Teaching Non-Philosophy Faculty to Teach Critical Thinking about Ethical Issues

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At various universities across the country, philosophers are organizing faculty development workshops for non-philosophy faculty members who want to incorporate critical thinking about ethical and social justice issues into their courses. The demand for such programs is reasonably strong. In part this is due to the increasing pressure from professional associations (e.g., those of nursing and accounting) for the inclusion of ethics in the curriculum. In part, however, it is simply due to the recognition by faculty members across the university that an adequate education must include some reflection on ethical issues. In this article we discuss some of the reasons for philosophers to become involved, describe a faculty development program that we are running, and offer some advice about how to succeed in such endeavors.

1. Ethics Across the Curriculum: The Need for Faculty Development Workshops

Two kinds of approaches can be used to teach moral reasoning skills to non-philosophy students. One is a course devoted exclusively to the topic, such as a philosophy course on applied ethics. The other is coverage of moral reasoning in a wide range of courses across the curriculum. The most effective way of teaching students basic skills of any sort—such as critical thinking, reading, or writing—is, we believe, to require both a course (or courses) devoted to the topic, and to require coverage of the topic across the curriculum. A systematic introduction provides students with the relevant basic skills, concepts, and principles. Coverage across the curriculum ensures that students learn how to apply those skills in a variety of contexts and in ways that are

meaningful and important in their disciplines. Here we focus solely on what can be done to enhance the quality of the coverage of critical thinking about ethical issues <u>across the curriculum</u>.

If ethics is to be covered across the curriculum, some sort of faculty development program is needed. Most faculty members in other disciplines have neither the theoretical knowledge of moral theory, nor the practical knowledge of how to design courses/modules on controversial and murky issues. Faculty development programs can, of course, vary widely in their scope. A fairly minimal program might consist of just three two-hour sessions. At this level, the emphasis, we believe, is best focused on the practical side of course design and classroom discussion. There is just not enough time to accomplish much on the theoretical side. A fairly maximal project might consist of three years of three-week workshops on theory, course design, and classroom discussion—with follow-up activities during the year. This would typically be granted-funded, with stipends for the faculty and organizers.

Well-designed faculty development programs increase both the participants' theoretical knowledge and their awareness of various course-design and teaching techniques. These benefits in turn typically lead to the following additional benefits: (1) increased confidence in their ability to facilitate discussions of difficult ethical issues, and a resulting increased willingness to do so; (2) increased tolerance of student views that differ from their own; and (3) increased connections with other faculty interested teaching applied ethics in their courses. These are each important factors for successfully teaching critical thinking about ethics.

2. Why Should Philosophers Get Involved?

There are both other-regarding and self-regarding reasons for moral philosophers to become involved in the training of non-philosophy faculty members.

The main other-regarding reason is that philosophers can be of significant help to faculty in other disciplines. It is very easy to underestimate how helpful we can be in dealing with the problems noted above. Because of our training and experience we intuitively know how to deal with controversial and murky issues. But most faculty in other disciplines have little idea how to proceed.

The self-regarding reasons for getting involved in such faculty development programs include the following: (1) significant appreciation by faculty across the university for the importance of philosophical expertise; (2) appreciation by one's dean of the interdisciplinary involvement; and (3) grant overhead money (for spending on travel, for example). The first two reasons help combat the isolation of philosophy departments and the resulting lack of support that can result. This could ultimately make a significant difference in later years when faculty outside the philosophy department participate in decisions about priorities for program support.

There are, of course, costs and dangers of getting involved in faculty development. It may require a significant investment of time. If there is not adequate internal or external support, then it would be unwise to get involved. Lack of internal support in particular is a sign that the efforts may not be adequately appreciated. There is also the danger that the university, or school, may decide to eliminate a requirement for students to take a philosophical ethics course ("since it will be covered across the curriculum"). This is bad for the students' education, and will typically be bad for the department (since the need for faculty lines may be undermined). These costs, and others, must be weighed carefully before embarking on a faculty development project.

