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'When Great Tao vanished, we got "Goodness and Morality"'

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Modules in ethics have become astonishingly popular at the University of the Western Cape. This could reflect students' concern about morality, but the saying by Lafargue in *Tao te ching* in the title suggests that moral discourse flourishes when moral behaviour is languishing. This article reflects on some 15 years of teaching ethical theory to third-year students. Three trends are identified: (1) Students' responses to the theories are unpredictable and surprising. Nietzsche and Kant are very popular, although some modern 'contextual' theories draw less support. (2) Students who can be extremely moralistic in class are sometimes amoral in their practices and offhand pronouncements. (3) Students are hampered by their poor conceptual skills and rely excessively on memorising. The last two trends raise questions about our teaching of ethics and the ethics of our teaching. Although many students embrace character-based theories, to some 'a good character' apparently means 'what makes me feel good about myself' and to others 'what makes me look good to my group'. Thus, they effectively embrace either individual relativism or group relativism, which is understandable when theories are presented without the backing of at least a rudimentary philosophical anthropology. Questions of indoctrination become acute in the teaching of ethics. Are we, in the name of moral formation, teaching students to parrot current dogmas presented without arguments? If so, our practice may be both morally dubious and counterproductive. The best students rebel against such manipulation. The article calls for more reflection on how and to what ends we teach ethics.

Keywords: Teaching ethics; Indoctrination; Moral discourse; Philosophical anthropology; *Tao te ching*.

The curious popularity of ethics as a subject at the University of the Western Cape

The Department of Religion and Theology introduced ethics as a major in the Faculty of Arts at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) about 20 years ago. After a shaky start, it became wildly popular. Currently, we try, unsuccessfully, to cap first-year enrolment at 700. By the third year, there are still regularly over 200 students in each of the four modules.

Students sometimes flock to subjects that they regard as relatively easy. The pass rates in ethics, however, have been below average. In the modules 311 and 312, pass rates have seldom been much over 60%, which is very low for third-year modules. This has not deterred students. Perhaps they are drawn by the perceived importance of ethics in our world and the moral crisis in South Africa in particular. Since Nelson Mandela's call for the 'strengthening of the moral fibre of society', public morality has become a hot topic. Larger organisations are now required to have ethics officers and clear policies on workplace ethics. To meet the need, there is a system to produce accredited ethics practitioners.

The results have been very disappointing. Racism is probably more prevalent now than it had been 20 years ago. Corruption in both the private and the public sectors is rife. The country is notorious for violence against women and children. Cape Town has an alarming murder rate. That students are drawn to the study of ethics is no reason for rejoicing as long as the impact on society remains imperceptible.

Perhaps there is a relationship between the interest in ethics in academia and the moral chaos in society. The quotation from the *Tao te ching* in the article title suggests that moral discourse flourishes when people no longer spontaneously do what is good, when they have lost the 'way' (Tao).[1] 'Goodness and morality' (*i* and *jen*) are by no means moral qualities of lower rank. *Jen*,

1.Lafarge's comment (1992:27) on the saying is: '[W]hen people start talking a lot about 'Goodness', you know something is wrong'.

Note: Special collection entitled Ethics, education and social justice, sub-edited by John Klaasen (UWC).

sometimes translated as 'humaneness', is the cornerstone of Confucian ethics and involves the love of others. The Taoist objection is not to the qualities as such, but to the need to theorise morality by distinguishing and defining a variety of moral qualities. Those who conform to the Tao will exhibit the qualities without feeling the need to name them.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1963) speaks in a similar vein in his *Ethics.* Quoting from FT Vischer, he says, 'Morality is always self-evident': it 'goes without saying' (Bonhoeffer 1963:231). When he says that 'the knowledge of good and evil seems to be the aim of all ethical reflection' but that the task of Christian ethics is 'to invalidate this knowledge' (Bonhoeffer 1963:3), he makes the same point that the *Tao te ching* makes. When the good is theorised, judging replaces spontaneous doing (Bonhoeffer 1963:16). Therefore, he lashes out against 'over-loaded and over-obtrusive' moral discourse (Bonhoeffer 1963:231) and 'the pathological overburdening of life by the ethical' (Bonhoeffer 1963:233).

