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Why Ethics Should be on the Critical Thinking Syllabus

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Abstract:
Critical thinking texts typically treat ethical reasoning as being in principle no different from non-moral types of reasoning. I argue that there are two distinctive types of ethical argument—those which appeal to principles of right and wrong conduct, and those which appeal to consequences—and that they cannot be properly understood or assessed on the basis of non-ethical models of reasoning. The failure to recognize this produces a simplistic understanding of ethical reasoning, and contributes to the view that ethical judgments are mere expressions of personal feelings.

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1. Introduction

Critical thinking texts usually ignore ethical reasoning. I don't mean by this that they fail to include examples of ethical arguments, for they typically do. But these examples are always treated as presenting no distinctively ethical features, at least not of a sort that would have any bearing on the way the argument is assessed. For example, the following argument,

> P. Most people donate part of their income to charity.
> C. Therefore, you ought to donate part of your income to charity.

might be used to illustrate the fallacy of appeal to popularity. The fact that the conclusion makes an ethical claim is incidental to the assessment of the argument. In addition, many critical thinking texts deal with the evaluative uses of language, and this usually includes a discussion of the ethical language and how it differs from the non-ethical use of language. But there is never any recognition of the fact that ethical reasoning has features that distinguish it from non-ethical types of reasoning. Nor is there any explicit recognition of the possibility that ethical arguments as such can be strong.

Most likely this dismissal of ethical reasoning is a result of the fact that authors of critical thinking texts believe that ethics is fundamentally non-rational. If, as is commonly held in intellectual circles, there is no rational way of proving or justifying any ethical view, then it seems to follow that any reasoning that might be used in an attempt to justify an ethical statement must necessarily be non-rational. Any attempt to provide a sound argument to support some ethical conclusion must inevitably fail since ethical reasoning is inherently bad reasoning. There may be other factors that help account for the neglect of ethical reasoning. Even if ethics does have a rational basis, it may be argued that it is impossible to teach principles of good ethical reasoning because students are so strongly committed to a belief in the irrationality of all ethical reasoning that a critical thinking course that denies this is likely to be seen as suspect. Whatever the reason, the outcome is the same: it is impossible to find, in any critical thinking text, a paradigm of good ethical reasoning with which bad ethical reasoning can be contrasted.

I want to argue that this failure to recognize the existence of strong ethical reasoning is (a) without any reasonable basis, and (b) morally bad, or at least morally regrettable. In my view, critical thinking courses should be

designed in such a way that ethical reasoning is not systematically excluded. In what follows, I will first describe two types of ethical reasoning. With respect to each of them, I claim (i) that they are familiar to everyone; (ii) that they carry weight in the personal deliberations of virtually everyone; (iii) that their strength is (in part at least) a function of their distinctively ethical features, and (iv) that each is open to assessment based upon how well it satisfies these distinctively ethical features. Next, I will address the challenge raised by the sceptic, a challenge which purports to show that the attempt to find rational strength in moral arguments is doomed to failure. Here I attempt to show that there is a good sense in which strong ethical reasoning can survive the attacks of the sceptics. Finally, I conclude with a brief discussion of the morally bad consequences of the neglect of ethical reasoning.

2. Consequentialist Moral Reasoning

The first type of moral reasoning I want to consider is that which rests on the appeal to consequences. The most common version of this type of moral reasoning is utilitarianism which holds that an agent should choose, from among the actions open to that agent, the action that will likely produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number of beings affected by it. Everyone is familiar with this type of reasoning for we encounter it on a daily basis. Here is a typical example:

> P1. Next Sunday is Tom's mother's birthday.
> P2. If Tom doesn't visit his mother next Sunday she will be extremely hurt.
> P3. Visiting his mother next Sunday would not inconvenience Tom.
> C. Therefore Tom ought to visit his mother next Sunday.

But such arguments are not merely familiar to everyone, they also carry weight for virtually everyone and not merely utilitarians. I am not claiming that the above argument is conclusive; I am making the more modest claim that it carries weight. I mean this in the following sense. A person who accepts the premises of this argument but is not moved or inclined as a result to accept the conclusion, would be expected to provide an explanation for their failure to accept the conclusion. In the absence of such an explanation their attitude would be regarded as extremely peculiar, even unintelligible. In other words, there is a presumption that a normal person who accepts the premises would also accept the conclusion unless there is some intervening reason not to do so. Thus, we would find it extremely puzzling if Tom responded by saying that he accepts the premises but denies the conclusion because he doesn't agree that the premises provide any support for the conclusion. We would understand him if he said he was angry with his mother because of her interfering ways, and was refusing to visit her on her birthday to make a point. We would understand him if he said he was bound by an overriding promise to do something incompatible with visiting his mother. But if he denied that the premises gave him any reason at all to visit his mother, we would find him unintelligible. Surely only a psychopath would hold such a view.

