When I was a graduate student I would occasionally get to my Intermediate Logic class a few minutes early and find my professor, William Wisdom, plucking away at his banjo. He mainly played instrumental music for us but once I heard him sing a self-descriptive verse in which he sang of himself as a ‘logic-teaching’, ‘banjo-playing’ professor.

For many years — through high school, college, graduate school, and postgraduate teaching — I have been playing music, sometimes on an acoustic guitar, electric guitar, electric bass, or piano and sometimes on a set of drums. The kind of music I play is mostly popular music although I dabble in classical music and jazz. The way I most frequently play music is by strumming guitar chords while singing. Over the years I have learned to play a countless number of songs. Instead of committing them to memory, however, I have used the method of typing up the lyrics and writing the guitar chords on the page over the lyrics. I have about a half-dozen binders full of these crib sheets. (My oldest ones hail from my high school days and are handwrittten and unevenly organized).

These binders are very useful at parties. Onlookers can read the lyrics and sing along with me if they choose. Some people are so accustomed to seeing me play the guitar that they call me ‘the guitar guy’. When they find out that I teach, they immediately think I teach music. No, I say, I teach philosophy. Philosophy and music? Is there any connection? Most people can’t see it, immediately at least. For a long time I myself did not clearly see the connection. I knew in the back of my mind, though, that I would one day be able to bring together the seemingly disparate pursuits of teaching philosophy and playing music.

When I was interviewing for my current position as assistant professor of philosophy at Neumann College I told the interviewer — the president of the college — about my avocation. I also told her that the notion
of bringing my guitar to the classroom was slowly churning in the back of my mind. She encouraged me to find some way to realize my vision. She thinks that philosophy is an important subject and finding new, exciting ways to teach philosophy is necessary to reach today’s college students. After all, what is the average college student interested in? Music, sports, and movies are high on their list of concerns. My task was to somehow use these concerns as vehicles to raise the students’ interest in philosophy and attract their attention.

At the college where I teach philosophy, every single student is required to take Introductory Ethics (Philosophy 102) as a core requirement. Even though most adults can appreciate why a college would require each of its students to take an ethics course, a sizable number of the young-adult traditionally-aged students that I teach are genuinely perplexed about why they have to take this course. Most of them think of the course as a waste of time that has nothing to do with their major area of study. I have taken my job as an ethics professor, therefore, to involve proving that ethics is relevant to any human life, and that ethical concepts, principles, theories and traditions pervade our lives, whether we realize it or not.

Thus in attempting to teach introductory ethics to unreceptive students I have found it helpful to illustrate various connections between ethics and popular music. I use popular music in the classroom to help introduce moral traditions, concepts, theories, and principles. In this paper I discuss examples of popular music as they relate to different traditions of moral philosophy, such as virtue ethics, divine command ethics, natural law ethics, utilitarianism, feminist ethics of care, and deontology. Other moral concepts that I discuss in the context of popular song lyrics are: sentience, hedonism, egoism, racism, altruism, and anthropocentrism. (For my Introduction to Philosophy course — PHIL 103 — I played thirteen different songs relating to philosophy of religion, epistemology, metaphysics, and social/political philosophy.) Most of the songs I discuss are from the 1960s through the 1990s. By examining popular song lyrics we can discover a wide range of standard perspectives in moral philosophy. Philosophical notions are often easily apparent in popular art regardless of whether the practitioners (or audience) of popular art realize it.
VIRTUE ETHICS

