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On the Innovativeness of Textbook Teaching for Excellence in Student Scholarship and Reducing Workload Demands

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ABSTRACT

Preparing Philosophy modules and teaching materials from scratch can be a daunting task, even for the most seasoned Lecturers. But armed with the right tools, the task can be completed with comparative ease. This paper shows how a well-designed textbook, together with ingenious use of it, provide the right tools for the job.

Keywords: innovative teaching; textbook; student-centred; lecturer-focused; Ethics: an Overview; workload; higher education

Introduction

(Robin Attfield, the author of the textbook, writes:) During 2009 I was invited by the publisher Continuum (now Bloomsbury) to compose a textbook on ethics. This was to be accompanied by a digital manual for teachers, supplying summaries, learning objectives and PowerPoints for every section of the book. As I had been teaching ethics, mostly at Cardiff University (but also in Nigeria), for over forty years, I gladly accepted the invitation. My impending retirement meant that there was enough time to complete the project. There was also a colleague, Patricia Clark, willing to prepare the PowerPoints, and generally to assist with the companion manual.

Sadly, Patricia Clark died in 2010, and the job of preparing the PowerPoints for the website was undertaken by Rebekah Humphreys, the co-author of this article, then a doctoral graduate of Cardiff University. And so, in 2012 *Ethics: An Overview* was published. That same year Dr. Humphreys was appointed Lecturer in Philosophy at University of Wales Trinity St. David (Lampeter Campus) and took the opportunity to use the textbook in her teaching there (see below).

In what follows, the six chapters of the textbook are depicted, together with their possible uses in different Departments; then uses to which this book has actually been put are outlined. The website which carries the section summaries, essay titles and reading, the sets of PowerPoints, and much more besides, is: <https://www.bloomsbury.com/cw/ethics-an-overview/>. But in the event of that website ceasing to be functional, I would be happy to supply anyone interested with its contents.

The Six Chapters and their Uses

Within the book's covers most of the field of ethics is studied, with chapters dedicated to six specific areas. These are: history of ethics; value-theory and the good life; normative ethics; applied ethics; meta-ethics; and free will and responsibility.

The Chapter on the history of ethics presents key contributions from the thought of five leading historical figures: Aristotle, Hobbes, Hume, Kant and John Stuart Mill. It seeks to clarify key themes of these thinkers, which are related to contemporary ethical thinking both here and in the following Chapters. Thus, the thought of Aristotle is related to virtue ethics in Chapter 3. Hume's views on motivation are returned to in (for example) the debate about internalism and externalism in Chapter 5 on meta-ethics. Kant's cosmopolitanism has been a major contribution to contemporary thought, while his 'categorical imperative' is revisited in Chapter 3 on normative ethics. So is Mill's utilitarianism, studied later in the revised form of practice-consequentialism.

In this Chapter, as in every Section of the book, study questions and reading-lists are supplied, while the accompanying website carries bullet-point summaries (and so on), plus PowerPoint slides devised so as to be usable by instructors in presenting the relevant material. For some Sections it also offers case studies, charts and, for the Aristotle Section, Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs), allowing instructors to select forms of teaching and learning appropriate to their situation. The four Sections of the history of ethics Chapter could be used either separately, or as part of a longer module including the two Chapters that follow, or the Chapter on meta-ethics.

The Chapter on the good life and value-theory opens with a Section on pleasure, happiness and flourishing, and proceeds to one on moral standing, value and intrinsic value, inviting readers to develop their own stance. The Section on worthwhile life, self-respect and meaningful work takes matters further, and then the final Section (on 'The Good Life, Virtue, Needs and Morality') considers explicitly a range of issues, such as the nature of needs, and whether virtue is needed for the good life, implicitly raised in the Aristotle Section. Some students and instructors may prefer to begin their study of ethics with this Chapter. In this and the following Chapter, there are several references to my more detailed book on these matters, *Value, Obligation and Meta-Ethics* (1995/2018), which delves into the relevant issues more thoroughly (and has recently been re-issued by Brill of Leiden).

