions or claims about the existence of God), likewise the disputability condition allows us to attend to just those sort of claims which can count as moral reasons and then to debate whether or not they support the position taken.
2) Derivability: Is the Claim Derived from an Identifiable Moral Principle?

In fact, it turns out that only those claims which appeal, erroneously or not, to some moral principle can meet the disputability condition. When you make a moral claim it must be clear what moral principles you are appealing to and how your actions derive from those principles. If your claim about what is right or wrong is not derived from an identifiable moral principle, then it is really only a wish or desire and not necessarily something that the rest of us need to take seriously. However, not all moral principles are created equal, philosophically speaking (I shall have more to say about this later). They all have their own individual strengths and weaknesses. Some are more appropriate than others, depending on the situation (this should not be confused with ethical relativism or situationalism). How do we know which ones we should follow? In what ways and under what circumstances are some moral principles better than others?

The strength or weakness of any moral principle or ethical framework depends on how well it meets the following three additional criteria:

3) Prescriptiveness:

How well does the moral principle tell us what it is that we ought to do or not do? Ideally, a moral principle should be both clear and flexible. A moral principle is not much good if it is vague about what it requires of us. But, it should also be flexible enough to account for the realities of human interaction and human limitation. For example, one moral injunction says, “Thou shalt not kill.” Pretty clear, on the face of it, but does that mean we are never justified in taking another person’s life (not that we would want to)? What about war? Self-defense? Capital punishment? If we can offer reasons for when such things are morally permissible, then perhaps our principle is too rigid. The flexibility requirement is consistent with the idea of moral agency, which, as Kant pointed out, is fundamental to the ethical enterprise itself. Before saying what a person should do, we need to know what it is they could do. If it is impossible to do or accomplish, or doing it brings about morally onerous consequences, then (perhaps) it is unreasonable to expect that it be done, or (perhaps) it should be considered to be supererogatory.

On the other hand, perhaps our principle is too vague. For example, students who consider themselves Southern Baptists often wear bracelets or T-shirts with the following letters emblazoned on them: WWJD? When faced with a moral dilemma, they presumably are to ask
themselves, “What would Jesus do?” and then do it. Not to be facetious, but while I think I know what Jesus would do with a loaf of bread and a couple of fish when faced with a starving multitude, I have no idea what he would think about multinational corporations or how to handle the home mortgage meltdown. And, neither, I suspect, do my Southern Baptist students. As with the flexibility requirement, it is practically impossible to act as a rational moral agent if the principles that you appeal to are hopelessly vague.

4). Fairness of Application:

Another basic criterion that must be met by any moral claim is fairness of application. That is, it must apply to all persons, including oneself, in relevantly similar situations; it cannot admit of arbitrary exceptions.

Example: A tribe in Africa practices genital mutilation on its young girls. One of the girls manages to escape to the United States, where she asks for political asylum. However, at her hearing, the judge threatens to deport her back to Africa because she has no passport or visa, and because, frankly, he doesn’t believe her story to be true. Eventually, her lawyers are able to convince the judge that, yes, even in the 21st century such things still go on. Now, suppose the judge is a moral relativist. Suppose he says, “Well, that’s too bad, but who are we to tell them that what they are doing is wrong?”

The fairness of application criterion allows us to answer such questions. We have simply to ask ourselves whether we would allow our own little girls to be so mutilated. Assuming we would not, we then ask, why not? Because it is cruel and inhumane, a violation of basic human rights? If so, we then ask if there is any cultural difference that would make a moral difference. The fact that these girls live in Africa and dress differently is not a morally relevant difference. Can they feel pain? Can they suffer both physical and psychological degradation? Will their sexual lives be diminished by such a practice? If the answer for both Western and Third World girls is “yes,” then how can we allow it of the one and forbid it of the other? Unless we can show a relevant moral difference in the different cultural practices, if it is wrong for girls in the United States, then it is wrong for girls in Africa, too.⁷

The Fairness of Application criterion is meant to guard against the pitfalls of moral relativism, the position that morality is a matter of...
personal or cultural belief, that all beliefs or practices are morally equal, that there is no independent way to adjudicate between competing moral claims. Admittedly, the reasoning used here is analogical and as such no guarantor of truth, but it is applied in much the same way that legal decisions are rendered by appeal to precedent. In both cases, situation B is compared to situation A. “For analogical reasoning to operate properly,” says Sunstein, “we have to know that A and B are ‘relevantly’ similar, and that there are not ‘relevant’ differences between them.”8 As Sunstein points out, no two cases are ever exactly alike, but if they are found to be “apposite”—i.e., alike in the crucial ways—then not only is it reasonable to assume that what was (morally or legally) true of the first situation is true of the second, a “principled consistency”—the same which justifies following stare decisis in legal matters—meant to assure fairness for all demands that we do so.

