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## *On Teaching Moral Philosophy*

by MARK PESTANA

IT'S HARD to avoid feeling like a sophist when teaching moral philosophy. Not only must the ethics professor present arguments for moral positions which he or she abhors, but those arguments must be made as plausible as possible. And, as if that is not enough, the teacher's knowledge of personal moral inadequacies can make the enterprise appear as the most preposterous pretension. This self-suspicion of sophistry on the part of the moral philosophy teacher is not mere psychic hypochondria. The causes of this suspicion are real sources of danger in the pedagogy of morality.

I want to spell out what these dangers are, how they arise, and indicate how Bob Reuman managed to avoid them. To provide a framework for this story I'll first discuss how moral philosophy is currently being taught in the United States and the standard justifications for teaching ethics. Then I'll indicate the source of potential sophistry in this context and its effects on teaching. I'll close on a more positive note with a discussion of Bob's powerfully effective teaching.

There are two general approaches to the academic study of morality: the theoretical and the applied. Moral theory can be further divided into four more or less distinct disciplines. Teaching moral philosophy usually conflates all of these divisions, but departments at larger universities do offer courses within each specific branch.

The first type of theoretical study, which is primarily the concern of anthropology and comparative religion, has been referred to as "descriptive ethics." This type of inquiry involves study of the content of the moralities of different peoples, religions, and political movements. A more distinctively philosophical approach to the theoretical study of morals is "analytic" ethics, which involves the analysis of concepts common to all moralities. This field addresses questions such as: what is the nature of moral obligation, how does morality relate to law, what constitutes a moral right, what is morality, etc. These two approaches to morality are regarded by some as nonnormative. This is rather controversial since a nonnormative and purely descriptive study of Nazi ethics, for instance, would seem to be both impossible and undesirable and since results in the conceptual study of moralities have normative implications, e.g., in the study of the relation between morality and the law. In any event, the third division of theoretical inquiry is distinctively normative. "Metaethics" may be regarded as the attempt to evaluate the various moralities which have been delineated by the descriptive branch. This attempt is perhaps the most controversial branch of the

philosophical study of morality because it amounts to an attempt to stand outside of any specific morality and assess its value. Some philosophers have dismissed this attempt as an intellectual pretense since, so it is argued, it is impossible to step outside of all moralities. Therefore any so-called metaethical evaluation of a specific morality will only be a disguised evaluation from within some other specific morality.

The fourth branch of theoretical inquiry returns to the level of specific moralities and involves the formulation and grounding of a system of morals. The classic examples of this philosophical endeavor are Thomas Aquinas' Natural Law morality, Kant's Morality of Freedom, and Bentham's Utilitarianism. The tenuousness of the division of inquiry is evident here since grounding moral precepts involves metaethical justification and since a conception of the nature and purpose of morality is crucial to the formulation.

The other general category of the philosophical study of morals involves the application of moral principles to specific problems of conduct. This field was once referred to as "casuistry," but is now called "applied ethics." The literature in this field is burgeoning. There are now specialized studies, and courses offered, in business ethics, environmental ethics, medical ethics, nursing ethics, agricultural ethics, police ethics, computer ethics, military ethics, etc. This attention to applications is a relatively recent phenomenon. Before 1970 (roughly) the concern of moral philosophers was primarily with the theoretical analysis of morality. Since the time of the war in Vietnam that concern has shifted to the applied.

Several developments, coincident with the war, prompted this change, e.g., moral dilemmas created by developments in medicine, the publicity of scandals in the practice of business, environmental difficulties (and the Vietnam War itself), all serving to bring philosophers out into the streets. Quite recently cuts in education funding have forced philosophers to justify their contribution to education. This struggle for justification shifts the emphasis in teaching (especially at junior colleges and state universities which focus on vocational training) to the "relevant" aspects of philosophy. Hence the increased attention to applied ethics.

Another form of this vindication is to justify the study of morality, both theoretical and applied, on the grounds of its effect on the consciousness of students. Philosophers claim that the study of morality, both theoretical and applied, expands the awareness of students. Even the most frivolous student of moral philosophy would necessarily become more aware of his or her own moral beliefs and practices. The student's morality is turned into a reflective morality instead of remaining the unreflected-upon mores of some larger social group. This awareness is brought about by forced understanding of divergent moralities and, at least in some classrooms, by the forced application of the student's own morals to particularly problematic situations (hypothetical or historical). Along with this heightened awareness must come an increased awareness of the morality of the other. This is brought about in the forced exposure to moralities which diverge from that of the student and, in some classrooms, by forcing the students to apply the divergent moralities to a problem situation.

There are several possible interesting consequences of this increased awareness. One student may discover that she really has no morals at all (assuming this is a theoretical possibility). For example, she may realize that she does not endorse any of the values of any system of ethics. Another student may find out that, whatever he does, he does merely to avoid punishment by authority figures. Yet another may discover that her morals are utterly contradictory, e.g., that she endorses divine command hedonism. Someone else may find out that his morals contain nonmoral relics from childhood, e.g., that being neatly groomed has the same moral status as telling the truth. A fifth student may discover that her “real” morals are evil. For example, though she insists to herself that she is a devout Christian, she comes to realize that her most important value is personal success regardless of the cost to others. Finally, the student can come to an awareness of the “unsavory” implications of certain moral beliefs. This is occasionally evident in those students who endorse some sort of divine command conception of morality, i.e., moral principles are equivalent to the commands of God. One implication of this conception that some find unacceptable is that if moral rules are the commands of God then it simply makes no sense to claim that God commands us to act a certain way because so acting is good.

