Why moral education should involve moral philosophy

Ethics are increasingly a part of the school curriculum, and practical introductory classes in applied ethics are part of the training that nurses, scientists and soldiers undergo.

Ethical education is ubiquitous, even though it may not always involve complicated theoretical debates — but should it include a dose of philosophy? There are powerful reasons for looking to moral philosophy to learn about real-world ethical action — and of course, there are risks too.

Why we can't do without moral philosophy

Moral education draws on the philosophical method. This method requires understanding concepts and distinctions, knowing what makes arguments valid, and attending to counter-arguments. Those skills are vital in the age-old business of moral argument, which involves considering moral principles, appealing to reasons, and comparing analogous cases. Because moral norms are not tangible or scientifically testable, we need conceptual clarity to avoid talking past each other. As well, being philosophically consistent can prevent us from making exceptions for ourselves (a common form of hypocrisy).

But why is moral argument itself a good thing? Moral argument allows us to keep engaging with others even when we disagree about values. Values are not simply "given", but can turn out to be amenable to reasoned discussion.

Moral philosophy also helps us [question unhelpful assumptions](#) and informs us about the ways our values connect to our descriptive beliefs, such as scientific hypotheses about human

psychology.

Notwithstanding all the endless debates — and some debates really have been going on for millennia — advances do occur. Natural rights theories were philosophical systems long before human rights laws protected people's equal rights. Many would agree [human rights](#) constitute genuine moral progress. Moral philosophy stands as an enduring record of what we have learnt so far.

Moral philosophy empowers us through its method and substance to reflect upon and talk about challenging moral issues. Studying ethics can even propel a personal journey, where we learn about ourselves and the way we think. We might even learn that others think in different ways.

The risks

Moral philosophy tends to focus on areas of disagreement. Applied ethics classes explore disputed issues such as abortion and euthanasia, rather than discussing the many issues on which we all agree. Furthermore, moral philosophy explores our reasons for being moral. But often we can agree on the right thing to do even when we disagree on the underlying principles.

[Jacques Maritain](#) captured this theme during the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, when he summed up the UNESCO philosophy group's thoughts by saying: "Yes, we agree about the rights, but on condition no-one asks us why".

The further we follow the trail of breadcrumbs into philosophical rabbit-warrens, the more morality threatens to become the domain of experts. Once we move from basic moral argument to high theory, philosophy becomes *hard* — an elite domain for those with the mental aptitude and the time to master the extensive knowledge required.

When the philosophical going gets tough, those without this acquired expertise can easily feel out of their depth. For them, philosophical argument may seem as much a weapon of intimidation as a tool of mutual exploration.

Much moral philosophy involves studying comprehensive moral theories, such as those fashioned by [Aristotle](#) (virtue theory), [Kant](#) (deontology) and [Mill](#) (utilitarianism). Philosophers have good reasons to develop these complex systems. Theories provide systematic ways of explaining, describing and justifying moral action.

Simply put, we cannot do moral philosophy without moral theories.

But full-blown philosophical theorising harbours a darker side. Accepting one theory means rejecting all the others, and the unique insights they can offer. Further, because each theory's advocates demand they have reason to believe their theory, they can become intolerant.

They might demand that their arguments must be answered and (if not demonstrated as false) accepted. They can be tempted to conclude that all non-believers are unreasonable dogmatists. Worse still, sometimes courses can expose students to just one type of moral theory, without learning about other alternatives. Far from expanding those students' moral horizons, exposure to high theory narrows them.

Where to?

If moral education needs moral philosophy, and moral philosophy needs high theory, how should we proceed? I offer just one suggestion.

Most moral theories build on a core insight. Utilitarianism tells us consequences for others' wellbeing matter. Deontology stresses that morality requires each person accepting they are

duty-bound to act in certain ways towards other people. Virtue theory reminds us that character drives action, and that ethical life carries its own rewards. These insights all provide valuable perspectives on the larger mosaic of human moral life. Moral education is at its best when it introduces students to these different perspectives, and their unique insights.

For ordinary people trying to think through practical moral questions, it is the insights (and not the theories) that matter most.

This is part of [a series](#) on public morality in 21st century Australia. We'll be publishing regular articles on morality on The Conversation in the coming weeks.

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