5) Justification:

What reasons can be given for accepting a moral principle or ethical theory? For example, Ethical Egoism argues that we all ought to pursue our own self-interest because that is what we all do anyway. In other words, ethical egoism appeals to the theory of psychological egoism for its justification. Utilitarianism, by contrast, tries to justify itself by arguing that it is a fair moral doctrine (in that everyone’s interest must be taken into account) and that we would all like to be happy. Kant’s deontological ethics argues that reason itself supports the Categorical Imperative and that only by treating people with respect do we fulfill the true demands of morality.

The issue of justification is perhaps the most difficult and philosophical of the criteria, and it illustrates the indispensable role of the ethics instructor in helping students to understand the strengths and weaknesses of a number of moral theories and their principles. But it also brings us full circle to the question of disputability. It is precisely reasons given for moral decisions that fail the disputability condition that are also the weakest when it comes to the question of justification, and not surprisingly. Put simply, it is because such reasons are indisputable that the decisions based upon them cannot be justified. But then, what counts as justification? Why are decisions that appeal to moral principle inherently more justified than those which appeal to custom or feelings? Because the former can be disputed and the latter cannot.

This sounds circular and self-serving only if one forgets that the question of justification is broader than the question of disputability. To
answer the former requires levels of expertise that go beyond basic moral literacy. However, the criteria I have laid down in schematic fashion for moral literacy can be employed by students to help them to understand what is going on in the higher order philosophical discipline called “Ethics.” In other words, the conditions of moral literacy can be deployed as a kind of algorithmic matrix for understanding the strengths and weaknesses of various moral theories and how effectively they apply to real world situations. It is to the question of such a deployment that I turn in the next section.

II. FROM MORAL LITERACY TO A FULL-FLEDGED ETHICS

We are now in a better position to define “ethics,” in a dynamic way that reflects the true nature of the task, whether it is in business or medicine or any human endeavor.

When asked to give a definition of ethics, students typically respond by defining it as a set of codes or standards governing human conduct. While strictly speaking, this definition is not wrong as a matter of usage, it is what Henderson has called a “static” definition of ethics. Instead, I would like to define ethics dynamically in the following way. “Ethics” is a philosophical activity (i.e., one which appeals to reason) to identify the moral good and the kind of conduct necessary to promote that good. This good is expressed in the form of moral principles, from which we derive an idea about how we ought to act. Actions that tend to promote the good are morally right; actions that tend to be detrimental to the promotion of the good are morally wrong.

Of course, philosophers disagree about what the “moral good” is. But this definition is plastic in that it fits virtually all the robust moral theories that we have. Specifically, this definition applies to Ethical Egoism (EE) in that EE appeals to the principle of self-interest to define the moral good. Actions that tend to promote self-interest are morally right; actions that tend to be detrimental to the promotion of self-interest are morally wrong. Likewise, virtue ethics, at least Aristotle’s version, appeals to the teleological principle that all things act for some end; the highest end is the good. For human beings, the good is achieving *eudaimonia*, or a fulfilled life (often translated as “happiness”). Again, actions that tend to promote the fulfilled life are right, actions which don’t are wrong. Bentham’s version of Utilitarianism is based on the “greatest happiness” principle, in which the moral good is defined as the greatest amount of pleasure/absence of pain for the greatest number of people. Actions which promote the greatest happiness are right, actions
which don’t are wrong. Finally, Kant’s ethics is based on the Categorical Imperative, an “unconditional, objective principle” valid for all rational beings. It is our moral duty to follow the dictates of the Categorical Imperative. Here the moral good is defined as a “good will.” A good will is one which chooses actions (maxims) which are consistent with our moral duty as defined by the Categorical imperative. If our actions are inconsistent with our duty, then they are morally wrong.

