

Winning Paper

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“But, That’s Only Your Opinion!”
Challenging An Adolescent to Engage in Moral Inquiry

Abstract

This paper offers a way of dealing with the refusal to engage in moral inquiry that is rooted in the claim “that’s only *your* opinion.” I object to any manner of combating this claim that transforms ethics into some abstract, objective enterprise. As an example I examine the popular tendency to open a course on ethics by challenging relativism. In response, I argue that we ought to clarify the character of choice to our students, and attempt to distinguish a moral judgment wherein one takes ownership over one’s actions from a moral judgment that simply rationalizes pre-given ends.

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“That’s only *your* opinion!” We’ve all heard it before. Whether it comes in the adolescent form of my thirteen-year-old sister who responded “that’s just what you think!” after I told her she was too young to get a job, or in the sophisticated manner of a college sophomore who flippantly rejected an argument because it was “based entirely on a culturally biased outlook,” the assertion is equally devastating. Is anything more frustrating for an ethics teacher to hear? Such a simple utterance, and all that has been adamantly asserted, carefully argued, meticulously reasoned and painstakingly presented is flippantly dismissed in one fell swoop. Not only does this message effectively convey to the instructor the belief that he or she is full of crap, it simultaneously offers a defense of the dismissal by acknowledging the tenuous condition of all moral judgments. In short, the claim is a refusal. It is not just a refusal of an argument, or even a refusal of the

conditions under which an argument can take place. Rather, it is a refusal of the very possibility *for* an argument. Even worse, such a refusal entails a failure to grow.

The problem for the instructor is that the basis of this refusal is not entirely unjustified, even if (as I shall argue) the refusal to engage in an argument is. I maintain that what underlies this claim is not some tacit belief in relativism. Rather, what motivates this refusal is the recognition of the radically concrete nature of moral inquiry. It is an acknowledgement of the fact that what is deemed just, right, decent, and good can only be seen in the context of a particular situation. This problem is not new. Socrates was confronted by it when Thrasymachus tuned him out, refusing to continue in their discussion of justice. Similarly, Aristotle saw the central problem of his Ethics to revolve around the inability of a moral education to guarantee the capacity for good judgment (*phronesis*). Even Kant, who vigorously lobbied for the existence of absolute moral imperatives, recognized the hermeneutic problem of applying a universal to a particular when he asked whether we need another rule that tells us how to apply the rule, and a rule for that rule, and so on, *ad infinitum*.

What all these philosophers see is precisely what an ethics teacher experiences on a regular basis: because ethics ultimately involves questions concerning what am I to do *here* and *now*, there is no universal procedure or method, no general formula or plan, that can guarantee good action. Instead, questions of morality demand that each individual make a *choice* in the face of all the contingency and particularity of their present situation. It is this character of choice that motivates the claim, ‘that’s only *your* opinion.’ For, when one chooses one simultaneously asserts, ‘it is me, and nobody else that is accountable for what I do.’ That is, to make a choice is to *take a stand* from an

individual *standpoint*; it is to arrive upon a decision not by escaping or transcending one's subject-position, but to do so from within an interpretive framework, including whatever biases such a vantage point might entail.

However, these pre-judgments are not something that we need to wholly overcome in an effort to make the right decision. Rather, given that our experience of the world is always and inevitably rich with color, texture and meaning, we are already claimed by a sense of what is good and just. I believe that it is not the moral educator's duty to help students to overcome this claim, but instead to better understand it such that they can justly take ownership over the ideals, values and aims these beliefs come to affirm. This is not to say it is the job of the moral educator to endorse whatever cockamamie scheme a student may hatch, or encourage them to pursue a hedonistic lifestyle. On the contrary, the process a student must undergo such that they can justifiably affirm a particular choice, action or belief is a long and arduous one. It requires that a student account for their decision, and stand up to the test of questioning and argument. At times this may force a student to retreat from a certain course of action, or alter a belief such that it coheres with some other moral claim. More often than not however, it will force a student to see what they already 'knew' in a new and much more profound way. They may come to realize that the 'golden rule' does not underlie all moral claims, that many obligations cannot be understood in terms of an equitable exchange, or that some of our most powerful relations have little if anything to do with self-interest. In any event, the student will come to have a better understanding of the force behind their choice. In so doing, we will have helped our students to grow.