3. Our Faculty Development Program

Our program, which was supported by a grant of $115,000 from the National Endowment for the Humanities, consists of three components: a three-week summer workshop, discussion sessions during the academic year, and a follow-up mentoring program. Fifteen faculty members participated during the first year, and a second set of fifteen are now participating during a second program year. The participants (who are paid a stipend of about $1500 and have the books and materials purchased for them) are from a variety of disciplines—such as Education, Accounting, Nursing, Health Administration, Sociology, Political Science, Criminal Justice, and Urban Studies and Planning. Many participants have little experience or knowledge, and want to learn enough to start teaching ethics in their courses. Many others, however, have been teaching ethical issues for many years and simply want to improve the quality of their courses.

The core of the program is the three week summer workshop (about 80 hours of meeting time), which has three main components: general moral theory, professional ethics, and practice-teaching. The general moral theory component (about 35 hours of workshop time) consists of discussions of readings on the divine command theory, utilitarianism, Kantianism, libertarianism, communitarianism, egalitarianism, and feminist ethics. The second component (about 10 hours) consists of discussions of readings on core issues in professional ethics such as confidentiality, deception, informed consent, loyalty, and professional dissent. The third component (about 35 hours) consists of practice-teaching sessions, in which each participant presents a proposed set of readings and assignments for the ethics component of a course, and then runs a mock classroom-discussion of some issue. These mock classroom sessions last about one hour, and then the seminar participants and leader offer suggestions for improvement.

During the academic year following the workshop, we have five meetings in which we discuss practical problems that the participants are encountering, discuss some ethical issue, or have a presentation from a visiting speaker. In addition, participants are required to teach at least a module on an ethical issue, and to have a philosopher visit their class to provide constructive feedback.

4. What Non-Philosophers Need to Know about Teaching Critical Thinking about Ethics

Because it will be fairly obvious to most philosophers how to teach moral theory to non-philosophers, and much less obvious to them what and how they should teach about pedagogical technique, we elaborate here on this latter issue.

The main problem that non-philosophers (and philosophers!) confront in their attempts to teach critical thinking about ethical issues is student skepticism about the value of the exercise. To some extent, of course, this is inevitable and must simply be accepted. There are, however, several effective pedagogical techniques that are standard for philosophers, but which are unfamiliar to many non-philosophers, and we shall here identify a few of them.

a. Dealing with Moral Skepticism, Nihilism, and Relativism: Non-philosophy faculty members need to be given techniques for dealing with moral nihilism, skepticism, and relativism. They need to be given examples of ways of showing that the mere fact of disagreement does not entail that anything goes. Most students agree, for example, that torturing innocent babies for fun is (normally) morally wrong and that scratching one's head is (normally) morally permissible. And faculty members need to be shown how they can demonstrate to students that rational investigation can make clear progress even if it does not eliminate all disagreement (e.g., it can lead to changes in views resulting from the identification of confused notions, false assumptions,

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or unforeseen implications; and it can improve one's understanding of one's own view and those one rejects). Furthermore, it needs to be emphasized that students will be able to see real progress only if moral issues are investigated in-depth. Superficial coverage of issues only encourages the view that "ethics is just a matter of opinion" (with no benefits to be gained from systematic rational investigation). Hence, faculty members need to be encouraged to go for depth over breadth.

b. Analyzing Cases: Non-philosophy faculty need to be given some models of how to run a systematic and thorough discussion of a moral issue. We believe that for most faculty this is best done by having the students focus on a short case (involving an action or public policy) with a few specific questions (e.g., Is this option morally permissible?). The cases need to be chosen and designed carefully so that they focus on the key issues and minimize the chance of bogging down discussion. Furthermore, non-philosophy faculty need to be given a systematic method of analyzing a case. We believe that in general some sort of open-ended pros and cons approach is the most effective. Such an approach allows students to suggest whatever considerations they think are morally relevant, and then have them debated.