In the first unit of material that we discuss in my ethics course the focus is on virtue ethics. We discuss the tradition of virtue ethics as it extends from the ancient period through the medieval, modern and contemporary periods. Although many of the specific virtues that Aristotle discusses are foreign to my students — as is the very idea of focusing on virtues and character rather than on actions and rules — they eventually become convinced of the contemporary relevance of virtues. As illustrations of how even contemporary popular culture still thinks in virtue categories, I play my students the song “Patience” by the group Guns N’ Roses. The song is about a romantic relationship and the lead singer addresses his lover with the words, “Said woman take it slow, it’ll work itself out fine, all we need is just a little patience.” Another contemporary pop song with a commonly known virtue in the title is “Honesty” by Billy Joel. Again the context seems to be a romantic relationship. The chorus of the song says that “Honesty is such a lonely word. Everyone is so untrue. Honesty is hardly ever heard, but mostly what I need from you.” The song is not about the action of truth-telling, or the rule or command about telling the truth: the issue is about the character trait of honesty and how it is important in close, personal relationships.

Virtue ethics captures the personal dimension of ethics very well. Another instance of this is Aristotle’s famous discussion of friendship and his inclusion of friendliness as a key virtue. There are many pop songs that address the theme of friendship but everyone is familiar with James Taylor’s “You’ve Got a Friend,” which discusses how friends are loyal, dependable, and helpful: “Winter, spring, summer, or fall, all you got to do is call, and I’ll be there, yeah, yeah, yeah, you’ve got a friend.”

One last example of popular music and virtue ethics, but this time from a different virtue tradition, is the “Prayer of St. Francis.” My college is a small Catholic college in the Franciscan tradition and in ethics class in addition to discussing the so-called human virtues, we also discuss theological virtues. In the song “The Prayer of St. Francis” the virtues of faith, hope, and love are mentioned, in addition to the virtues of peace-making and forgiveness.

Make me a channel of your peace.
Where there is hatred let me bring your love.
Where there is injury, your pardon Lord,
and where there’s doubt, true faith in you.
Make me a channel of your peace.
Where there’s despair in life, let me bring hope.
Where there is darkness, only light,
and where there’s sadness ever joy.

NATURAL LAW ETHICS

The next unit of material that we discuss in my ethics course focuses on natural law ethics. We treat the natural law tradition primarily through focusing on the work of Aquinas: we view Aquinas’ natural law ethics as a confluence of Aristotle’s ethics and Catholic ethics. The traditional Christian hierarchical worldview is apparent in a famous passage of Aristotle’s Politics:

[W]e must believe, first that plants exist for the sake of animals, second that all other animals exist for the sake of man . . .
If then we are right in believing that nature makes nothing without some end in view, nothing to no purpose, it must be that nature has made all things specifically for the sake of man.2

It is a very common anthropocentric view. Since in class we do a little bit on environmental virtue ethics I take time to introduce the concept of anthropocentrism. As an illustration of an anthropocentric view I have played the song “This Land Is Your Land” by Woody Guthrie because it highlights how, “This land is your land, this land is my land, from California to the New York Island, from the Redwood forests, to the Gulf Stream waters, this land was made for you and me.” It conveys the view that the land was made for humans. This is the traditional view that the earth is the property of human beings, for God has given it to all of humanity.

A more contemporary song that I play to illustrate a natural law outlook on ethics is Santana’s “Put Your Lights On.” The first verse says “Hey now, all you sinners, put your lights on, put your lights on. Hey now, all you lovers, put your lights on, put your lights on. Hey now, all you killers, put your lights on, put your lights on. Hey now, all you children, leave your lights on, better leave your lights on.” Later verses mention angels, darkness, the soul, and God. Many of the elements of the Christian natural law view are apparent, most importantly, the notion of how the natural law comes to be known. As Aquinas puts it, “the natural law is the rational creature’s participation in the eternal law,” and we therefore come to know the natural law with the natural light of reason,
for it is written on our hearts. Santana is advising us to put our lights on and perceive the natural (moral) law. Children have their lights on, whereas sinners, lovers, and killers have allowed their lights to grow dim or go out altogether.