When 'the moral course' is not followed or has become questionable, there *is* a need for 'the ethical as a theme' (Bonhoeffer 1963:234–235), for carefully considering universal principles. This, he notes, is a time of temporary simplification of the debates. The upper stratum of society, which is 'predominantly intellectual, relativistic and individualistic', has to step back so that there can be public discussion and everybody 'can take part in the debate' (Bonhoeffer 1963:234f). What he envisages is clearly not a proliferation of learned books and theses on moral dilemmas.

Thus, the growing interest in ethics at UWC can be seen in two ways. It may be frantic moral flag waving by those who have lost the way and cling to the ethical theme because they feel an 'incapacity for life' (Bonhoeffer 1963:236). Their 'trite and jejune moralization and pedantic regimentation of the whole of life' then signal a retreat into a position 'at the same time arrogant and envious' Bonhoeffer (1963:235f). It may also indicate a re-asserting of moral principles, a temporary simplification to 'purify and restore the human community' (Bonhoeffer 1963:235).

Three tendencies

Which of these applies to students at UWC, I do not know. What experience I have of ethics students has been gained mainly through the teaching of Ethics 312 over the last 15 years: I have not taught other modules in ethics for some time. Ethics 312, Ethical Theory or Moral Philosophy,[2] is frankly a survey course. It introduces students to some, by no means all, of the major positions and arguments in the field (see the Appendix for the work currently covered). Although one student wrote on an evaluation form that the module 'changed my life', that is hardly the envisaged outcome.

What is presented here is based mainly on observation, not systematic research. After delivering a draft of this as an article, I checked some of my observation with the class of 2019. The majority of the examples are taken from this group. The tendencies, however, have been observed in all classes. The data come from evaluation forms, personal communications and work presented by students in assignments, tests and examinations. Regarding the written work, the focus is on two factors: what students choose and how well (with what degree of understanding) they deal with certain questions.

The inputs of the very weakest and very strongest students have generally been disregarded except when it comes to their choices. The former students show so little understanding or even basic knowledge of the various theories that their views contribute nothing of value. Some of them rarely attend classes. The latter's views, although highly interesting, represent outliers. The tendencies discussed here can be observed among average students.

1. The first 'regularity' is that there is no highly significant regularity: on the whole, students' responses to the theories presented to them are unpredictable and sometimes surprising. By no means, all women are enthusiastic about Carol Gilligan's ethics of care and the ones who are often misinterpret her. In spite of warnings, some women (and men) keep writing that Gilligan is right because 'women are more ruled by emotions than men' (or words to this effect), although Gilligan (1987:19) explicitly denies that this is what she is saying. That not all Africans are drawn to African ethics can be seen in their weak and unenthusiastic answers. Some of the weaker students simply present their personal views of what African ethics entails. Their answers are vague and usually amount to repeating 'Ubuntu' at intervals and filling the gaps with anecdotes. The questions, of course, concern the views of specific African scholars, but these are sometimes not even mentioned. (Student, UWC, 2018)

Utilitarianism is not very popular either, although this may be because students sense my own lack of enthusiasm. Still, not even the social reformist implications of the original theory, which is pointed out to them, excite many students. The exceptions are those who misunderstand the maximising principle as saying 'choose that act that has the best consequences for *everyone*' and those who, more vaguely still, believe that this theory (and no other?) simply means that one should not consider only one's own interests. But these are obviously very weak students. Many students find aspects of MacIntyre's view attractive, particularly his emphasis on tradition (cf. MacIntyre 2007:221ff.) and his criticism of the 'Enlightenment project'. Their understanding of MacIntyre, however, leaves much to be desired. Interestingly, Dunbar Moody, in a personal communication, said that students at Berkeley also struggle with MacIntyre. He ascribed this to their lack of a historical frame of reference, which is presupposed in MacIntyre's work.