Why does this type or reasoning carry weight? The answer surely lies in the fact that it expresses the idea that each person should seek to produce good in the world. To deny that this idea carries weight is tantamount to denying that producing goodness is a reason for action. There is of course more to utilitarianism than the claim that producing goodness is a reason for action. But the appeal of utilitarianism is surely derived in part from its reliance on this notion. The notorious difficulty of defining the good is of course a large problem for utilitarians, but does not alter the fact that each of us thinks that producing good, understood in whatever way we think is appropriate, supplies us with an unproblematic reason for acting. Historically, utilitarianism has defined the good in various ways: in terms of pleasure and pain, in terms of happiness, and more recently in terms of welfare or

well-being. Whatever disagreements there may be about the true nature of the good, however, are independent of this particular method of moral reasoning. And the fact that there is widespread agreement on a broad range of instances of good states of affairs (health and freedom, for example) means that disagreements over the definition of good do not subvert arguments that appeal to consequences. It is also true that there are important debates about how we can make interpersonal comparisons of amounts of happiness (or good). But these disagreements are also independent of the method of reasoning that appeals to consequences. It is surely obvious that the appeal of the method rests on the fact that it expresses the view that we should seek to produce good in the world, regardless of what we take the good to be and despite the difficulties there may be in determining the best strategy for doing so. We should remember that even Kant, the arch anti-utilitarian, accepts that there is a duty of beneficence. Doing good can really be seen as a kind of moral imperative for everyone. My claim that such arguments carry weight for virtually everyone thus amounts to the claim that it is virtually impossible for rational beings to deny outright a claim that the good, whether their own or that of others, is always a reason for action, albeit not necessarily a conclusive reason.

It is a mistake to think that the typical ethical egoist denies this. The typical ethical egoist only wants to resist the claim that he or she ought to prefer the good of others to their own good. An ethical egoist who goes beyond this and tries to claim that there is never any reason to attach any weight at all to the good of others is carrying egoism to such an extreme that it ceases to be an ethical position at all. As I indicated earlier, such a person is indistinguishable from a psychopath.

How is such reasoning open to rational criticism? To answer this question we need to look briefly at the three main features of this type of argument. First, all the alternative actions open to the agent must be considered. There must be at least two — otherwise there would be no need for deliberation or choice — but there may be more than two, depending on the features of the situation. In the above example there may appear to be only two alternatives, viz., Tom's visiting his mother, and Tom's not visiting his mother. But the second alternative embraces a number of different possibilities: if Tom doesn't visit his mother he might just stay at home and watch television. Or he might study for a test. Or he might do volunteer work at the local food bank. Since each of these alternative actions would have different consequences, each must be considered in order to determine which will likely have the best overall consequences.

Second, the method requires us to predict the likely consequences of each alternative insofar as they involve the creation of happiness of unhappiness. The predictions called for are sometimes difficult to make, and in such circumstances we must simply do the best we can. The method doesn't require us to make correct predictions, but only to make the best predictions we can under the circumstances. What is crucial is that we make a serious effort to cover all the consequences. We must consider long term consequences just as much as short term. We must make sure that everyone who might be affected is considered. We must also take into account the probabilities associated with these various consequences. These predictions, it should be noted, are mainly of an empirical nature, although there will be some cases where the imprecision of the concept of happiness presents a difficulty. These cases are, however, more the exception than the rule. Usually, such difficulties do not arise. For example, the prediction that my cousin will experience happiness as a result of my giving him a present of a bottle of malt whisky is surely an unproblematic empirical judgment. Similarly with the prediction that people prefer being healthy to being ill.

Third, we must make a comparative judgment in which the net happiness that each alternative will likely produce is compared, and the action which produces the greatest net happiness is chosen. Sometimes this will not be an easy task, for the final decision may turn on exactly how we have defined happiness or on the question of how

the happiness or unhappiness is distributed rather than on the total amount of happiness. But in most cases the decision will be quite straightforward and uncontroversial. However, it is important that in weighing these consequences each person's happiness is to count equally. In Bentham's memorable phrase, "Everybody to count for one, no-body for more than one."