**SOCIAL CONTRACT ETHICS**

The first modern tradition of ethics that we discuss in my ethics class is social contract ethics. One of the main background principles of this ethical tradition is known as the principle of self-interest, which involves egoism (both psychological and ethical). A contemporary song that I play that illustrates the sentiment of egoism is a song with the title “On a Plain” by the group Nirvana. In some of the repeated lines in the song the lead singer says: “I love myself better than you, I know it’s wrong, what should I do?” And the title refers to the line that says, “I’m on a plain, I can’t complain.” In class we discuss how the singer is taking an egoistic stance and although it may sound selfish and radical, yet it is not even as selfish and radical as defenders of the philosophical view known as ethical egoism. For ethical egoists claim that it is morally acceptable to love oneself more than one loves others, yet the singer of this song describes that he thinks it is wrong to love oneself better than one loves others, and he feels helpless in fighting against his selfish tendencies. In ethical terms, we say that he admits his commitment to psychological egoism but feels misgivings about endorsing the more radical view of ethical egoism.

**UTILITARIAN ETHICS**

Another modern ethical tradition, one that contradicts the egoistic elements in social contract ethics, is utilitarianism. Some key concepts of this unit that appear in popular songs are happiness, hedonism, sentience, and vegetarianism.

In the chorus of Sheryl Crow’s song “If It Makes You Happy” she baldly asserts that “if it makes you happy, then it can’t be that bad. If it makes you happy, then why the hell are you so sad?” Not only does this song highlight the key concept of happiness that lies at the heart of utilitarianism, but the sense of happiness that she is singing about seems to be the hedonistic kind that the classical utilitarians famously endorse, the definition of happiness as a preponderance of pleasure over pain.
It is this hedonistic conception of ethics that paves the way for the notion that sentience is the necessary characteristic for any being we wish to include in the moral community — that collection of beings that we wish to regard as morally considerable.

In Nirvana's song “Something in the Way” we hear the line: “It's okay to eat fish, because they don't have any feelings.” It appears that in order to reach a conclusion about how we ought to treat fish and whether it is morally acceptable to eat fish, the singer is using the criterion of sentience. According to the classical utilitarian tradition, the question is (to paraphrase Jeremy Bentham) not whether the creature is rational or can speak but whether the creature can suffer.

If the creature can suffer, and additionally, we can obtain proper nutrition by avoiding eating sentient animals, then we ought to become vegetarians. In the song “Cheeseburger in Paradise” by Jimmy Buffett, Buffett starts the song with the verse:

Tried to amend my carnivorous habit,
      made it nearly seventy days.
Lisin’ weight without speed, eatin’ sunflower seeds,
      drinking lots of carrot juice and soaking up rays.
But at night I’d have these wonderful dreams,
      some kind of sensuous treat,
not zucchini, fettuccine, or bulgar wheat,
      but a big warm bun and a huge chunk of meat.

It is significant that Buffett admits that he only made it “nearly seventy days” on his vegetarian diet, for it is a common criticism of utilitarian ethics that the standards set by such an ethic are overly demanding. Nevertheless, we often look at the utilitarian ethical tradition as alerting us to take seriously the pain and suffering of non-human animals. Some people refer to this as animal consciousness. A song by Simon and Garfunkel that seems to refer to this new animal consciousness is “At the Zoo.” The opening line of the song that later gets repeated is “Someone told me it’s all happening at the zoo. I do believe it, I do believe it’s true.”

**DEONTOLOGICAL ETHICS**

Another modern ethical tradition that we study in my ethics class — a tradition that takes issue with the utilitarian emphasis on happiness, hedonism, and sentience — is deontological ethics. We look at deontological ethics as formulated by Immanuel Kant and thus we learn about
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categorical imperatives and hypothetical imperatives. As a way to get comfortable with the idea of ethical imperatives in general, we consider a related theory of ethics known as Divine Command Ethics that defines ethical imperatives not as Kant does, as dictates of reason, but rather as dictates of God. A popular song with an imperative in the title and that makes a seemingly religious allusion concerning the source of the command is “Let It Be” by The Beatles. The opening line is: “When I find myself in times of trouble, mother Mary comes to me, speaking words of wisdom, let it be.” When students (especially at a Catholic College) hear that line, they usually interpret it as referring to Mary, the mother of Jesus. This is not an unusual interpretation especially in the light of the many claims made about how apparitions of Mary have appeared to people and have given them instructions.