The great favourites are undoubtedly Aristotle, Kant and, surprisingly, Nietzsche. Aristotle, to be sure, is not that difficult and the notion of character-based ethics generally appeals to students (see below). Kant's sternness may appeal to the more moralistic students, of which there are many, but

2. Until recently, the module, with two different names and codes, served both ethics and philosophy students and was co-taught by a lecturer in philosophy.

that does not explain why so many show a firm grasp of the basics of his theory.[3] One or two have told me that it takes time to follow Kant's line of argument. Afterwards, however, it sticks in the mind. This rings true, because there is an element of clockwork precision in his train of thought.

I introduced Nietzsche into the course with trepidation, fearing that his strident atheism would offend our many highly religious students. Moreover, I present Nietzsche as the 'unabashed elitist' (Solomon 1984:347) that he was and leave to others the 'rather systematic whitewashing' (Solomon as quoted in Berry 2015:381) that underplays his consistent rejection of equality and compassion for the weak.[4] He proved wildly popular. The following quotation from the examination script of an African woman is not atypical:

> [*T*]he slaves thought the masters should treat them as equals simply out of the kindness of their hearts. Needless to say, Nietzsche thought this total nonsense. He had no respect for those who try to hide their cowardly little lives behind talk of equality and pity. (Student, UWC, 2018)

Perhaps not how Nietzsche would have put it, but surely in the spirit of Nietzsche. This year a student was downloading books by Nietzsche on her phone as soon as the first lecture on him ended.

I do not fully understand this. Is it the return of repressed? Or does Nietzsche appeal to the student mind across the boundaries of race, class and gender? This year a former student told me that he still dips into Nietzsche. He is drawn to Nietzsche's emphasis on struggle and his refusal to let his problems get him down, because he (the student) too had to overcome obstacles to succeed at the university. Perhaps, students from poor backgrounds who had to make sacrifices to get to where they are have scant respect for those who (in their view) lack Nietzschean *Zucht*.

This year I checked my impression regarding student preferences. In the first examination, students got questions on Kant, Aristotle, Gilligan and Gyekye and had to answer any three of the four. Of the 119 students who wrote, 41 evaded the question on Gilligan, 34 evaded the one on Gyekye, 18 evaded the one on Kant and 16 evaded the one on Aristotle. In the second examination, there were questions on Nietzsche, MacIntyre, Gilligan and Magesa. Nearly all the students answered the Nietzsche question. The remaining choices were roughly equally spread.

Divine command theory, cultural relativism and various forms of utilitarianism are dealt with early on and assessed in a test. Many religious students are initially drawn to divine command theory and abandon it reluctantly or not at all. Some are also drawn to cultural relativism, but the majority see the objections to it quite clearly. One particularly bright student told me that he came to the course a cultural relativist, but found it untenable afterwards. Among the forms of utilitarianism, preference utilitarianism seems the most popular. Rule uitilitarianism, as presented by Brad Hooker (2000), is generally badly understood, which is surprising. As objection to classic utilitarianism its reductive aspect – people are reduced to numbers – is most often cited, which is interesting.

The students' preference for Aristotle, Kant and Nietzsche[5] is reflected in the quality of their answers. Clearly, they take more trouble with what captures their interest. The point is that I could not have predicted what would interest them. Lecturers' assumptions about students' preferences need to be questioned.

2. Although students in general are very moralistic in classes and in their essays,[6] they often do not apply their high standards to themselves. Plagiarism remains rife: over the past three years, roughly 20% per year of all students were guilty of fairly serious plagiarism in their assignments. This excludes the minor infringements. They know how to fool anti-plagiarism software, by, for instance, making 'spelling mistakes' at intervals and omitting or doubling words. Some keep a thesaurus open and consult it to find synonyms. Many hand in suspicious medical certificate or affidavit to get more time for a test, examination or assignment. A good few want rules bent for them. When I point out that this would be unfair to other students and could get me into trouble, a standard reply is, 'I won't tell anyone'. (Student, UWC, 2018)

Amid much moralising, students also express some morally dubious views in class and particularly in assignments. In an assignment on euthanasia, quite a few students thought it was acceptable to get rid of people who have become a burden to society through age or sickness. Sexist views, although seldom expressed in class, surface in assignments. One student wrote that one of the most regrettable effects of Western influence on Africa has been that it brought education to women.[7] In an examination, one referred to Martha Nussbaum as 'an almost acceptable feminist'. In commenting on a particular reading, many female students explicitly note the sexism in certain social arrangements of the past; few men do. Although I have not encountered open homophobia in the class, my colleagues who teach gender ethics have.