It is my claim that the refusal inherent in the phrase ‘that’s only *your* opinion,’ is a result of a fundamental misunderstanding of this character of choice. Thus, what I view to be essential to a moral education, whether one is teaching a group of ten-year-olds or a class of college seniors, is that the character of choice be clarified. Furthermore, I argue that the current trend of beginning a course in ethics by challenging ‘relativism’ can have a debilitating effect on our students. First, it promotes an overly simplistic picture of moral inquiry. Second, it has the potential of obstructing their existent capacity to actively criticize an argument. Finally, and most importantly, it effectively severs students from the pressing reality of the issues being discussed, leading them to address moral questions abstractly, as though a moral judgment is only warranted or even possible so long as it is made objectively and free from prejudice.

To begin, it is important that we clarify exactly what this tendency to combat relativism entails. Relativism is most often understood as the belief that all moral claims are relative to some framework, whether subjective, communal, or cultural. That is, moral relativism entails that there are no universally valid moral claims. Neither of these assertions is without warrant in and of itself. But the fear for a teacher of ethics concerns a potential upshot of this position – the belief that morality is just a sham given that there is no external standard for evaluating moral claims.

Now, it is important that I am clear on the fact that this paper is not advocating, refuting, or even evaluating the central claim of moral relativism. Rather, it is my aim to evaluate the consequences of opening a course in ethics by challenging relativism in an effort to overcome the sort of refusal that is described above. The motivation behind challenging relativism (as I see it) is that it will vanquish the resultant belief that we are

all duped by morality, in turn forcing students to take the issues (and assigned material) more seriously. The problem is, I have yet to meet a student who believes that he or she is duped by morality.

At the same time, it has been my experience (limited, though it may be) that upon discussing the position of relativism some students are never fully satisfied by the critique offered in class, and still others are convinced that the position is in fact tenable. Again, that in and of itself is not a major problem (for as I said, the fundamental claim of relativism is not entirely without warrant). Nor is it simply the case that I am concerned by the fact certain students come to embrace moral absolutism as an alternative. Rather, my ultimate worry involves the *kind of reasons* we implore students to give as a response to the problem of relativism.

The sort of response we encourage from our students concerns their ability to escape their prejudices and presuppositions. That is, we tell our students that a moral judgment only has real force so long as it can be 'rationally justified.' As far as our students are concerned, this means that they are not allowed to voice their 'feelings' or express their particular 'point of view,' but instead provide us with something that is extremely difficult in matters of morality – an argument that is verifiable. They get the impression that the kind of reasons that are required for settling moral questions must have nothing to do with their subject-position and everything to do with logic. They interpret the move away from relativism as a desire to escape the dark and dirty cave of personal opinion and enter the luminescent, universal realm of reason. In attempting to overcome relativism we implore our students to give reasons that are not based in *their* experience, but instead are premised upon a logically sound, though thoroughly abstract,

argument. It is as though we are telling them their opinion counts only so long as it has *nothing to do with them*. It gives them the impression that they need to forget about whatever claims morality may already have on them and transcend their subject-position such that the firm but soothing hand of logic may govern them.

What underlies this critique of relativism is the idea that morality can be threatened by some abstract problem. It is as though a clever twist in logic or some theoretical slight of hand can preclude the powerful claim that morality has on us in and through our very experience of the world. It calls to mind the absurd and fundamentally flawed nature of proofs for the existence of God. For one, it assumes that such a proof would transform an atheist into a believer, or vice versa. Second, it fails to account for the complex web of relations, interactions, projects, values, aims and processes through which the concept of God gains a sense and has significance in life. That is, it fails to account for the way in which meaning emerges out of the very process of living. The same can be said for our sense of the ‘good.’ The effect of treating ethics in this way, as though it can be imperiled by some theoretical stance, is to transform moral inquiry into something that it most decidedly is not – a game.

It is the transformation of the concrete nature of moral inquiry into an *abstract* theoretical endeavor that I object to. This is not to deny the important accomplishments of such Western figures as Aristotle, Kant, Mill, Levinas or Williams, or the powerful contribution these thinkers can make in an Ethics class. Each of these philosophers has a great deal of moral insight to provide our students, insights that I claim are essential to a moral education. But what each of these thinkers realized and deftly incorporated into

their ethical theories is the fact that moral inquiry is unlike any other form of deliberation – they saw the way in which one’s life hangs in the balance of these questions.