Even without the religious interpretation, though, the basic point is that the phrase ‘let it be’ is a command, a prescription, and in ethics it is very important to be able to distinguish between prescriptive claims and descriptive claims, and among prescriptive claims, to distinguish between hypothetical imperatives and categorical imperatives. One formulation of Kant’s categorical imperative that we discuss is: “Act only on that maxim that you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” This is sometimes simplified and collapsed into the principle of universalizability. Seen in this light, the principle provides a ready argument against racism. As Anthony Appiah puts it, “. . . if two people share all the properties morally relevant to some action we ought to do, it will be an error — a failure to apply the Kantian injunction to universalize our moral judgments — to use the bare facts of race as the basis for treating them differently.”

A contemporary song that describes the form of racism known as racial profiling is “Mr. Cab Driver” by Lenny Kravitz. Kravitz sings about how “Mr. Cab Driver won’t stop to let me in,” because “Mr. Cab Driver don’t like my kind of skin.” Although many of my students believe that racism is a thing of the past, when they are reminded of the persistence of racial profiling, they are challenged to reconsider their view.

Feminist Ethics of Care

One other ethical tradition that we discuss in my ethics class is the approach of feminist ethics of care. My students are already familiar with feminism understood as lobbying for equal rights of women. I remind them of this with the song “I Am Woman” by Helen Reddy: “I am
woman; hear me roar, in numbers too big to ignore, and I know too much to go back and pretend. ‘Cause I’ve heard it all before, and I’ve been down there on the floor, no one’s ever gonna keep me down again.”

But one of the novel aspects of the feminine ethics of care is that it is not advocating for equality, on the contrary, it is emphasizing how men and women are different in how they think about ethics. The concept of moral rights has its natural home in a deontological framework, but advocates of a feminist ethics of care see a deontological ethic as borne out of the male experience of ethics. An ethics of care emphasizes care, love, and close personal relationships. In fact, in many ways it hearkens back to a virtue ethic.

As songs that seem to fit with this tradition, I play “All You Need Is Love” by The Beatles, and “Love” by John Lennon. “All You Need Is Love” captures the idea that the key aspect of living a good life is love. Proponents of the ethics of care like to remind us that love is the most important moral motivation, certainly more important than duty or obligation as Kant claimed. The song “Love” continues with the emphasis on love as having to do with close, concrete, personal relationships, for example in the lines: “Love is you, you and me, love is knowing, we can be.” The ethics of care is not advocating a general ‘love of all humanity’ or ‘love of all sentient beings’ because such a notion is much too abstract; ‘love of all humanity’ is an abstraction, not a concrete personal loving relationship between a caring and cared-for person.

**Educational Psychology**

Before I conclude I would like to situate the pedagogical technique of using music in the philosophy classroom within the frameworks of a few well-known theories in educational psychology.

In terms of Benjamin Bloom’s taxonomy, which is a system including six levels used for ordering thinking skills, the classroom activity that I have been describing operates at four out of six of Bloom’s levels. First, this teaching technique operates at the two simplest levels of Bloom’s taxonomy — 1) the level of knowledge and 2) the level of comprehension. It is an in-class activity that focuses on recall of factual information and the students’ understanding of the broader meaning of the ethical concepts and theories they are learning about. But this classroom activity also operates at the next two levels of Bloom’s taxonomy — 3) the application and 4) analysis levels. For, in the activity I ask the students to use in new ways the ethical material they have learned and I ask them
to demonstrate how the material they have learned applies to various popular songs. The activity is at the analysis level because I am asking them to select out and separate the song lyrics that relate to the ethics material we have been discussing. My usage of this teaching technique does not reach the two highest stages of Bloom’s taxonomy — 5) synthesis and 6) evaluation, however. I wouldn’t say that I am asking the students to combine knowledge and come up with something new, nor do I ask them to evaluate the songs or the songs’ use of ethical material.