How are lecturers to deal with this? It is certainly not our responsibility to engage in the moral formation of students, much less to force our views on them. The belief that simple

3. Obviously, they do not grasp all the intricacies, but neither do I. As Hill (2000:227) says, '[S]erious Kant scholars often disagree about interpretations'.

4. Ken Gemes (2001) carefully dissects the postmodern use and abuse of Nietzsche and indicates towards the end (354ff.) why certain perfectly clear aspects of Nietzsche's thought are glossed over.

5. Initially, I found it strange that students could name Kant and Nietzsche as their favourites, as many do. But when I asked a student about this choice recently, she gave a sensible reply: 'They are so completely opposite'. Perhaps facing this opposition squarely is a good place at which to start ethical thinking.

6. They get particularly indignant about corruption and various forms of social injustice. But many also express very strong views about abortion, the majority being firmly against it. This year again two students worked it into an assignment that had nothing to do with it.

7. This could be indicative of resentment because the female students, who make up around 60% of the class, regularly outperform the male ones. Of the 20 students in 2018 and the 13 in 2019 who got distinctions in the module, *all* were female.

knockdown arguments can settle all differences in matters of morality is naïve. The module itself indicates that cogent arguments can be advanced to support different views. Regarding 'burdens on society', a strict Utilitarian may well argue that utility can be maximised by eliminating 'useless' members of the population and that this will benefit the planet as well.

Still, to present the various views dispassionately would be neither possible nor necessarily desirable. In a subject such as this, lecturers owe their students some honesty concerning their own views *and their reasons for holding them*. Then they stand to be corrected instead of soaring above correction or lying beneath it. Surely that is what we want our students to do? Another response stated that:

3. Students in general are conceptually very weak. The results for the small test on concepts and distinction in ethical theory are invariably dismal. Obviously, some students are simply badly prepared and either know little or have understood little. Others, however, clearly struggle to articulate their thoughts. The following are examples from the 2019 class [*sic*]. (Student, UWC, 2018)

Strong determinism is when we have no control over what the effects of a given situation may be.

Weak determinism has little control over circumstances.

Emotivism simply put is reflecting one's preference through feelings.

Intuitionism is a feeling that is morally intertwined with our moral judgement that human beings have by nature.

Descriptive ethics is a non-judgemental form of defining the ways and reasons behind people's actions.

Ethical relativism is when moral rules are followed by a specific person or group.

Cultural relativism is the process whereby tolerance is the key virtue.

He (Bentham) believes in the hedonic calculus theory because he believes that pleasure and pain are more quantitative than qualitative.

When these sentences are read within the context of the full answers, they give evidence of conceptual ineptness rather than of total lack of understanding. The students had something relevant to say, but they failed to do so. Many students rely on memorising, at which they are often very good. Mindless memorising is evident when students, in discussing the question (derived ultimately from Plato), 'Is it good because God demands it or does God demand it because it is good?', attach the implications of the two possible answers (which they remember perfectly) to the wrong questions of the pair. Almost correct memorising also yields the answer that Kant said we should always treat others as ends only and never as means (switching the 'only').

The problem may go beyond mere lack of verbal skills. Some years ago, a student confided her great discovery to me: 'You can only study this work once you understand it' (or words to that effect). Two students this year blithely said that you are seldom required to think at the university. Many students find assignments in the module 'puzzling' because they are required to find and present their own arguments. This raises disturbing question about how we are teaching. When the philosophy students were still part of the class, they performed (on the average) very much better than the others, presumably because philosophy focuses on conceptual and argumentative skills from the start.