More specifically, one such approach is as follows. (1) A student is selected (perhaps in advance) to defend a position about whether a given action or policy (in the context specified by the case) is morally permissible. For concreteness, let us suppose that the student is defending the moral permissibility of an action. The student then identifies what she takes to be the main genuine morally positive considerations (counting in favor of permissibility; e.g. that certain people will be helped) and any genuine morally negative considerations (e.g., unfairness to certain people) she recognizes. (Emphasizing that even a person defending the permissibility of an action may recognize that it has some morally negative features is important for getting

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students to see that issues are rarely all or nothing affairs). The instructor writes these on the board (rewording and clarifying where appropriate). (2) The class is then called upon to help strengthen the student's argument. If the student is arguing for permissibility, then this would involve suggesting additional genuine positives, and suggesting reasons for thinking that the purported negative considerations are not genuinely negative (e.g., they are irrelevant or based on false assumptions). The student defending her position may either accept or reject the considerations. If she accepts an alleged positive feature, then it is listed on the board as a genuine positive feature. If she rejects it, then it is listed (under a new column) as a spurious positive. If the student comes to reject a negative feature that she initially endorsed, then it is moved to the spurious negative column. (3) Up to this point, there has been no debate. The focus has been on identifying a clear position and supporting considerations. In the final stage, the considerations are assessed and debated. Each positive consideration is then discussed. If students raise a point that is not relevant to that issue being discussed, their point is recognized as a good one, but it is pointed out how it is irrelevant to the current issue, and they are encouraged to raise their point when it becomes relevant. At any point in the process, the student defending the position may change her mind about whether a given positive or negative consideration is genuine or spurious (with the instructor making changes on the board). (This helps show how progress is being made.) Any new considerations raised that the defending student rejects are listed as spurious. (4) The final step is to assess whether the genuine positives (as recognized by the student) are at least as weighty as the genuine negatives. This is the most difficult part of the exercise, and in general it is probably best done only superficially. One might simply identify the main genuine positives and the main genuine negatives (many others will be of relatively minor importance), and leave open where the balance of considerations lies.

An alternative, but closely related, method for analyzing a case is to divide the class into groups of five to ten students, and to have half of the groups identify the considerations in favor of the permissibility of a specific action or policy, and to have the other half identify the considerations against. After each group has met (for 10-20 minutes during class, or perhaps outside of class), each group presents its considerations. The instructor writes them on the board, and then they are debated. This approach, and others like it, are useful when the instructor wants to encourage all students to participate in the discussion, and when individual students may be reluctant to have their views singled out for the focus of class discussion.

It should be emphasized very strongly to participants, that to have any real effect, they must use the same analysis procedure several times (at least three) in their course. For it is only after students become familiar and comfortable with the procedure that they will start to appreciate the power of systematically reasoning about a moral issue.

c. Emphasizing Cooperative but Ruthless Critical Thinking: Because many faculty members are not used to teaching topics that are highly controversial and emotionally charged, they need to be encouraged to structure their discussions and assignments so as to focus on critical thinking. Students need to be actively discouraged from mere regurgitation or endorsement of what they believe the professor's view to be. Furthermore, instructors need to take steps that encourage all relevant views to be expressed—even those that are not politically correct. Students need to see that ideas are ruthlessly criticized, and that no relevant position is out-of-bounds. Finally, instructors need to create an atmosphere in which students feel comfortable expressing their views, in which all views are expressed civilly, and in which all members of the class are treated with respect. Faculty participants may not appreciate adequately the importance of creating a friendly and cooperative atmosphere for facilitating ruthlessness about ideas.

d. Using Readings and Graded Assignments: *N*on-philosophy faculty need to be reminded that, in order for the ethics part of the course to be effective, it must include readings and assignments, and must have an impact on the course grade. Otherwise, students are sent a clear signal that the ethics component is just a throwaway add-on. More specifically, the importance of having students do some sort of (graded) written assignment (e.g., a position paper) after class discussion of an issue is inadequately appreciated by many instructors. Such writing assignments help students see the progress made in the class discussion, emphasize the importance of understanding the strong points of opposing views (so that they can be addressed adequately), and develop students' abilities to make a reasoned argument in defense of a position.

The above issues (and many others) are probably best discussed with the faculty participants both in the abstract (e.g., with a handout) and as part of feedback on practice teaching sessions. We have found practice teaching sessions to be the single most important part of our faculty development program. In these sessions, faculty members take 5-10 minutes to provide some background on a course they teach, and then take 45 minutes or so to run a class discussion on a case (with the other faculty participants pretending to be students). After that the workshop participants identify the strong points of the discussion session and discuss possible improvements. These sessions provide concrete models both of effective techniques and ineffective techniques, and the feedback from the participants is usually very insightful. Having faculty act as students gives them insight into why certain techniques work better than others (e.g., they see very clearly why poorly designed cases or assessment procedures are very frustrating for students). Finally, the philosopher can provide important concrete advice on how to improve (1) the content of the case and the question asked about it so as to maximally focus on the core issues that the instructor wants addressed, and (2) the flow of discussion so that it stays

on topic, proceeds in a systematic manner, and focuses on critical thinking (and not indoctrination).