A different framework in educational psychology has been developed by Howard Gardner; he is an educator who has developed a theory of multiple intelligences. According to Gardner people have at least seven intelligences (ranging from linguistic, logico-mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily kinesthetic, interpersonal, to intrapersonal). In Gardner’s psychological theory there is not one generic type of intelligence, but rather, each person has strengths in different areas of intelligence.

Gardner’s theory has been used for rethinking curriculum. He emphasizes that all students are different. The implications that his theory has about education fit in with that long tradition in philosophy of education that goes back to Plato and continued through the work of Dewey, namely, that students should be educated according to their abilities and that education should not be one size fits all. Because each person has strengths in different areas of intelligence, one of the implications for education then, is that by using a variety of different teaching techniques (not only relying on lecture) teachers can enhance student learning. For example, working in small groups helps those students who have strengths in interpersonal skills, but working in small groups is an irritating annoyance for those who are not strong in this area because those students may desire lecture only. By using a variety of teaching techniques to accommodate a wide variety of learning styles, some educators have found that they can minimize the anxiety about learning a foreign subject matter and help students to gain a better understanding of new concepts.

Students who have a strength in musical intelligence, then, but weakness in other areas can benefit from class activities that involve music. Using music in the classroom is simply another teaching technique to supplement a cadre of other techniques. If multiple intelligence theory is taken seriously for education then teachers need to have an arsenal of different techniques that compensate for a variety of different learners.

A final educational philosophy or pedagogical orientation that I will mention is called constructivism. “Constructivist teachers deemphasize
lecturing and telling and encourage instead the active engagement of students in establishing and pursuing their own learning objectives. The guiding idea behind constructivism is that all knowledge is constructed, so rather than viewing the student learners as passively absorbing information the constructivist views the student learners as attempting to construct knowledge for themselves. Using activities that encourage and facilitate them in actively constructing knowledge are thought by constructivists to enhance student learning. By having students listen to and analyze popular music I am providing a means for the students to operationalize their knowledge of ethical concepts, theories and traditions; and the technique offers them dynamic building blocks with which to create new clusters of knowledge.

**CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, I have briefly discussed virtue ethics, natural law ethics, social contract ethics, utilitarian ethics, deontological ethics, and feminist ethics of care and the various popular songs that I use to help students see that the ethical concepts, principles, theories and traditions that they are learning about in ethics class are often alive and well in the culture in which they are living. They can see this by paying attention to the song lyrics of popular songs from the 1960s through the 1990s.

I have been singing and playing the guitar for twenty-five years now so it is not a difficult thing for me to bring my acoustic guitar to class, put the lyrics on a screen with an overhead projector, and sing the songs for them. On occasion, however, a song is too difficult for me to sing, or out of my vocal range, or wouldn’t come off well as an acoustic song, and so I have played the song for my students with a tape player or CD player. But a live performance is always more exciting. Also, when I have found out through conversation that one or more of my students are guitar players I have invited them to accompany me in class. I try to get the students involved in the playing of the music as much as possible.

Most of my students initially think that ethics and philosophy are arcane subjects with very little relevance to what they consider ‘reality’. For them ethics and philosophy are foreign not only because of the subject matter but also because the practitioners they study in their introductory courses are historical figures. The initial assumption that my students make about ethics and philosophy is that they are useless, boring, and ancient pursuits. My goal in making connections between ethics and popular music is that they will see that moral philosophy is not as
foreign, irrelevant or as unknown to them as they might think. If they can see that ‘mere’ popular songs contain some of the ideas encountered in ethics class then maybe they can see how ‘serious’ activities, like politics, education, science, religion, etc., deal with and rely on ethical concepts and principles even more. This gives them some inkling that ethics and philosophy live outside the classroom, that ethical and philosophical notions permeate our culture to the point at which popular discourse and popular art reflect philosophical thinking even if the practitioners of popular art or the audience of the popular arts do not realize it.

