

## Teaching Ethics in Colleges and Universities

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**Abstract:** The role of textbooks includes stimulating wider reading on the part of students. Textbooks on ethics are no exception. My own textbook, *Ethics: An Overview*, uses several devices to achieve this, including exercises and reading lists. One reviewer, Eric Matthews, writing in *Philosophy*, recognises its clarity and the care with which it was written, but maintains that a textbook on ethics for university students should focus on case studies rather than on theory. Such an approach, however, would prove cumbersome, requiring multiple case-studies for the pros and cons of theories to be discussed, and would foreseeably fail to tackle questions of meta-ethics which students would be likely to want to have explicitly raised and answered. Approaches opposed to theory are discussed in this textbook, as well as theories, but reasons are given why it is not structured around such approaches. The focus in the textbook on theories makes possible its six sections of applications to applied ethics, concerning future people, medical ethics, animal ethics, environmental ethics, the ethics of development and the ethics of war.

**Keywords:** Education, ethics, students, universities, case-studies, ethical theories.

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### INTRODUCTION

What kind of textbook do students need to develop an up-to-date understanding of ethics, and an ability to reflect and reason on ethical topics as ethicists in their own right? Too often, textbooks have been treated either as texts from which passages are to be quoted or even memorised, or as the repositories of all information and the answers to all questions, and particularly to the questions liable to arise in students' assessments.

Certainly students need a grounding in key historical figures from the history of ethics, and in key ethical concepts. But they also need to be encouraged to read works other than the textbook, and to think through relevant issues for themselves. They need to be directed or re-directed to the institution's library, or to one or another relevant website on the internet, to grasp points of view different from that of the textbook, and in many cases different from their own initial perspective as well.

### DISCUSSION

I am the author of a textbook entitled *Ethics: An Overview*, first published in 2012[1]. This book covers the history of ethics, value-theory, normative ethics, applied ethics (six fields), meta-ethics, and issues surrounding determinism and free will. It has been fairly widely reviewed, not least in prominent journals, and has received both generous praise and

some amount of criticism. To some of this criticism I will shortly be responding. But first I should explain how it responds to the issues already raised, and also describe the ancillary material that it offers to readers.

With regard to the needs of students to be encouraged to think for themselves, this book offers exercises and topics for discussion, as well as stimulating them to philosophize for themselves. There are also essay questions with reading lists. And in order to assist teachers and instructors to get as far as arousing such interest, there are (for each and every section) sets of captions which can be presented to a class, which summarise that section, and its key moves and themes and arguments. All these ancillary materials were originally included in a 'companion website', but are now available from the website of the publisher Bloomsbury. People who enter the Bloomsbury website and go to 'Robin Attfield' and *Ethics: An Overview* will find supplementary material for each of the six main chapters, and are free to use it for their own teaching and/or for their own study.

One Lecturer (from Costa Rica) mentioned a difficulty with using these captions. My students, she said, do not speak English (the language of the captions). So I suggested that she should select whichever sections she wanted and proceed to translate the captions into the language spoken by the students (in their case, Spanish), and then present the translated

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captions to her classes, after reading the relevant section(s) to assist her teaching. This is not said to suggest that the sections are in all regards sufficient, but to facilitate teachers (such as this one) and students (such as hers) in getting started. For the text and its examples are sufficiently provocative to generate further thought and reflection on the part of the students, particularly if teachers make use of other supplementary material (as just mentioned).

As has been mentioned, favourable reviews have appeared in various journals, specifically *The Philosophical Quarterly*, *Philosophical Perspectives* and in the *Open Journal of Philosophy*. But some unfavourable comments were made by Eric Matthews in his review in the journal *Philosophy* in vol. 89, no. 349 (July 2014) at pages 487-490[2]. These unfavourable comments were accompanied by several favourable ones, which are quoted here.

It hardly needs saying that a philosopher of Professor Attfield's distinction and a teacher of his experience is capable of producing an introduction to ethics which will present the major issues in a way which is both solidly grounded in knowledge of the literature and lucidly explained, and he amply manifests this capacity in the present work (pages 487-8).