Given these features it is clear that there are several different types of rational criticisms that can be brought to bear on specific instances of the appeal to consequences. (1) Not all the alternatives have been considered. This is a common failing in real-life applications of utilitarianism. For example, people sometimes argue that welfare schemes ought to be abolished because they create a dependency that makes it impossible for recipients ever to become self-supporting, but they fail to consider the alternative of reforming the welfare system. The implicit premise of such reasoning is that there are only two alternatives: maintaining the present system and abolishing it. This is a false dichotomy because it ignores other alternatives.

(2) Not all the consequences of some alternative have been considered. Someone who wants to build a consequentialist case against relaxing current euthanasia policies may overlook the impact that the legalization of euthanasia would likely have on health care costs. It is a very common failing in consequentialist reasoning to leave out of account certain consequences, and anyone who does so can legitimately be criticized for their failure.

(3) The consequences have not been weighed in an impartial manner. Typically this will arise because some questionable judgments about the amount of happiness or unhappiness have been made. For example, someone might decide that the happiness people get from watching soap operas is less weighty than the happiness that people get from attending the theatre. There are many pitfalls here, and there will always be plenty of room for challenge and correction. And there will be some cases where two reasonable people will simply disagree about a judgment. You and I may disagree on whether the pleasure I receive from a glass of malt whisky is greater than the pleasure you receive from a glass of beer, and there may be no rational way of resolving this disagreement. However, disagreements of this type do not typically play a significant role in assessing appeals to consequences. In most cases such disagreements don't make enough difference to change the final outcome.

Thus we can see that consequentialist arguments in support of ethical conclusions have a rational character which makes them subject to rational scrutiny. Anyone who attempts to justify some action or policy on consequentialist grounds can legitimately be challenged on any of the grounds mentioned. Let me repeat, however, the limitation on my claim that I mentioned above, viz, that even at their strongest, such arguments are not conclusive but do carry weight in our deliberations.

3. Appeals to Principles of Right and Wrong

The second type of moral reasoning is the Kantian type of appeal to a principle of right or wrong conduct. Once again, this is a type of argument which virtually everyone recognizes and uses in their own deliberations. Here is an example:

> P1. Mary is aware that her employer is involved in making pornographic videos involving young children.
> P2. Everyone has a duty to protect children from sexual abuse.
> C. Mary ought to inform the police of her employer's activities.

Ethical arguments of this type are different from consequentialist arguments in that they include an ethical principle as a premise. As a result, they seem not merely to carry weight in the sense mentioned above but seem to be conclusive. But this appearance is misleading because the full argument would have to include the sub-argument used to support P2. This sub-argument might take the following form:

> P3. Mary would not agree that it would be morally acceptable for others to refuse to protect her children from sexual abuse.

The force of this sub-argument can best be described in the form of a dialogue between the speaker who presents the above argument and someone who accepts P1 but resists the conclusion. This person might be Mary herself, but need not be. Suppose Mary says she rejects P2. The speaker can then challenge Mary as follows: "Your rejection of P2 means that you think it morally acceptable for people to refuse to seek to protect children from sexual abuse. Can you honestly say that you would take this view if your own children were being sexually abused and people who could have prevented it did nothing?" This type of challenge is one that is well known to moral philosophers who usually term it the generalization argument. Its effect is to place the person against whom it is directed on the horns of a dilemma. A person who embraces (or rejects) a specific principle of right or wrong conduct must permit everyone else to embrace (or reject) that principle in circumstances — real or hypothetical — where it would have unwanted effects on that person. If I tell you lies, I cannot object if you tell me lies. If I demand that students who cheat should be expelled I cannot object if my son is expelled for cheating. Those who live by the sword must be prepared to die by the sword.

We are all familiar with the fundamental moral intuition that underlies this type of reasoning, namely the idea that hypocrisy is wrong. If I invoke a principle to justify my actions I must by the same token grant to all others the right to use the same principle to justify their actions, even in circumstances where their actions may be harmful to me. No-one forced me to invoke the principle in the first place, but having done so I thereby authorize all others to use the principle whenever they choose. If I invoke a moral principle only when it suits me I am a hypocrite. It is saying something and not really meaning it. It is dishonest. It should not surprise us therefore that virtually everyone accepts the force of this type of reasoning.