We could expand our treatment to include Natural Law ethics, feminist ethics, and other versions of virtue ethics, utilitarianism, and deontological ethics, respectively. Almost without exception such moral frameworks would fit the dynamic definition of ethics given above. This is important because none of these theories assume any particular action is morally right or wrong ahead of time. Rather, particular actions are subjected to the requirements of the moral principle upon which the theory or framework is based in order to make a determination about the moral character of such actions. Ethics involves figuring out what we should do to promote the moral good, however that good is defined. Faced with a plethora of moral theories or frameworks, how do we know which to choose? What are their strengths and weaknesses? We can use our five criteria to judge.

Application of the Criteria

Let us examine first ethical egoism (EE). EE is notoriously bad when it comes to prescriptiveness. What exactly is our self-interest? Happiness, love, power, wealth, position, family, friends, health? If we pick one, we have to explain why the others don’t count. If we pick them all, then we have watered down the theory so much that is unobjectionable, but vacuous. Is our self-interest always the same? Across all of our social roles and positions? What happens when my self-interest as an employee is at odds with my self-interest as a spouse or parent? This was the situation faced by John E. Swanson, the creator of the ethics program at Dow Corning Corporation. When the landmark class action lawsuit was brought against the company for its manufacture and sale of defective breast implants, he defended the company and its image. But he later discovered that his own wife, Colleen, was one of the millions of women made sick by the implants.11

What happens when your self-interest is at odds with your neighbor’s self-interest, such that the one cannot be satisfied without the denial of the other? Ayn Rand argues that everyone’s self-interest can be promoted, but how is this possible? Case in point: Milton Friedman, a
stauch advocate of Rand’s brand of capitalism, has famously argued that the only moral responsibility of corporations is to increase profits for its shareholders. But evidence shows that the value of stocks actually goes up when companies lay off employees and close plants. How are the loss of my livelihood and the undermining of the tax base for the community in which I live in my self-interest? Because in the long term, it strengthens the economy for all? Small consolation if it doesn’t put food on my table now. Friedman further asserts that business need only follow “the rules of the game,” referring to the laws that society does (or does not) pass, to protect the environment, for example. But suppose the laws are weak or non-existent in some third-world country. Is it not in my self-interest to move my operations overseas, where I can dump my toxic waste freely in the local rivers? So what if a disproportionate number of babies in the area are born without brains, if it increases the bottom line for my stock-holders?12

Clearly, the consistent application of EE principles would violate the Fairness of Application criterion. In fact, an ethical egoist will find herself in the embarrassing situation of not being able to advocate EE for someone else, if following EE would actually be detrimental to her own self-interest. As for justification, I have already mentioned that EE attempts to justify itself by appealing to psychological egoism, the idea that we always act for our own self-interest whether we admit it or not, that there are no genuinely altruistic actions. But as Shaw and Barry have pointed out, if psychological egoism is true, it undermines the distinction between morally-praiseworthy acts and morally-blameworthy acts. If both the hero and coward are acting from self-interest, then there is no moral difference between them.13

Does utilitarianism fare any better than EE? Yes, significantly better, at least with respect to prescriptiveness. In fact, Bentham was sensitive to this very problem. For the utilitarian, determining what it is that we ought, or ought not, do is a matter of straight-forward calculation. We have available to us a tool for doing exactly that: the Happiness Calculus. When faced with a moral dilemma, simply calculate how many “utils” of pleasure will be produced by a given action—measured by the variables of intensity, duration, remoteness, fecundity, certainty, and purity—and then choose the action which generates the most pleasure for the most people. Bentham realizes that you cannot always predict the outcome of a given action, but he sees this as no serious objection; intelligent people can make reasonable predictions based on past experiences. If it turns out we were wrong, we simply go back to our Happiness Calculus and start over.
As for fairness of application, here the waters are muddy. On the one hand, utilitarianism prides itself on fairness, since everyone’s happiness (i.e. pleasure/pain) must be taken into account when determining what will produce the greatest happiness. Fairness is part of the very justification of utilitarianism in that it assumes, correctly I think, that everyone wants to be happy; thus it is incumbent upon any ethics to promote this, as far as is possible. In fact, it was this “democratic” aspect of utilitarianism which prompted James Mill to champion it as a model for political and social reform. On the other hand, one of the most enduring criticisms of utilitarianism, especially the sort advocated by Bentham, is that it may require us to trample upon individual rights if it will increase the pleasure of the majority. An example I like to use in my courses to illustrate this is black slavery in Mississippi. There was a time when Mississippi had more millionaires per capita than any other state in the union. Of course, it achieved that distinction through the institution of slavery, the evidence of which can still be seen in Rhode Island, where the estates of former cotton barons line the shores of Newport. Now Mississippi is among the poorest state in the nation. Suppose some savvy economic consultant suggested that we could bring prosperity back to the South by reinstating the institution of slavery. The population of African-Americans being only about thirty percent, the majority would certainly have their happiness increased.