Virtue ethics and its discontents

On the whole, students seem to find the idea of ethics based on character, as opposed to rule-based ethics, appealing. They often grasp some of the advantages of this approach: It allows one to make exceptions to general rules, which are otherwise not context-sensitive enough. An ethics of being also accounts for the moral lapses of otherwise good people and for moral development. It feeds off those moral convictions that are 'the cumulative product of the reflection of many generations', which, as Ross (2002:40f.) argues, supply the only data for moral theorising. It explains why we encounter moral dilemmas to which there are neither deontological nor consequentialist solutions.

But soon it all falls apart. What does it mean to have a good character? Students tend to assume that it means either 'behaving in such a way that I feel good about myself (or satisfied or at ease with myself)' or 'behaving in such a way that I seem good to my group'. The former view is Aristotelian in that it is eudaimonistic, but it comes perilously close to individual relativism. Thus, some students, after delivering a moral harangue, say that they do not wish to not judge others, for 'we all have our own moral codes'. The approach lacks a basis for moral appeals. The latter view emphasises social harmony and is Aristotelian in its focus on public honour, but shades into group relativism. The obvious dangers, often coupled, are blind conformism and the pursuit of 'harmony by exclusion of others' (the nightmare of apartheid).

One has to sympathise with the students, for these are typical pitfalls of most forms of virtue ethics. Does Aristotle avoid them completely? As Michael Slote (2000:326) puts it, non-theoretical virtue ethics 'lacks a certain kind of generality'. It frees Nietzsche to specify an ethos that applies only to those who are *vornehm* and the Nazi SS to follow their code with its high, albeit perverted, sense of honour. Whenever virtue is defined in terms of a specific natural group or association, it implicitly excludes others. If it is defined in terms of an unspecifiable group of 'virtuous people', the argument is patently circular. That is why Slote (2000:328), in criticising Rosalind Hursthouse, says that the good life has to be 'specifiable independently of our account of what is virtuous' to avoid circularity.

It may be overlooked that the problem remains when one specifies rules, duties or principles. Unless morality is *simply* an end in itself, moral precepts must serve a life that is good apart from its being moral.[8] This good life has to be defined in terms of the life of a specific kind of (generally human) being. In *Natural Goodness (*2001:48f), Philippa Foot argues precisely this. Goodness, she says, cannot be ascribed to states of affairs in isolation, but relates to 'essential features of specifically human life'. To determine what 'a good life for human beings' (Foot 2001:43) is, we have to ask 'what kind of a living thing a human being is' (Foot 2001:51). In *Dependent Rational Animals (*1999:76), Alasdair MacIntyre says much the same: 'focal uses of "good"' are those that pertain to the flourishing of members of a species '*qua* members of that species'. In fact, he finds it impossible to discuss ethics in isolation from biology (*x*).

The general statement that ethics requires some form of philosophical anthropology does not commit one to the specific naturalistic views of Foot and MacIntyre (although I find Foot's case very plausible). The loose (and somewhat emotive) use of 'metaphysical' and 'foundationalist' will cloud the issue here. Plato and Aristotle certainly base their ethics on an anthropology, as do Gyekye (2011)[9] and Nussbaum when she outlines central human capabilities,[10] both of these being 'Aristotelian'. But so do Hume[11] and Bentham,[12] although they start from completely different premises. Kant and Hare offer a very minimal *theoretical* base,[13] but both expand it when it comes to application.[14] If ethics in any way serves 'the party of humankind' (Hume 1902:175), one has to ask what humanity is. We can evade the question only if 'humanity' is seen as either completely determined or so completely lacking in determination that no moral imperative applies to anyone *now.* Then, of course, there can be no ethics.