Let us return to Mary and our original argument. The speaker has placed Mary on the horns of a dilemma. Either she must inform the police of her employer's activities or she must concede that it would be morally acceptable if her children were being sexually abused and those who knew about it refused to intervene. How can Mary respond to this challenge? There is room here for Mary to avoid both horns of the dilemma. She could argue that she doesn't want to reject P2 but only to qualify it. She could claim that she accepts a different principle, viz., that everyone has a duty to protect children from sexual abuse except when doing so would risk their well-being. This would allow her to argue that the risk of losing her job would justify her in not informing the police. The speaker is of course free to repeat the challenge: Can you honestly say that you would take this view if your own children were being sexually abused and people who could have prevented it did nothing because they thought they might lose their jobs? At this point Mary will have to attempt to persuade herself (and the speaker) that she really would feel no moral disapproval of those who refused to prevent her children from being sexually abused because they feared losing their jobs.

This brings us to the core of this type of reasoning. It is not a matter of saying certain words. Of course, in one sense Mary can avoid the moral condemnation of the speaker by saying that she would have no moral objection against those who refused to protect her children. However, the argument is not about whether she can say the words, but about whether she can mean what she says. One of the difficulties here is that even Mary may be

uncertain about whether she truly means what she says. If she doesn't have children of her own, she can only make an honest guess as to what her feelings would be if her hypothetical children were in such a hypothetical situation. And if Mary might have difficulty in doing so, then the speaker is clearly going to have even greater difficulty in deciding whether Mary is being sincere in what she says. Despite these difficulties, however, it is clear that in real life situations we often have little or no difficulty in making judgments we feel are reasonable, both about our own hypothetical feelings and about those of others. So even if such reasoning is not conclusive it nevertheless typically carries weight in our deliberations.

Thus, we can see how reasoning of this type can be open to rational objection. Anyone who invokes a moral principle of right and wrong conduct in order to justify some action can legitimately be called upon to show that they would also accept whatever judgments are made against them by others who make use of the principle. If they cannot do so persuasively then they can be called upon to withdraw their original judgment. The fact that we are sometimes unsure of whether a person's claim that they would accept the outcome when others use their principle against them is sincere does not vitiate this method of criticism. For sometimes we are justifiably confident in the judgments we make about others' sincerity or insincerity.

4. The Weight of Moral Arguments

I said at the beginning that the most likely reason why critical thinking texts ignore ethical reasoning is that it is assumed that there is no such thing as a strong ethical argument. The two types of moral reasoning I have described do, as a matter of empirical fact, carry weight for almost everyone. I think that attaching weight to these types of reasoning is legitimate. But to defend this view I have to respond to those who argue that no ethical reasoning can ever really carry weight because all are logically flawed. The most troublesome argument of this type is that put forward by sceptics. They argue that all moral reasoning is a logical failure. The premises may appear to force us to accept the conclusion but do not really do so. A person who accepts the premises does not fall into contradiction by refusing to accept the conclusion. What rational or logical error, sceptics want to know, is such a person making? The answer, they insist, is that such a person is making no logical error. Consequently, sceptics are able to hold that reason is silent on all ethical matters. It follows that any argument that purports to present a good reason in support of some ethical conclusion is certain to be flawed. And for the last century or so moral philosophers have increasingly come to agree with the sceptics.

As long as we allow the sceptic to formulate the issue in terms of what can be proven in ethics the sceptic's challenge is unanswerable. But why should we accept this way of formulating the issue? The sceptic's argument assumes that the only acceptable reason for accepting a moral proposition is that we can prove it on the basis of reasoning that respects all the canons of rationality. But this is an extremely strong requirement, one which on reflection it is impossible to adhere to in general. Consider first its implications for ethical belief. I cannot rationally prove that the holocaust was evil; it seems self-evident to me, but I know enough philosophy to know that self-evidence is no proof at all. Should I therefore suspend judgment on the question whether the holocaust was evil? Surely not. But this is exactly what follows from the demand that we should accept nothing unless it can be proven on the basis of rational argument.

But the sceptic's requirement does not even make sense for empirical claims. Scepticism also creates the problem of induction, i.e., that we cannot prove that the future will resemble the past. But if we cannot assume that the future will resemble the past, most of science has to be rejected. So if we let the sceptics have their way we would have to jettison most of science. Consider also the ordinary empirical claims that most of us make with

regard to such matters as the movement of the planets. I believe that the earth rotates around the sun, but I could not possible prove this to be so on the basis of rational arguments. All I can do is give a weak justification for my belief in terms accepting certain authorities. If the sceptic's requirement is to be followed strictly I should give up my belief that the earth rotates around the sun until I can prove it for myself. It is therefore quite unreasonable to demand that we should accept only claims which we can justify on the basis of rational argument. No reasonable person would ever do so for empirical claims. So why should we do so with respect to moral claims? There is no critical thinking text in existence that adopts this approach to empirical statements. Why then, do so many implicitly adopt such an approach to moral argument?

