BOOK REVIEW

ETHICS IN ACTION: A CASE-BASED APPROACH

Peggy Connolly, Becky Case-White, David R. Keller, and Martin G. Leever
Reviewed by: Deborah Mower, Youngstown State University


There is a new method for teaching moral reasoning, and it does not require a traditional classroom. The Ethics Bowl began in 1993 when Professor Robert Ladenson organized a competition in which several teams debated resolutions to moral dilemmas. This first event, held at the Illinois Institute of Technology, was a success due to the fact that students not only achieved a deep and nuanced understanding of the moral issues surrounding each case, but they also learned how to develop comprehensive and clear arguments that fairly addressed those of the opposing position. In an article titled “The Educational Significance of the Ethics Bowl” (2001, Teaching Ethics, 1: 63-78), Ladenson notes that this kind of competitive team activity develops students’ capacity for ethical understanding, reasoning, and tolerance. Most importantly, it teaches students shared standards of ethical reasoning and judgment necessary to resolve the moral dilemmas and social policy issues they will encounter throughout their lives. The explosive growth of the National Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl is a testament to the value of this applied approach to teaching moral reasoning. The case-based approach to teaching moral reasoning spurred the development of this book, which is authored by members of the National Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl case-writing team.

More than merely a reader for case studies and moral dilemmas, this text provides a model for moral reasoning and an opportunity to practice and hone one’s reasoning skills. Chapter 1 offers readers a basic framework for understanding moral concepts and principles, while Chapter 2 provides a clear method for analyzing moral dilemmas. In Chapter 1, Keller offers a brief discussion of metaethics and categorizations within normative ethics, and explains the relevant terms, concepts, and principles of major ethical theories. A short section details differences between ethics and religion, and he offers a nice explanation of Natural Law theory, emphasizing that moral judgments stemming from religious beliefs
should not counter moral judgments via reason. Keller’s synopsis of positions within environmental ethics is excellent, and challenges readers to examine the basis of moral consideration and to reject anthropocentrism.

Chapter 2 offers readers a method for moral reasoning. Gampel presents the “Analysis and Justification Method,” which is a clear five step method for analyzing moral dilemmas in which one gathers information (step 1), considers a variety of potential solutions to the dilemma (step 2), lists pros and cons (step 3), analyzes the strength of individual reasons (step 4), and justifies a conclusion citing reasons and responding to conflicting claims (step 5). But as Gampel notes, persons tend to emphasize particular ethical principles when reasoning, which effectively become biases by blinding one to additional concerns or allowing assumptions to run rampant without critical reflection. To help ensure objectivity, he suggests using principles from multiple moral theories to analyze dilemmas. His acronym CARVE provides a simple checklist for evaluation, encouraging readers to consider consequences (“C”), autonomy (“A”), rights (“R”), virtues (“V”), and equality/fairness (“E”). This model not only provides students with a shared method for moral reasoning, but also provides a shared standard for assessing reasons, evidence, and positions.

The book offers a broad array of topics, covering ethical issues as they arise in the arts, environment, healthcare, business and marketplace, government, education, public policy, and social relations. In the Introduction, Connolly stresses the pervasiveness of moral choice: morality and ethical reasoning are not compartmentalized events, but woven throughout our daily lives. A virtue of this text is that each chapter contains cases that either do, or will, affect individuals in the course of their lives. For example, the criteria for death (case 28) is relevant to the death of friends or family members, and all persons are affected by direct to consumer advertising (case 20). But as Keller notes, although we tend to think of ethics as a private affair, “we are intricately bound in a social fabric by relationships of reciprocity. Whatever we do—and do not do—affects other beings worthy of consideration and respect” (45). The book also includes cases that students might initially assume would be private matters, but which illuminate the social contexts and relations surrounding each choice. The cosmetic use of cadaver tissue (case 21) provides a perfect example.

As Connolly notes in the Introduction, reasoning about moral dilemmas is difficult, confusing, and fraught with complexity: “what constitutes ethically justifiable action is affected by changes in technology,
social and political environments, and human understanding...varies among cultures, belief systems, and the nature and extent of one’s experience” (2). Although moral dilemmas are often overwhelming, this book provides a resource manual for moral reasoning. Using the systematic conceptual and analytic frameworks presented in the first two chapters, the authors include short responses to each case from two or three perspectives to help readers identify primary issues and values, and then demonstrate how to apply the five step method and the CARVE principles for the first few cases in each chapter. The final case in each chapter is left completely unanalyzed, encouraging readers to practice applying the method and principles on their own.