It has been my experience that emphasizing the need to escape one’s particular situation and evaluate the reasons for an action in the way one might approach a mathematical problem or a logical proof leads students to detach themselves from the reality of their moral experience. In fact, one such result has been a more rigorous retreat into the claim, “that’s only *your* opinion.” Often, given the assumption that the rationale for a particular ethical position can be demonstrated much like a logical proof, students will feel cornered when unable to formulate a response to their peers or instructor. In such a position, where something that is adamantly believed is called into question, it seems a logical alternative to deny the possibility of any moral claim. For, is it not reasonable to believe that we are all biased and unable to formulate an argument free from prejudice? As such, isn’t the logical upshot to declare morality a sham?

While the study of ethics does concern the capacity for critical thought, this does not begin and end with the ability to construct a bulletproof argument. Nor does critical thinking primarily entail one’s ability to criticize the position of another. Rather, it involves the ability to expand one’s horizons, to come to an understanding, to effectively communicate one’s ideas, to creatively navigate one’s way out of a problem, to evaluate one’s situation, beliefs and presuppositions, and ultimately, to make sound judgments. In short, critical thinking involves growth. Clearly the hypothetical realm of logic has a role to play in cultivating these abilities. But, it is also imperative that we allow students to see moral inquiry and deliberation for what it is – an activity that occurs in the highly tumultuous and unstable territory of life as it is lived. The effort to combat relativism can

obscure this reality, leading students to believe that the appropriate response to moral questions is to employ the cold, objective 'faculty' of reason. It is to reinforce the belief that reason itself can be immune to the throes of experience.

I also believe that this response to the refusal inherent in the claim 'that's just *your* opinion,' misdiagnoses the root cause. As I mentioned, it is in part due to the realization surrounding the concrete nature of moral inquiry. But there is no apparent reason why this realization leads to a refusal rather than a more vigorous engagement in argument. Why not, upon recognizing the inherent difficulty of moral inquiry, simply embrace this reality and work harder to ensure what is done is genuinely good? Why not put one's beliefs to the test and listen to what others have to say in an effort to strengthen one's decision and ensure what is done is in fact justifiable? Why is it that so many teenagers refuse to engage the arguments of others, whether they are those of the instructor, classmates, or philosophers, both canonical and non-canonical?

Part of me sometimes believes it is simply the result of the cocksure attitude of adolescence, convinced as they often are that they know everything, particularly in matters of right and wrong. I say this as one who is not entirely detached or even immune from the perils of youth and inexperience. But I believe that the problem is larger these days than a lack of humility. Rather, it seems our students are being carried away by the rabid cynicism that has enraptured Western culture. And who could blame them? We live in a world governed by spin and sound bytes. Every day they are confronted by talking heads on television, deep-throated hucksters on the radio, and conniving columnists in print, all who are desperately trying to pull the wool over our eyes in an effort to convince us that either the sky is falling or it isn't. Is it any wonder

that this general distrust is translated into the schools, and subsequently into their relations with teachers, classmates and texts?

At the same time, this cynicism is not all bad. It seems to me that students today have a tremendous capacity to call ‘bullshit!’ in the face of deception. Shows such as the Colbert Report, the Daily Show and Southpark have given our students the power to recognize when they are being misdirected, patronized and otherwise abused. However, it is worrisome that this oppositional stance is so easily translated into everything they hear and read (especially when it concerns assigned material!).

So, the question is, how do we continue to foster their ability to recognize sophistry while at the same time open them up to the possibility that their worldview is at times limited and in need of adjustment? I have found that a simple distinction can work wonders in this effort. This is a distinction between making a choice and rationalizing.

First, I attempt to clarify the sort of justification that is demanded by moral questions. To do this I use Aristotle’s basic distinction between moral and scientific knowledge (*phronesis* and *episteme*), one that is premised upon a difference between *deliberation* and *demonstration* (NE 1139a 12-13). I think it is important to be honest with our students and acknowledge the fact that in matters of morality we cannot *prove* a claim in the manner in which one might demonstrate the formula for calculating the hypotenuse of a triangle. One simply cannot validate or verify a moral justification by way of variables, for we are always dealing with something more precise when questioning what should or should not be done. Again, this is not to say that there is no place for teaching such principles as *modus ponens* or *modus tollens* in an effort to help

students recognize consistent reasoning and sound argumentation. However, the concrete nature of moral inquiry shows us that such abstract standards are never enough.