The anthropology does not have to be detailed, foundationalist or essentialist. Hare (1981:6) says that he believes that ethics can be pursued without ontology, and O'Neill (1989:194) argues that one can make do with 'minimal and plausible assumptions about human rationality and agency to construct an account of ethical requirements' that can guide action and reflection. Nietzsche (1921:68ff.) lambasts Strauss for trying to formulate an ethics without answering questions about the world and humanity, although Magesa (1997:35) holds that African ethics depends on a particular 'view of the world and humanity's place and role within it'. The controversy between minimalists and maximalists is not relevant here. All that is needed is an outline of those aspects of the human condition that make it *minimally* possible for humans *now* to make moral evaluations and provide them with *some* guidance in doing so.

Do we raise such questions in teaching ethics? Unless we do, we may sow confusion. With right hand, we teach forms of determinism, relativism and constructivism that render moral discourse anomalous – why care for chance intersections of discourses? With left hand, we teach activism, commitment and ever more stringent witch hunts. Do we blame students for being emotivists (cf. MacIntyre 2007:11ff.) when we have left them no options? This should be a topic of discussion, but I have no pat answer.

Formation or indoctrination?

The danger of indoctrination, endemic to teaching of all kinds, is acute in the teaching of ethics, particularly virtue ethics. When the Greeks asked whether *arête* can be taught, they probably already saw that moral formation can amount to operant conditioning. Truly, those who advocate moral formation today emphasise the role of stories, symbols and metaphors and do not rely on outright teaching. This, however, does not eliminate the problem, for there are competing and negative stories, symbols and metaphors too. Indoctrination through selective emphasis is particularly easy for academics.

The danger is not *that* great. Hume (1902:214) already saw that our moral sense cannot be produced *purely* by indoctrination. Moreover, as academics we may overestimate our influence. Some students do not allow anything perceived as highbrow to gain a foothold in their heads. They reproduce just enough to pass (sometimes) without abandoning their scepticism about academic talk in general. Others think for themselves – rightly or wrongly. This year a female student who incorrectly took Gilligan to be saying that women are more emotional than men wrote: 'Many feminists would find this offensive but it is the truth and it's innate'. Constructive debates start when people do not blindly follow a trend.

8.'Good' here does not necessarily imply 'happy'. Foot (2001:3) recalls that Wittgenstein, whose life was hardly happy, said on his deathbed that he had had a 'wonderful' life. Perhaps Kant (2015[1788]:89–97) was right to argue that the *complete* good cannot be thought without the addition of happiness *of some kind.* Then some may stop at what he called 'contentment with oneself' (2015[1788]:95) without moving on to his teleological view on future happiness. On this, see Watkins (2010).

9.He speaks of the 'common sentiments, purposes, responses, hopes, and aspirations of all human beings in respect of certain situations' (1), of what serves the 'intrinsic fulfilment' of human beings (7), particularly as 'social animals' (8). (The numerals refer to sections in this non-paginated document.)

10.For her list of these, see Nussbaum (2000:79f.) and Nussbaum (2011:33f.; slightly adapted). The list is 'informed by the intuitive idea of a life that is worthy of the dignity of the human being' (2000:5).

11.It is sufficient to note that Hume deals with ethics (among other things) in a book entitled *A Treatise of Human Nature.* As Wiggins (2006:31) puts it, Hume sets out to 'describe and explain the actual capacities of human beings to make the distinctions they do make', and thus, offers an 'anthropology of morals'.

12.Bentham (1907:1) starts with an anthropological statement: 'Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure'. Later (2), he says that we have recourse to the principle of utility 'by the natural constitution of the human frame'.

13.Kant (1998[1787]:698; cf. 1997[1785]:2), to be sure, says that 'the *metaphysics* of morals' is not grounded in any anthropology (understood as an empirical science) because empirical knowledge can give 'no practical laws' (2015[1788]:19). This does not rule out a *philosophical* anthropology derived *a priori* from the concepts of reason, freedom and finitude. Thus, O'Neill (1989:161) argues that Kant presents a 'formal and rational conception of human nature … sufficient for the grounding of at least some maxims of virtue'.
Hare (1963:1ff) too takes freedom and reason as his points of departure. In a later work (1981:44ff; 53f), he speaks more about 'human weaknesses' (finitude). In this respect, he follows, as he admits (1981:4), Kant.