The Chapter on Normative Ethics builds on the insights about moral standing and intrinsic value of Chapter 2, opening with a Section on 'Moral Standing, Value, Rights and Rightness'. This discussion of concepts such as rightness prepares the way for the coming Sections on 'Consequentialism and Its Critics', while the following Section considers other theories of normative ethics such as deontology and contractarianism. The Section on 'Virtue Ethics' opens with a consideration of whether theories and principles are needed at all, and proceeds to consider virtue ethics, sometimes regarded as itself a move away from principles. But it goes on to argue that principles of rightness and of obligation remain crucial. The final Section introduces the possibility that the advocacy of virtue (green virtues included) can be fruitfully integrated with practice-consequentialism.

The Chapter on Applied Ethics discusses the implications of a range of normative theories (including forms of deontology, contract-theory, virtue ethics, and consequentialism) for specific practical fields. It opens with 'The Re-emergence of Applied Ethics', since applied ethics almost disappeared in the English-speaking world for approximately the first six decades of the twentieth century, and then covers factors explaining its near-eclipse and its subsequent resurrection. This Section also introduces Inter-generational Ethics and Population Ethics. The following five Sections introduce Biomedical Ethics, Animal Ethics, Development Ethics, Environmental Ethics and the Ethics of War, and explain their origins (ancient in some cases, recent in others), together with recent issues and contributions. Their bearing on matters of ethical theory is also raised, not least in connection with the wider scope of ethical concern brought to the fore by recent work in Environmental Ethics.

Some instructors and students may prefer to begin their use of the book either with this Chapter as a whole, or with one or more of its Sections. If used together with the PowerPoint slides available from the website, it could form the core of a short course on applied ethics, or (with Chapter 3) part of a longer course on normative ethics and its applications.

Particular sections of this Chapter could also be used in University Schools or Departments other than Philosophy. For example, the Medical Ethics section could be used in Medical Schools, and the Development Ethics section in Departments teaching international development or international politics. The section on Environmental Ethics could be used in Schools of Environmental Studies, and also in scientific Departments (such as departments of Genetics), where study of the Precautionary Principle and its applications is much needed and widely neglected. There again, the section on the Ethics of War could be used in connection with discussion of Just War theory, in Departments of Politics or Religious Studies.

The next Chapter explains key positions and developments in Meta-ethics. While students can sometimes feel apprehensive about this area of ethics, experience suggests that University and College students are well capable of grasping (and writing good essays or papers about) the material presented here. Issues about the meaning and status of moral discourse are philosophically important ones, including issues about whether moral claims have any kind of objectivity and can be known; and these issues are introduced in the five Sections of this Chapter. The first Section introduces and considers theories that deny the possibility of such knowledge, while the second reviews attempts to throw light on how claims about 'good' and about 'ought' can be grounded. The third appraises the case for moral realism and cognitivism, while the fourth considers arguments (originating with Hume) against these stances based on the motivating capacity (or 'practicality') of moral language. The final Section introduces ethical naturalism, and at the same time theories about the grounds of moral claims, in ways that cohere with stances presented earlier in the book.

This Chapter could be studied alone, or could be combined with the first Chapter, or the first three Chapters, in a longer course. Here the website is likely to be of help, particularly to those not previously trained in meta-ethics. The later chapters of *Value, Obligation and Meta-Ethics* (1995/2018), and of its predecessor *A Theory of Value and Obligation* (1987/2020) may also be found to serve as an amplification of this Chapter (both have been reprinted recently), alongside the many other works referenced there.