Now it should be evident that this attempted vindication of teaching ethics (in terms of expanded awareness) assumes that if consequences such as these obtain, then further changes will be prompted in the student: for instance, that she will adopt a morality or rectify the incoherence of her morals or that he will change his morals because they are evil or have unacceptable implications. There is a definite connection between knowledge and action in teaching moral philosophy.

In the fight for their life within the academy, moral philosophy teachers offer another vindication of the profession which pertains even more closely to action on the part of the student. The reason for studying applied ethics is (so it is claimed) that the student’s ability to reason about moral issues will be improved. Presumably, this refinement of casuistical abilities follows from the increased awareness of one’s own moral beliefs and from practice at applying principles to cases.

The issue of sophistry enters precisely at this point. Both justifications for the study of moral philosophy ultimately rest on the assumption that students of moral philosophy will become morally better persons (as both Kant and Aristotle argued they should). If this does not occur, then teaching moral philosophy degenerates into sheer sophistry. As a cynic recently argued, teaching of business ethics merely serves to furnish the practitioners of morally suspect business activities with sophisticated means of justifying what they will do, even in the absence of such rationalizations. (I suppose the most preposterous example of this sort of thing was Eichmann’s appeal to Kantian ethics to justify his obedience to orders.) So, to avoid sophistical pedagogy, the teaching of moral philosophy must succeed in bringing about the moral improvement of its students.

This improvement involves bringing about two quite distinct changes; the

student must be brought to awareness, and that awareness must be translated into changed practice. Which task is emphasized depends ultimately on one's metaphysical conception of the relation between knowledge of the good (what is right and wrong) and action. On one side is the Platonic-Socratic conception whereby no one knowingly does wrong, i.e., knowledge of the good is sufficient for right action. On the other side is the Christian conception that knowledge of the good (i.e., God's will) is only necessary for right action and choice is needed (i.e., it is possible knowingly to do wrong). Unfortunately, the danger of sophistry is present in moral instruction regardless of the metaphysical stance. For those students who never apprehend the good, moral philosophy will only serve to provide them with sophisticated rationalization for the pursuit of illusory goods and, for those who choose wrongly in spite of their apprehension of the good, moral philosophy will enhance their capacity to rationalize their wrongdoing.

So, in order to avoid sophistry, the instructor must do everything possible to enhance the student's awareness and to put that enhanced awareness into action. The first task is probably the easier. All the standard classroom work in ethics instruction contributes to that effort. The second task, however, is especially liable to failure due to student estrangement from the instructor and thereby from philosophy as such. This estrangement can arise from two causes which are peculiar to the moral philosophy classroom.

The first occasion for student alienation arises if the student is in fundamental disagreement with the morals of the professor. For example, the student may find out that the teacher signed a petition against abortion, which was published in a local newspaper. If this disagreement goes deep enough, i.e., if the issue is one about which the student really cares, then the effect on pedagogy can be devastating. The student may simply reject the philosophical approach to morality as merely a way of "making the weaker argument appear stronger." Pedagogy which is tolerant of difference and respectful of divergent judgment may go some distance in minimizing such rejection. In the best case the student would leave the course better able to articulate and defend his/her own position and would have a better understanding of arguments for the opposing view. This in itself is cause for hope since being more aware does increase the possibility that if one's conscience is in error then it is culpably in error. All are agreed that improved understanding is a necessary condition for moral improvement. However, added to this is a second source of student alienation which does not depend on the content of the instructor's morals.

In this second case the alienation is occasioned if the student suspects that there is a radical discontinuity between the moral beliefs of the teacher and the actual actions of the teacher. In other words, the student regards the teacher as a hypocrite. In this instance moral philosophizing is dismissed as fraudulent because it appears that what one thinks is utterly irrelevant to what one does. If the ethics teacher blatantly lacks the very virtues he extols, then not only will cynicism about moral philosophy arise but warranted cynicism about morality in general may follow. If the teacher of ethics really is a sophist, then what is

taught should be dismissed. Because morality is essentially connected to action, teaching morality and leading an immoral life presents the student with an utterly incongruous role model, which, as every educator knows, is devastating to pedagogy.

Resisting these two corruptive influences places a tremendous burden on anyone with pretensions of teaching morality. In order to teach well, one must effect a change in the moral character of one's students and, in order to ensure that, it really is necessary to practice just what you preach.

Now it is obvious to all of us who studied morals with Bob Reuman that he is the moral philosopher and ethics teacher par excellence. He was extraordinarily patient with and tolerant of students whose morals diverged radically from his own. From the student's perspective this was especially admirable since, as would become evident during the course of instruction, Bob's own moral commitments were so strong. His consistent and persistent practice of respectful pedagogy in the ethics classroom virtually eliminated student estrangement due to differences in fundamental moral commitments.

Against estrangement arising from incongruities in the life of the ethics teacher, Bob's life provided the best possible defense. I have not met anyone else in the American Philosophical Association to compare with Bob in respect to the continuity between theory and practice. All of the teachers of ethics I know have little experience beyond the confines of their own North American suburban middle-class culture. And though most of them really are deeply concerned about morality, that concern is not translated into actions other than taking stands on curricular matters or signing petitions. This seems so far removed from the lives of the great exemplars of moral virtue (those who can't, teach!). The problem with having a moral mediocrity for an ethics instructor centers on the content of the academic discipline. Moral philosophy is not like other subjects taught in the academy since it ultimately concerns how to live the best life. In a sense, the life being led by the person who is teaching the subject is itself part of the curriculum. And because of his own morally exemplary life, Bob not only completely eliminated the corruptive influence of the incongruous role model, he provided a positive inspiration to his students. *It is possible to live the best life.*