14.Louden (2006:350) points out that when it comes to application, Kant does talk about 'moral anthropology'. Then Kant speaks about 'the particular constitution of the human being, as well as the laws that are grounded on it' (quoted in Louden 2006:351). Louden uses many quotations from Kant, often from lectures, to show what an important role anthropological considerations played in Kant's applied ethics. Here too Hare follows Kant closely. Although the logic of moral language provides the basis, for 'use in this world of ours, facts about the world and the people in it are relevant', a moral system also needs 'empirical theses' (Hare 1981:5). Although Hare tries to hide it, quite substantive theses about human beings are needed to rule out 'evil desires' (cf. Hare 1981:140ff).

Those who are at risk fall between these two groups. They can be taught to mouth current slogans, some of which are no longer new. Some first-year students in humanities this year asserted confidently that gender is socially constructed, without being able to explain exactly what they meant. My wife, a teacher, assures me that they are taught this at school. To be sure, what we present to students may be news in Trumpland and Zumaland, but few of our students are from there.

The worst effect is that some students, generally those with some imagination, rebel against received wisdom, *whatever it is*. As Marvin Harris (1983:8f.) points out, the phenomenon of the generation gap is found across cultures: the new generation at least partly rejects what the older generation offers to it. In an assignment on courage, a male student said that perhaps only 5% of students have the intellectual courage to resist standard views presented to them. Universities 'have their own agendas in what they want students to learn', and this leads to 'unintended cases of indoctrination'. As example he cites 'the notion that racism is a privilege only preserved for white people and dominant groups' (he is not white). This stands in the way of 'social solidarity'. Intelligent students respond to new ideas, but harbour doubts when, since school, the ladies (and gentlemen) addressing them protest too much and with too few arguments. Thus, they flex their muscles by slaying the fathers (and mothers).[15]

I was once, very gently and politely, accused of indoctrinating students. A Muslim woman pointed out that I kept making snide remarks about patriarchy. Although I always tell students that they should back their views by arguments, I never explicitly argued against patriarchy. She found this disturbing because it seemed that I dismissed patriarchal elements in her religious tradition *without debate*. The student cited in the previous paragraph rightly warns against stifling 'important conversations and discussions'. Views that are not granted a hearing in academia fester elsewhere, among the supporters of ISIS, Trump and Brexit, for instance. Although we do not intentionally exclude, my example shows how easy it is to slip into it. It is with the best of our intentions, not the worst, that we err.

How do we teach ethics?

How should ethics be taught? My way – through a survey of representative theories – is not necessarily the best one – but it is not the worst one either. It forced (and still forces) me to consider and think through the motivations behind theories that I do not much like (divine command theory, cultural relativism and utilitarianism), to examine counterarguments and not only supporting arguments, to look for correspondences amid differences and so on. This also influenced the way in which I present the theories. I regard it as my first task to show students why each of the theories appealed to and often still appeals to intelligent, thoughtful people. Often the appeal survives even devastating criticism of the details. For instance, if cultural relativism is inadequate *as an ethical theory* (as I believe it is), the intention of cultural relativists to promote tolerance and to counteract racism and ethnocentrism should be honoured. Whatever the theory replaces it should promise no less.

Hume's approach in his *Dialogues concerning natural religion* (Hume 1947) seems to set a good model. Although Hume's own position is best represented by the sceptic Philo, even the Platonist Demea is granted some points. As Kemp Smith (1947:58) puts it, 'something of his own beliefs [is] put into the mouths of all three'. As a result, 'the reader is left free to be his [*sic*] own judge of the total argument' (1947:61),[16] although Hume's position is not unclear. Should teachers of ethics be moral crusaders or bearers of crosses? Perhaps it is better to ask whether students are to be 'informed' or treated from the start as members of the party of humankind.