There again, Matthews further writes:

... this is a book written with great care by someone who is distinguished in the field, and who has sought to make it as useful as possible to students and teachers by such devices as suggesting questions for further discussion in class and providing bibliographies and a website. All students would benefit from these aids to learning, and all teachers will appreciate the teaching aids. Some students -- probably those with most potential to do further work in philosophy -- will respond to Attfield's general approach (page 490).

There is also another passage from the middle of the review that carries a related message:

[This book] is very clearly written and thoughtful, the work of someone who has reflected deeply over many years on the problems of moral philosophy, and has made his own distinguished contribution to the subject as a result. This reflection has not been merely academic, but has sprung from a real personal engagement, especially with many of the issues of applied ethics (pages 489 to 490).

But Matthews goes on to claim that what is needed in a textbook on ethics is a focus on one or more case studies, and that theories should not be the main focus if students' attention is to be engaged and retained. *Ethics: An Overview* does in fact consider some case studies,

but does not make them as prominent or central as Matthews would have liked.

I am assured, however, that examination syllabuses on ethics (at least for 'A' Level examinations in United Kingdom) expect students to be familiar with normative theories such as deontology, contract-theory, consequentialism and virtue ethics, and to be able to reflect on their relative merits as explanations of actions being right or obligatory. In this matter, it is my view that they are right to take this view; for only in this way can students reason about what makes actions right or wrong on a principled basis. What is more, if this degree of understanding of theories is required for 'A' Level students, a greater degree will normally be expected for University degrees.

It is true that one way of making the case for the cogency of any of these theories would be to begin from case studies and the judgements that most people form in response to them. Another way, though, is to reflect on what actions that we judge to be right have in common, and this approach soon leads to giving consideration to theories, which can then be used with relation to new situations and cases. This is the approach more frequently used in *Ethics: An Overview*. Experience suggests that this approach does not forfeit the attention and interest of students, who are often intrigued by, for example, the practice of paternalism, and are quick to devise cases where it would be justified as well as cases where it would not.

There must also be limits to what can be achieved if the emphasis is to remain with case studies. For very large numbers of case studies would be needed to validate any given ethical stance of any complexity. Thus interesting students in principles of value (such as the principle that enjoyment is intrinsically valuable, or the principle that this is not the case) would require several case studies, and proceeding to interest them in related principles of obligation would require many more. But should teachers be expected to abandon the discussion of such principles, except where case studies facilitate them?

Besides, both judgements about particular cases and judgements about principles are sooner or later going to come up against issues of meta-ethics such as whether ethical judgements are expressions of feelings, prescriptions or statements of objective truth; indeed lecturers who hold back from raising such issues are prone to be questioned about them on the ground that if they are not confronted then all ethical conclusions lack foundations, or at least a clear basis. But to reason about such matters (as is done in *Ethics: An Overview*) requires using names for the different stances concerned, to specify the key theories involved.

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There are admittedly some ethicists who hold that all theories are insecure, and that judgements about singular cases are much more secure. But this is a controversial view, which deserves to be considered (although not in my view, nor perhaps in that of Matthews, one to be accepted). Accordingly it is discussed in *Ethics: An Overview*. It would, however, have retarded the ethical understanding of readers if this stance (which is, of course, a theory itself) had been assumed to be correct and if the book had been moulded around it. For in that case, little progress could have been made in expounding rival explanations of rightness and wrongness, and students would have been left without resources for understanding ethical issues other than the resource of exchanging intuitions.

### CONCLUSION

All things considered, my confidence in the approach adopted in *Ethics: An Overview* is fortified and confirmed by consideration of the place and the relative importance of case studies and of theories. In that book, theories are considered as often as the

subject-matter requires, with ample resort being made to case studies, and ample encouragement being given to students to think their way through theories in the light of new cases or situations.

I realise that not all worries will be alleviated through these words. But both for those who are convinced and those whose worries persist the next step is to find a copy of *Ethics: An Overview* and read relevant sections, and consider to what kind of classroom use it can be put, and whether this is (as I believe) the kind of textbook that students need to attain an understanding of ethics.

### REFERENCES

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