I use music in the classroom as a review tactic, a means to go over points that we have already discussed at length, in order to generate a deeper understanding of the issues that we have learned about. I’ll play the song and then we’ll talk about how it relates to a prior discussion. Often the students will benefit from seeing how the philosophy finds its way into a popular song. They are then looking at the same philosophical point but now seeing it from a different angle. Occasionally this will precipitate a follow-up discussion that clarifies and reinforces the philosophy they have learned.

In my view, it is not important whether the popular musicians whose compositions I discuss were intentionally singing about moral philosophy. The key to this teaching method is that before I play any of these songs for my students they have already studied ethics with me. The basic ethical notions should be fresh in their minds. Before I begin to play a song I instruct them to listen for allusions to the material that we have already studied in class. What the musicians originally intended is not (necessarily) the point. It would be pleasing to think that I have interpreted their lyrics as they meant for them to be understood, but for my purposes it does not matter. I am simply using their creations to reinforce what my students have already learned. And anyway, as Socrates and Plato have said, if you want to understand a poem you usually will not have much luck asking the poet who composed it. According to Socrates and Plato this is because more often than not, the poet who is inspired does not understand what he or she is truly saying.

After the politicians, I went to the poets, the writers of tragedies and dithyrambs and the others, intending in their case to catch myself being more ignorant than they. So I took up those poems with which they seemed to have taken most trouble and asked them what they meant, in order that I might at the same time learn something from them. I am ashamed to tell you the truth, gentlemen, but I must. Almost all the bystanders might
have explained the poems better than their authors could. I soon realized that poets do not compose their poems with knowledge, but by some inborn talent and by inspiration, like seers and prophets who also say many fine things without any understanding of what they say.9

Offering musical selections to the students as specimens that convey ethical and philosophical notions is analogous to showing students popular films. But popular songs have the advantage over films in that the songs, like poems, are short, compressed, and compact modes of artistic and philosophic transmission. By only playing a single verse or chorus of a song, the professor can even further abbreviate the musical selection for in-class presentation. A song snippet doesn’t take up the whole class period and unlike showing a film clip — which usually requires an explanation of the plot of the entire film — one need not explain what the rest of the song is about. A song snippet simply needs to be long enough for the student to see the wider implication and application of the philosophical idea in question.

Although in other classes I have tried to explain how philosophy is pervasive, relevant, and important, there is a much different response from the students when you can show it through popular music rather than merely talk about it. The popular songs are lively and exciting pieces of evidence that philosophy lives outside the classroom. The students more clearly see that philosophical thinking pervades human thought and activity, whether scientific, political or religious. The students can more clearly see moral philosophy as relevant because they can no longer dismiss it as wholly foreign, arcane, and ancient. They can more clearly see the joy in philosophy because they see that philosophy is not an isolated and sterile intellectual activity but a multidisciplinary and vibrant endeavor. In addition to simply making the classroom more exciting, several educational and psychological frameworks support the concept of bringing music into the classroom, partly in virtue of the excitement generated and partly in virtue of the needs of the student learners. Further, the students see how songwriters are so energized about philosophical notions that they want to sing about them. And they see how their professor is so excited about philosophical notions that he wants to sing about them, not to mention that he is confident enough about philosophy (and music) that he is willing to sing in the classroom.
NOTES

1 A shorter version of this paper was presented at the Fifth International Ethics Across the Curriculum Conference, held at St. Edward’s University in Austin, Texas, October 23-26, 2003.


DISCOGRAPHY


Temple, Sebastian. “Prayer of St. Francis.” (Los Angeles, CA: *Franciscan Communications,* 1967.)