Thus, there seem to be two ways of 'doing ethics' at a university or elsewhere. One consists in flaunting our most sexy moral views in the intellectual demi-monde. The views may not be wrong ones *per se*, but the mode of presentation leads to an increasing shallowness – posturing without substance. Another saying from the *Tao te ching* captures this process: 'Losing *Tao*, next comes *Te*; Losing *Te*, next comes *Jen*; losing *Jen*, next comes *I*; losing *I*, next comes *Li*' (Lafargue 1992:24 with the key words untranslated). Of this my tendentious interpretation (it is not a translation) is this: When appropriate behaviour no longer goes without saying, we turn to virtues of character; when virtues of character disappear, we turn to human rights and human dignity; when humaneness fades, we turn to legality; when legality no longer binds, we turn to proper procedure. Proper procedure 'is loyalty and sincerity spread thin' (Lafargue 1992:24).

Bonhoeffer (1963:234) partly agrees: when what is ultimate about the ethical becomes 'a method, a cause, a discourse', it leads to the loss of life and of the ethical. But he sees another option. Ethical discourse can lead to a recovery of 'the way' *together with others*. It can amount to a reconvening of the party of humankind to restore what goes without saying *and should, in normal times, go without saying.* As this cannot be an elitist enterprise, it demands some trust in the good faith of our interlocutors. The discussion, aimed neither at populism nor necessarily at popularity, is popular in the sense of involving the populace. Although this type of ethical discourse does not generate topics for 'research outputs', it may help students to cope better with the moral crises they perceive around them.

Notes

More time is devoted to utilitarianism, African ethics, Kant and Nietzsche than to the other themes. The former two have subsections and the latter two require some 'scaffolding'.

15. Arguably, this accounts for the popularity of the elitist Nietzsche. Machiavelli is also often read by our students.

16. Particularly telling is the note that Hume added to the manuscript in which he says that 'it seems evident' that the dispute between sceptics and dogmatists 'is entirely verbal' because the dogmatists do not deny that there are many uncertainties, nor the sceptics that we necessarily have to hold some things to be certain (Hume 1947:219). The point is still relevant.

Students are also given additional readings on which they are not assessed. Probably very few ever read them. These are on: Natural Law Theory, Nussbaum's capabilities approach, Hare's prescriptivism (all at some stage included in the course), Hume, WD Ross's intuitionism and Martin Buber's *I and Thou* (as counterpart to African ethics). In the ideal world, I would have included at least Hume and Ross in the course.

I see all themes after Kant as falling under the broad rubric of virtue ethics. Nietzsche can be read as a 'heretical virtue ethicist' and many see the ethics of care as a form of virtue ethics. Magesa (implicitly) and Gyekye (explicitly) present African ethics as a form of virtue ethics.

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17.This work is cited under the name of the translator and commentator. The *Tao te ching* is traditionally attributed to the shadowy, at least partly legendary, sage Lao Tzu, but Lafargue does not even mention him. He probably rightly seeks the origin of the text in oral sayings (1992:197). I also retain Lafargue's use of the Wade-Giles system of transcription.

Appendix starts on the next page →

Appendix 1

The current shape of Ethics 312

Although the exact content of the module has varied over the years, it has been taught in the following way for the past few years:

1. *Some concepts and distinctions in ethical theory*

This deals fairly simply with the basic 'vocabulary' of the discipline and includes brief outlines of some positions in meta-ethics.

2. *Divine command theories*
3. *Cultural relativism*

Although these two theories are not to my mind tenable, many students somewhat naively hold them. I deal with them immediately to get them out of the way.

4. *Various forms of utilitarianism or consequentialism*
5. *Kantian deontology*
6. *Classical virtue ethics: Aristotle*

Sections on Confucian ethics and virtue ethics in the Hebrew Bible are appended to this, but students are not assessed on them.

7. *The revival of virtue ethics: Alasdair MacIntyre*

Formerly, there was another section here on the capabilities approach of Nussbaum and Sen, to show that Aristotle can also be re-read in a different way.

8. *The 'ethics' of an immoralist: Friedrich Nietzsche*
9. *Carol Gilligan and the ethics of care*

This section always includes a critical response to Gilligan, mainly to show that her position is not shared by all feminists.

10. *African ethics*

This section also includes two readings to show that not all African ethicists see African ethics in exactly the same way.