Although Chapters 1 and 2 offer a fairly complete conceptual framework and analytic method for moral reasoning, the treatment of the Feminist Ethic of Care (FEOC) is disappointing. Keller explains the Ethic of Care as a form of virtue ethics that promotes cultivation of care and empathy as virtues. As a normative theory, care and empathy may be virtues in addition to all the other traditional virtues (e.g., temperance), and as such, could be included within consideration of virtue as part of the CARVE principles. However, a feminist Ethic of Care also presents a metaethical challenge to the Western overemphasis on autonomy and the supremacy of impartiality. Although Keller briefly notes this challenge, he presents it as an objection only to utilitarianism (a normative challenge, and improperly leveled against one theory), and presents the objection on the ethical importance of relationships only in passing. Given Keller’s emphasis that the social fabric of our relationships requires consideration of others, and the emphasis in the whole book on overcoming personal bias and developing shared standards of analysis, a full explanation of the importance of special relationships and a discussion about how to account for these conflicting obligations would be perfectly in line with the goals of this book. Many persons wrestle with such conflicts, and a deeper treatment of these issues would aid readers in learning how to reason through these moral dilemmas.

Because the Ethic of Care is a mainstream moral theory (which some hold is a separate ethic and not merely a version of Virtue Ethics), I would have expected it to have its own section complete with objections to it just as Deontology, Utilitarianism, Social Contractarianism, etc. In addition, I would have expected Gampel to revise his CARVE principles to include an additional principle for the Ethic of Care as a counterbalance to autonomy given the unique focus on the intrinsic value of relationships and the necessary consideration of special relationships.
Although the book does a wonderful job of presenting a clear conceptual framework and a method for moral reasoning, these are unfortunate omissions.

As all ethics teachers know, students often have a deep-seated, and unreflective, adherence to subjectivism and relativism. Keller does offer a brief explanation of metaethics, but I doubt it is argued forcefully enough to challenge students’ preconceptions. He offers a wonderful case in which one learns that a neighbor family intends to perform a traditional cultural clitorectomy on their young daughter, and notes the importance of supporting tolerance. He suggests that a solution to this situation would be to adopt a principle supporting physical and psychological integrity or rights. Although I agree with this solution, simply appealing to such a principle or even appealing to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights will not persuade students of a relativistic bent. Appeals to objectivist principles or appeals to authority beg the question against the relativist, and will do nothing to settle these questions for readers.

While ethics teachers will welcome the clarity of Gampel’s method for analyzing moral dilemmas, I wonder whether each step within the method is necessary. The second step requires persons to engage in creative problem solving, but it seems either unnecessary, or to fall most naturally after the analysis in step 4. Problem solving in advance of considering all the pros and cons of step three jumps the gun and nullifies the need for step three, since many of the pros and cons would be considered in evaluating various approaches for problem solving. However, problem solving is also out of place because being able to evaluate which would be acceptable solutions to the problem also requires previously analyzing the strength of various reasons, evidence, and analysis of hidden assumptions. Until one has come to a conclusion for how to proceed, problem solving seems to be, at best, a distraction, and at worst, letting one’s assumptions and biases run ahead of steps 3 and 4. Whatever the sequence, there is great value in gathering information, evaluating the pros and cons of various moral factors and principles, and being required to state one’s reasons for and against a position while fairly accounting for opposing positions.

This book has the potential to become an industry standard for ethics courses and for applied approaches to teaching moral reasoning. It offers a wide array of standard topics for those interested in using cases as focal points for lecture, discussion, or debates. For those interested in applied approaches to teaching moral reasoning, it offers a systematic framework for moral concepts, a method of moral reasoning, shared
standards of evaluating arguments, and concrete examples of moral reasoning in action.

It also could have an important role in the development of moral reasoning skills outside of the classroom. Given the extensive opportunities to practice moral reasoning in each case, this book can function as a training manual for moral reasoning with broad potential application for private citizens, Ethics Bowl competitors, members of Internal Review Boards, executive committees, politicians—in short, anyone who encounters moral dilemmas in social contexts.