

Discussing questions of comparative metaethics first, before introducing classical moral theories, is a more descriptively honest and culturally inclusive approach to teaching ethics.

Introduce Moral Theories Last

Embracing the inherent diversity and messiness of morality, rather than replacing it wholesale with various Western stencils, is descriptively honest. Moral theories have their place, but they are posterior to human cultures and behaviors, not prior to them. In Nietzschean terms, it is better to face the complexity of reality with courage, rather than flee into the ideal [6] —and we should help our students do just that.

What if we, as teachers of ethics, began by encouraging students to challenge their own prior assumptions, rather than giving them the impression that all of morality is necessarily embedded within a particular (Western) worldview? What if moral theories were introduced only *after* initial questions of comparative metaethics had been discussed? This “First Things First” model is necessarily broader and more culturally inclusive, and may help to prevent natural tendencies toward theoretical rigidity, which can easily develop when studying moral philosophy. Such an alternative approach to the introduction of ethics would hopefully inspire students to embrace the inherent messiness of moral decision-making.

REFERENCES

[1] For example, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* by James and Stuart Rachels (McGraw-Hill, 2007, Fifth Ed.) assumes moral theory and methods of moral reasoning from the outset.

[2] For example, see Berniunas, Renatas et al. “Beyond the Moral Domain: The Normative Sense Among the Chinese.” *Psichologija*, vol. 60, pp. 86-105 (2019), and “Mongolian *yos surtakhuun* and WEIRD ‘morality.’” *Journal of Cultural Cognitive Science*, vol. 4, pp. 59-71 (2020)

[3] For example, see Wierzbicka, Anna. “Moral sense”. *Journal of Social, Evolutionary, and Cultural Psychology*, vol. 1 (3), pp. 66-85.

[4] Stich, Stephen. “Is Morality an Elegant Machine or a Kludge?” *Journal of Cognition and Culture*, vol. 6 (1-2), pp. 181-189 (2006).

[5] de Sousa, Ronnie. “Forget Morality.” Aeon, 23 July 2021, aeon.co/essays/five-reasons-why-moral-philosophy-is-distracting-and-harmful. Accessed 12 Jan. 2022.

[6] Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Twilight of the Idols*. Oxford University Press, 2008.

Introduction

What is morality? Is there a principled distinction between moral and non-moral norms? If so, what is it? Do all cultures have moral concepts? And if so, how do they differ between groups? How do cultural, societal, and educational forces shape our conceptions of morality? These questions appear fundamental, and even necessary, to any substantive discussion of morality, and yet they are typically treated as an afterthought, tacked on at the end of ethics courses, if they are discussed at all. This approach seems backward. I really think we ought to teach ethics in *reverse*.

Comparative Metaethics & Non-Western Moral Thinking

Many introductory ethics courses begin with a definition of “morality”, followed by an instruction (explicit or implied) to choose one of three main moral theories.[1] Not only does this common approach rely on initial assumptions which themselves are up for debate, it largely excludes (or precludes) conceptions of morality and ways of thinking engaged in by people outside of Western societies. Research in comparative metaethics has demonstrated that ethical reasoning across cultures often does not fit neatly into deontological or consequentialist molds, arising mainly from concerns for harm and fairness.[2] And there is indication that some non-Western cultures may not even have distinctly “moral” concepts at all.[3]

Ethics is Messy

Morality, culturally observed, has been described as a *kludge*, “a hodgepodge of psychological mechanisms that are often in competition with one another” for which “culture... provides much of the content of the rules or principles” that underlie it.[4] As such, neat ethical theories are attempts to wrangle, systematize, and simplify something that is by itself inconsistent and *messy*. This leads to a situation where “adhering to them consistently is impossible, and so each system is forced into incoherence by setting arbitrary limits to its own scope.”[5] So, before rushing to set such limits, I think we ought to help students acknowledge the rough edges.

First Things First—An Alternative Approach to the Introduction of Ethics

THANKS TO:
Lance S. Bush, Amanda Corris, Center for
Cognitive Sciences at UMN, and Peter Hanks

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