Of course, we would immediately object that such happiness would be achieved by the most atrocious violation of individual rights. What can the utilitarian say to this? Even James Mill’s son, John Stuart, was very concerned about this troublesome possibility. He advocated a form of utilitarianism in which we are obligated to promote the “higher pleasures” of justice and equality. However, Mill would not allow an appeal to individual rights, because he did not believe that such rights exist. His defense of individual freedoms in On Liberty is not based on the idea that human beings have rights, but because of the good consequences for society that comes from such a recognition. “I regard utility as the ultimate appeal on all ethical questions,” says Mill. If this is the case, then a utilitarian, even one as enlightened as Mill, must entertain the possibility that the greatest happiness could only be bought at the expense of individual freedoms.

Whether or not you believe in individual rights, whether or not you are convinced by arguments one way or another about the metaphysical grounds of rights, we can all appreciate the idea that any ethics should recognize the fundamental dignity of human beings. This is precisely
what worries critics of utilitarianism, that it may require us to violate that
dignity, for some at least, if doing so will promote the greatest happiness.
But to violate human dignity is to ignore or to misunderstand the very
point of ethics. For the deontologist, such as Kant, we have a duty not to
violate human dignity, even if it causes us pain, even if the consequences
fail to maximize the overall happiness. The inviolate character of human
dignity is expressed most practically by the idea that we have certain basic
rights (whatever the source of rights are, whether natural or by
convention). John Locke defined rights as “prima facie entitlements,”
which means that anyone who would restrict my rights bears the burden
of proving that there are good reasons for doing so. For example, the
right to private property is sometimes trumped by the principle of
eminent domain, provided that I too stand to gain by seizure of my land.
My right to free speech is limited by the harm it might cause by, say,
shouting “fire!” in a crowded theatre. There are times when we feel
justified in limiting or abrogating certain positive rights for the common
good, but even here no social outcome justifies torture, slavery, murder,
or any action which violates my fundamental human dignity. Deontological ethics assumes there to be a line that cannot be crossed,
regardless of the consequences.

Thus, Kant’s type of ethics would seem to fair best with respect to
the fairness of application criterion because it requires, as intrinsic to the
Categorical Imperative itself, that we treat all persons, at all times, as ends
and not merely as means to an end. This is not due to any good benefits
that may stem from doing so; in fact, respecting the dignity of others may
actually diminish overall pleasure. But we have a duty to do so, regardless,
because reason demands it. It demands it because to do otherwise is
irrational given the requirements of the Categorical Imperative, which are
(arginually) three:

1. The Principle of Universality: Act only upon that maxim which you
can at the same time will to be a universal law.

2. The Principle of Humanity: Treat others, including oneself, as an end,
and not merely a means to an end.

3. The Principle of Autonomy: Treat persons as capable of freely giving
themselves the moral law.

Unpacking the categorical imperative this way allows us to test how
well that Kant’s ethics meets both the criteria of justification and of
prescriptiveness. The Principle of Universality illustrates best how Kant’s
ethics is founded on reason itself. Kant argues famously that the only
thing good without qualification is a good will. Another way of putting this is to say that we don’t always have control over the consequences of our actions, but do control the intentions with which we commit a given action. If universalizing our action would actually end up contradicting the intention then we are acting irrationally. But the principle of universality is more of a regulatory principle than a substantive one. The substance of Kant’s ethics comes from the principles of humanity and autonomy. All three principles act together as a kind of test. If an action fails the requirements of any of them—if it cannot be universalized without contradiction, if it violates the dignity of human beings, if it takes away their freedom to act as moral agents—then the action is morally wrong and you must not do it. As for prescriptiveness, then, Kant’s deontological ethics is (often) very good at telling us what it is that we ought not do, but not quite as good as telling us what it is we should do.