Chapter Six, on Free Will and Responsibility, has been given an historical structure to make these issues more accessible. The first of the four Sections introduces the treatment of related issues by Aristotle, and the original discovery of the problematic implications of determinism by Epicurus. This approach supplies a followable entry into the central problem and also into issues surrounding compatibilism and incompatibilism. The second Section brings in belief in laws of nature (newly introduced in the Early Modern period), together with related understandings of determinism, the stances of Hume and Kant, and the theory of agency of Reid (all of which have contemporary followers). The third covers more recent thought about these matters, including the implications of Darwinism and of quantum indeterminacy, and compatibilist attempts to analyse the key phrase 'could have done otherwise'. The final Section, 'The Future is Open', embodies arguments against compatibilism and determinism, and a suggested account (based on the recent work of Mary Midgley (1994)) of how human evolution makes libertarian freedom possible.

Once again, this Chapter could be used for a short, self-standing course. (The PowerPoint slides of the website will prove particularly useful to instructors.) Alternatively it could be used in conjunction with the first Chapter in a course on the History of Ethics, or with chapters such as the ones on the Good Life and on Normative Ethics, to which issues of the nature of character and of degrees of responsibility are also relevant. Or it could be used with the rest of the book as a whole, so as to cover all the key areas of ethics. For use actually made of this Chapter at Lampeter, see below.

This book is not, of course, comprehensive. But selectiveness has been the price of breadth and of focus on stimulating and promoting debates (particularly in the field of applied ethics) by which ethicists and their students are currently exercised. Studying this book will give its readers a good grounding in the rudiments of ethics and will offer numerous ways of taking this study further, of progressing into work of a more advanced nature, and generally of doing ethics for yourself.

Case Studies and Use of the Textbook at UWTSD, Lampeter Campus

(Rebekah Humphreys writes:) What follows is my own experience of using the textbook in my role as Lecturer of Philosophy at UWTSD from 2012 onwards. Having composed the PowerPoint slides accompanying the textbook before I started teaching at UWTSD, I was already familiar with how the book would be of help in teaching modules on ethics, but was surprised by how much the book would assist me in my teaching of other areas in Philosophy, most notably Ancient Greek Philosophy, Early-Modern Philosophy, Mind and Metaphysics, and Knowledge and Reality.

Ancient Greek Philosophy

With regards to Ancient Greek Philosophy, one of the key learning outcomes of this level 4 (year 1) module is that students should be able to demonstrate an understanding of key concepts in Aristotle's Ethics (Books 1 and 2), including the good, eudaemonia, and virtue. Pressed for time (as many lecturers are), I found (to my delight – and, I should add, relief!) that I had a suitable PowerPoint presentation to hand in the form of the slides accompanying the website component of the Aristotle section (of Chapter One: History of Ethics) of the textbook.

These slides covered the main concepts, as well as objections and counter-objections to Aristotle's account of the virtues. This content enabled me to challenge not just the weaker students, but the stronger ones too, and although I taught (and still teach) this module at level 4, I would use these slides if I were to teach the topic at level 5 or 6 (years 2 or 3). While level 4 students are expected to read the article by John Ackrill and the book by Anthony Gottlieb, students of higher levels could be expected to engage with additional secondary reading such as that of Martha Nussbaum and Roger Crisp. (References to all these readings and more are provided in the textbook and the relevant website component.)

In order for the students to demonstrate that they met the aforementioned learning outcome, they were required informally to discuss in class the two 'questions to consider' (as presented in the same section of textbook), and then to submit two assessments linked to these questions. Students particularly enjoyed engaging with the discussion questions, answers to which could be formulated via their reading of the relevant section of the textbook, alongside Aristotle's Ethics and secondary scholarship. Students enrolled on this module included (and still include) students of Classics, History, Anthropology, and Philosophy.

Thus, in respect of my delivery of the classes on Aristotle's ethics and in terms of my teaching preparation, I had everything readily available through the textbook and its relevant website component, saving me time and valuable energy. Further, the format and content of the textbook as a whole allows for a coherent, well-structured and transparent (to the students and others) teaching method that embodies the important concept of constructive alignment (see Biggs, 2003).