5. Undertaking a Faculty Development Program: Some Advice

The following are some of the key elements of a successful faculty development program for teaching critical thinking about ethical issues:

a. Be sure that you have clear support from your chair and dean (and ideally from your provost and president as well). If they are not willing to provide both some symbolic recognition and some resources, then it is probably a mistake to become involved.

b. For any significant program, get an external grant. Both the National Sciences Foundation (mainly for engineering and the sciences; www.nsf.gov/html/div_res.html) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (www.neh.gov/sbe/sber/sdest) offer fairly large grants (e.g., $100,000) for these programs. Getting a grant will bring some prestige to your department and to the faculty development program. And it will typically enable you to provide a stipend ($500-$1500) to the participants, and release time or stipends for the program organizers. It will also provide overhead money (e.g., $2000), which in most universities one is permitted to spend on professional items not related to the program.

The following strategies are useful in obtaining a large grant. (1) Try running a small pilot program (e.g., one day affair) so that you can gain and claim experience and also show evidence of faculty interest. (2) Work closely with the program officers of the granting agency. They are usually willing to look at rough drafts of grant applications and provide extremely useful advice. Finally, (3) get copies of successful grant applications from others. The granting agencies can usually put you in touch with the authors of some similar grants that they have awarded.

c. The program should aim to develop <u>long-term institutional support</u> for the teaching of critical thinking about ethical issues. Some ways of achieving this include: (i) giving institutional recognition to those who participate in the program (e.g., course release-time, stipends, or identification in university publications and addresses given by the dean or president); and (ii) establishing an on-going faculty network for ethics and public policy that, for example, sponsors and/or advertises relevant lectures or lunch-time discussion sessions.

d. The program should <u>focus on basics</u> and not get lost in detailed examinations of various philosophical theories (a natural tendency of philosophers!). What faculty need most is a clear grasp of the basic moral concepts and principles and of how to design courses and run class discussions that promote critical thinking about ethical issues. With a sound foundation, individual faculty can then develop their expertise in ways that are meaningful for their courses.

e. The program should require <u>active involvement</u> from the participants. In addition to doing presentations and engaging in discussion of theoretical issues, each faculty participant should do a practice-teaching session with the other participants. Finally, the participants should commit in advance to teaching a course during the following year, and to having a philosopher visit their classroom and provide feedback.

f. Participants should be explicitly <u>discouraged</u> from trying to <u>incorporate moral theory</u> into their courses. In general, this will be inappropriate for their students and courses, and the faculty participants will be unqualified to do so. The purpose of discussing moral theory in a faculty development workshop is to provide background for the faculty participants (to improve their theoretical framework)—not to provide material for them to introduce in their class.

g. The program should emphasize that it will <u>take many years to develop the expertise</u> to teach critical thinking about ethical issues. Given the difficulty of the exercise, and the great variability

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in the nature of student bodies, disciplines, and faculty expertise, it is not uncommon for students to give <u>lower</u> evaluations the first time an instructor attempts to introduce critical thinking about ethical issues. Faculty need to be assured that, while many early experiments will fail, through trial and error they will eventually find an effective approach that works for them and their students.

6. Conclusion

A well-designed faculty development program can make a noticeable difference in faculty expertise in teaching critical thinking about ethical and social justice issues. If there is strong internal support for such a program, and especially if there is external grant support, philosophers can do well by doing good.[1]

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Notes

[1] For descriptions and discussions of some related faculty development programs, see Michael Davis, "Ethics Across the Curriculum: Teaching Professional Responsibility in Technical Courses", <u>Teaching Philosophy</u> 16 (1993): 205-235; and Charles Ess, "Value Analysis as an Experiment in Interdisciplinary Ethics", <u>Teaching Ethics</u> forthcoming (1998?).