While some theoretical purists maintain the incompatibility of moral systems, such that if you are a utilitarian, then you can’t invoke Kant, and so forth, given the complexity and variety of moral demands, I think it better that we move toward what Ruggerio, Shaw, and others have called a “practical synthesis” of ethical frameworks. A rough and ready example of such a synthesis would say that there is nothing wrong with pursuing your own self-interest, however you define that, up to the point at which that pursuit comes into conflict with my own. At that point, fairness of application dictates that we move to an ethical theory or framework which takes both of our interests into consideration and which prescribes an action that benefits us both, or minimizes our pain, as far as is possible. Here a version of utilitarianism seems appropriate. Given that everyone, indeed, would like to be happy, choosing actions which maximize overall pleasure seems both fair and desirable. But we must be careful not to lose sight of why we have ethics in the first place. Actions which violate the fundamental dignity of others cannot be justified by any definition of ethics. Here’s where deontological ethics draws a line in the sand. While other ethical frameworks are better at telling us what we should do, the strength of Kant’s ethics is that it is designed to tell us what we cannot do without violating the spirit of ethics itself. As such, it can serve as a bulwark against the potential excesses and oversights of other ethical schemes.

Such a synthesis would allow us to incorporate other ethical frameworks, such as Aristotle’s. Arguably, the doctrine of the mean only crudely tells us how we ought to act, not to mention that some ethical dilemmas do not neatly admit of such a treatment; nevertheless,
cultivating the virtues espoused by Aristotle is a worthwhile pursuit, one that should govern, among other things, education and the raising of children. On the other hand, the standards of moral literacy might cause us to amend, or even reject, other long-standing ethical schemes. For example, while some versions of Natural Law ethics fare quite well in prescriptiveness, this success is predicated on controversial and, some would argue, out-dated, bigoted, and hence unfair ideas of what is “natural.” In fact, we might happily integrate ethical frameworks, such as Virginia Held’s feminist ethics, which see traditional ethics as limited by male points of view. A robust synthesis would be informed by the experience and insight of diverse others.

The scope and nature of my project has made it necessary to gloss over the complexities of virtually every moral theory I have considered here. Nevertheless, I am convinced that the standards of moral literacy that I have laid down here can serve our students well, not only in the classroom but in the so-called “real world” as well. In the classroom, it gives students a framework for understanding how different ethical theories are at bottom all engaged in the same practical enterprise. It provides a way of assessing their strengths and weaknesses without throwing the baby out with the bathwater, so to speak, in that philosophically disparate theories are shown to have real cache in resolving moral dilemmas, in ways that can potentially augment each other. In the real world, students can employ this knowledge and understanding in such a way that they are able to go beyond uncritical appeals to custom, feelings, dogma, and prejudice, to recognize what counts as justifiable moral reasons, and to thereby come to considered decisions of their own, decisions which can be taken seriously in that they are based on sound moral principle. In so doing, our students become more rounded moral citizens.
NOTES


2 These standards are extra-moral or pre-moral conditions which moral claims must meet, independent and regardless of what such claims say is right or wrong. They are analytic standards derived from the very idea of moral claims, i.e., from what they are qua moral claim and from what they are designed to do as such, viz., give us direction in matters requiring moral deliberation.

3 Karl Popper, “Every genuine test of a theory is an attempt to falsify it, or to refute it . . . A theory which is not refutable by any conceivable event is non-scientific. Irrefutability is not a virtue of a theory (as people often think) but a vice,” *Conjectures and Refutations*, (London: Routledge and Keagan Paul, 1963), 33-39.

4 By “erroneously,” I mean simply that, for example, the appeal has misunderstood and/or misapplied a given moral principle or ethical theory, in the way that, say, an attorney may misunderstand or misapply a given legal statute or tort. However, in both cases, although mistaken somehow, the appeals fall within the framework of what are considered legitimate applications of moral theory or law.