Early Moderns

As part of the Early Modern Philosophy module (level 5 / year 2), I teach Hume on moral sentiment. For this teaching, Section Two of Chapter 1 (History of Ethics) on Hobbes and Hume is used. Student reading material here includes the relevant sections of Hume's Treatise and Inquiry, as well as items of secondary reading (the full references to all the reading material were derived from the website component of the textbook). Essay titles and corresponding reading resources are sourced from that same component.

Thus, as with my delivery of the lectures on Aristotle's ethics, for my teaching of Hume I already had to hand materials which could be readily utilised in their current format. Indeed, I was able to 'read around' the overview of Hume's arguments regarding deriving 'an ought' from 'an is', and thus this overview provided me with 'skeleton' lecture notes. Again, students on this module included / include not just students of Philosophy, but of Anthropology and History too.

While this is a level 5 module, related themes could be taught at level 6 and at postgraduate level by incorporating content from a later Chapter (specifically, Section One of Chapter 5: Noncognitivism, Prescriptivism and Projectivism), including content on the naturalistic fallacy. Reading listed in this same section could then be added to the reading list accordingly, and the PowerPoint slides on and summary of Noncognitivism, Prescriptivism and Projectivism could then be used to deliver the lecture(s).

Should I be allocated the formidable task of teaching a module exclusively on Kant, then the textbook's Section on Kant and its corresponding website component (Section Three, Chapter One) would be a port of call in terms of preparing such teaching.

Knowledge and Reality, and Mind and Metaphysics

The other modules that are not ethics-focused, yet for which I have made good use of the textbook, are Knowledge and Reality (level 4 / year 1), and Mind and Metaphysics (level 6 / year 3). For both of these modules I have delivered (and continue to deliver) lessons on free will; lessons for which I use the PowerPoint presentation of Section Four ('The Future is Open') of Chapter Six (on free will and responsibility), found in the related website component. This includes a slide of a diagram of possible stances (compatibilism, incompatibilism, and determinism), their definitions, as well as the different forms these stances may take. The slides also present evaluations of each of the stances; these evaluations are discussed in class amongst the students. Again, the content of my lecture itself is based around the summary provided in that same website component. Essay questions and corresponding reading is also derived from this teacher's resource.

Should I deliver this topic at postgraduate level, then I would make use of all the Sections in the teacher's resource of Chapter Six (on Free Will and Responsibility) and the reading material therein. Indeed, the teacher's use of the website components can be adapted to the level taught.

Elucidating tricky concepts

So far, I have outlined four modules for which I use the textbook in teaching. With regards to some of the other modules I deliver – and to modules that are focused more obviously on ethics (including Environment Philosophy at level 5 and at postgraduate level) – the textbook is similarly used, but in addition I use the case-studies for in-class discussions. I will not discuss these modules here but will add that I also use the textbook for elucidating specific philosophical issues to students (issues which do not tend to be linked to particular modules).

For example, there is a topic with which students of all Humanities disciplines frequently struggle (or do not realise they are struggling with); that topic concerns value and its variants. Teaching students across disciplines, all in the same class, can result in students often 'talking past each other' due to concepts related to value being construed in very different, discipline-specific ways. This creates confusions and misunderstandings in class, as well as the usual heated yet healthy arguments. With regards to issues concerning value, I often direct students to Section Two of Chapter Two (on moral standing, value and intrinsic value), which outlines the different sorts of values and where they may be located. This helps me to clarify the issues to the students and make them aware of relevant conceptual distinctions. Indeed, the textbook has been of enormous help in terms of 'moving the discussion along' so that the rest of the lecture can be delivered within the time available.

(Robin Attfield writes:) These case studies are as much a tribute to the ingenuity of Rebekah Humphreys as to the resources of the textbook and the teachers' manual. Certainly when I began writing it, I had no idea that it might one day be used in modules about mind or about metaphysics, although it is less surprising that it can be put to use in connection with the clarification of 'tricky concepts'. My hope is that other readers may be able to apply their own ingenuity in making use of this book, as teachers of ethics and related topics both within and beyond the philosophy curriculum.

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