The appropriate response to the sceptic is to acknowledge that moral propositions cannot be proven to be true in anything like the sense in which mathematical or empirical propositions can be proven to be true. This is what I have tried to express above by acknowledging that the two types of moral reasoning do not conclusively establish the truth of their conclusions. The claim that moral arguments can carry weight in practical deliberations, however, is immune to the sceptic's challenge which is really a challenge only against claims to truth.

Surely there can be nothing irrational or epistemically irresponsible in adopting a stance whereby we stick by our current beliefs until such time as we meet an objection that is weighty enough to persuade us to give them up. In the case of empirical beliefs it is a matter of making reasonable judgments about the sources we take to be authoritative. In the case of ethical beliefs it is usually a matter of paying attention to ethical objections to our current beliefs. In practice this means listening to and seeking to come to grips with both the types of moral arguments described above. The only thing of moral significance we can learn from the sceptic is that we are never in a position to be able to claim moral certainty. For that we would need to have moral arguments that are conclusive. But as we have seen, moral arguments of the sort I have described are always less than conclusive, although they do indeed carry real moral weight.

Finally, I need to say something about the bad consequences of the failure to recognize the rational nature of moral reasoning. My objection is not merely that critical thinking texts ignore a significant type of reasoning. My fundamental objection is that there are morally bad consequences to this dismissal of moral reasoning. I think it encourages students to take the view that all moral judgment is purely personal. It is "mere opinion" to use the current vernacular. When someone says that Tom ought to visit his mother next weekend, or that Mary ought to inform the police of her employer's activities, these are to be understood as nothing more than expressions of my personal sense of what is right and wrong for me, and that is all that can be said about the matter. These opinions are not right or wrong in any objective sense, they are merely my opinions. There is no room for any reasoned debate and argument. And there is certainly no reason to listen to those who would criticize us since we know in advance that they are wrong because the fact that they want to criticize us means that they believe they have the truth, which is impossible. We can listen to others whose views are different from ours, but this we can intelligibly do only when a conflicting view strikes us as interesting. We might even change our minds about some important moral issue, but if we do so it will not be because we have been persuaded that we are in error, for there is nothing in principle that could ever show that a moral view is erroneous.

Anyone who teaches undergraduates will recognize the kind of attitude I am describing. It has a very deep hold on most undergraduates, fostered as it is by some very respectable and widely held views in contemporary society. (1) Science deals with fact; all else is mere opinion. Arguing about opinion is utterly useless because by definition only factual differences can be settled (by appealing to the facts). (2) Values and value judgments are best understood as weapons. I attempt to exercise power over those around me by trying to get them to agree with my personal values. To the extent that I am able to do so I am able to control and manipulate them as I

want. (3) Values define what we are as individuals. So when I attempt to persuade another person that their values are wrong I am attacking their very self identity. If I am to show respect for the integrity of others I must respect their values. I think all three of these views are complex and ambiguous; they are not necessarily false, but are often misinterpreted in a way that fosters the view that ethical views are purely personal and that it is inappropriate to subject them to rational or critical scrutiny. The argument I have tried to develop in this paper is that ethical judgments can legitimately be subjected to rational scrutiny. The fact that there is so much in contemporary society that militates against this view makes it even more important that critical thinking courses not acquiesce in a view that is ultimately untenable.

5. Conclusion

I believe I have shown that there are at least two types of moral reasoning which (a) legitimately carry weight in our moral deliberations, and (b) are subject to rational appraisal on the basis of features that are part of the moral nature of the reasoning. I have not argued that anyone is under any rational obligation to use either of these types of reasoning. But I do argue that there are strong practical reasons why people want to use them, and once they do so, they can properly be subject to rational appraisal of the sort I have described. I do not disagree with any of the sceptic's arguments, but there is nothing in what these arguments that undermines either of the types of moral reasoning I have described. Consequently, any text book that claims to teach students how to improve their reasoning skills contains a major lacuna if it is silent on moral reasoning. And such silence only gives aid and comfort to all the moral red-necks who beset us.