5 Actually, what I am proposing comes closer to what Jonathan Dancy has called “moral particularism,” in which, rather than giving special precedence to one moral framework over another, “one’s main duty, in moral judgment, is to look really closely at the case before one,” *Moral Reasons* (Blackwell Publishers, 1993), 60-63. Some will object that this presupposes some as yet unstated meta-ethical principle about the relative strength, weakness, and applicability of different ethical theories or frameworks. At the meta level of moral inquiry, this may be true. But, as I have already indicated, the standards of moral literacy are meant to apply at the practical level of moral deliberation, by appealing to a given ethical theory or framework. We have many robust ethical frameworks from which to choose, each appealing to some guiding foundational principle. This is both a blessing and a curse. How do we decide between them? Rather than appealing to some meta-ethical principle, which takes us out of the practical sphere, we choose an ethical principle based on how well it meets the criteria of prescriptiveness, fairness of application, and justification. We shall see that different ethical frameworks have different strengths and weaknesses in these areas, depending on the moral dilemma involved. Admittedly, this does presuppose a certain inclusiveness with respect to ethical theories that leaves the meta-level question begged. But, this is a problem for professional philosophers, not just to solve, but to determine if it even is a problem. From the standpoint of moral literacy, not only does it not matter, the imperatives of moral exigency require us to set it aside.

6 Says Kant, “morality and humanity, insofar as it is capable of morality, alone have dignity . . . Hence, autonomy is the ground of the dignity of human nature,” Immanuel Kant: *Ethical Philosophy*, trans., James W. Ellington (Hackett Publishing, 1983), 40-41.
The classic example of a cultural difference that does make a moral difference is the practice of infanticide among arctic aboriginals. Arguably, such practice can be justified on utilitarian grounds; specifically, the scarcity of resources and the harshness of the environment can make keeping an unhealthy infant alive dangerous to the welfare of the tribe as a whole, whereas such practice could not be justified in affluent Western societies which have the resources required to care for such a child. Another example might be the marketing of powdered baby formula to Third World mothers who lack both the literacy and the sanitation conditions necessary for the formula to be administered safely.


This definition is adapted from Charles Powers and David Vogel, who define ethics in the following way: “In essence ethics is concerned with clarifying what constitutes human welfare and the kind of conduct necessary to promote it,” Ethics in the Education of Business Managers (Hastings Institute, 1980), quoted in Business Ethics: Readings and Cases in Corporate Morality, 71.


I realize that the average ethical egoist would object to this as a strawman characterization of the EE position. No doubt she would argue that the egoist has to consider such factors as whether her own self-interest is hurt by dumping toxic waste, if nothing else because of the possibility that customers might object to such practices and take their business elsewhere. Friedman would certainly argue that it is up to government, not business, to pass and enforce environmental legislation. If it fails to do so, business has no moral obligation (although it may have a financial incentive) to adopt practices that add to its costs, especially if it puts the company at a competitive disadvantage to companies who do not do likewise. But the average consumer has little or no leverage upon the typical maquiladora plant operating just across the Rio Grande border, because the average consumer does not directly purchase the sort of materials produced at such plants. Moreover, against Friedman, companies do not necessarily find it in their self-interest to comply with environmental legislation even in countries that have such legislation. They know that the EPA only has the resources to prosecute a small percentage of violators. They also know that it can take years, even decades to discover violations, if they are discovered at all. Further, they count on the fact that whatever the fine and cost of clean-up will be, it will pale beside the amount of profit they can potentially generate over years of non-compliance. All of this is factored into a cost-benefit analysis that makes it rational to ignore environmental legislation.


Here Mill is a rule utilitarian, because his case for individual freedoms rests on the assumption that recognizing said freedoms, even when they violate
taste or custom or our own sense of propriety, provided that they do not cause harm to others, is good for the health and vibrancy of the state, even if squashing freedoms might produce greater happiness in any given instance. Thus, Mill would be against water-boarding, for instance, even if the information obtained really did prevent a terrorist act.

16 Some readings of the Categorical Imperative would say two, that the third one is actually entailed, and accounted for, by a fully fleshed-out interpretation of the second.