Unlike the meticulous and controlled process of scientific inquiry, the process of deliberation is much muddier. We can understand the difference through their respective paradigms: a jury who is called to deliberate over a sentence versus the demonstration of a geometrical proof. One is reminded of the trial of Socrates when considering the distinction. While certain evidence was called into question, such as whether or not Socrates received monetary payment in exchange for his ‘teaching,’ thus bringing up issues of verifiability and validity, the crux of the trial revolved around the *context* and *meaning* of Socrates’ actions. That is, through the process of the trial Socrates was forced to *answer for himself*.

When students recognize that they too must answer for themselves, the refusal inherent in the claim ‘that’s just *your* opinion’ is challenged much more effectively. They begin to see that the issue surrounds why *they* hold the beliefs they do, why *they* are of a certain opinion rather than another. Morality is no longer a matter of giving somebody else’s reasons in response to some imaginary problem. Instead, it requires that they actively participate in these questions. It is, to repeat a phrase coined by Paulo Friere, to challenge our students to make the move from *doxa* to *logos*. It is to challenge them to take ownership over their opinions, to take responsibility for what they believe. This is a challenge that takes root only by challenging *their* opinions. In so doing we make them aware that their role in the classroom is not a passive receiver of information and method, but as an active inquirer into questions that will profoundly shape their lives.

However, this approach still leaves us with a central problem, bringing me back to the key distinction mentioned earlier. Even if our students come to the realization that in questions of morality one must answer for oneself, some students may get the impression that their instincts surrounding moral issues are always right, even if they do not yet understand why. Such a belief is almost as dangerous as the refusal inherent in ‘that’s only *your* opinion,’ for while a student may engage in argumentation, the potential for growth is terribly limited by an inability to see one’s own limitations. Moreover, this belief often leads to a refusal to engage in deliberation, as we saw in Socrates’ discussion with Thrasymachus.

Of course there is no guarantee that our students will be willing to acknowledge their limitations, but there is at least one strategy I have found rather effective: ask them if they are making a choice or simply rationalizing a position. The motivation behind rationalizing is an idea that is quite easily conveyed. Either one’s whole purpose in engaging in deliberation is to *prove* that they are right, or to *discover if* they are right. If one is engaged in the former, using clever methods and shrewd techniques in an effort either to convince or confuse the other, then one is not attempting to make a choice, but instead is striving to validate some pre-existent end. Luckily (for purposes within the classroom at least), there is no shortage of examples that can clarify the difference. One need only turn on the television. It is not even a matter of waiting for the latest popular legal drama to find fodder for the classroom. Instead, one need only turn to one of the countless 24-hour news channels that is conducting a ‘debate’ over the latest hot-button issue to hear some pretty decent (and at times absurd) rationalizations.

The reason why rationalizations impede our ability to choose is that through such behavior one fails to take ownership over one's actions. For, as Aristotle points out, the capacity for choice is indelibly wedded to our ability to 'see what is' beyond questions of self-interest and pleasure (*NE 1095b* 18-33). Failure to do so implies that one is simply bandied about by instinct, as though a human were no more responsible for obeying their every whim and desire as a cat, fish or insect. For, when one rationalizes a pre-given end, one simply assents to taste, and places reason in service of these ends. This is a fundamental sort of blindness, for it entails that one fails to see the needs, desires, projects, aims, values, and – most essentially – the *reasons* of the other.

When one chooses, one is not looking for *excuses* for what is done, but for *reasons*. This requires that one attempt to think along with the other, to allow for what Hans-Georg Gadamer called a *fusion of horizons*. It is to share in a world that is larger than any single one of us, and to actively participate in this shared world by virtue of acknowledging that which we hold in common. It is to recognize that the claim of morality we all feel is not something subjective, but something that emerges out of the infinitely varied relations and interactions we have with other humans, animals and the Earth. Thus, when we choose we seek to understand, rather than defend, our position.

I maintain this is a distinction that students positively respond to and readily acknowledge. In fact, it has been my experience that upon establishing this distinction, one need simply ask, 'do you choose that position, or are you rationalizing' in order to spark further reflection. It is a distinction that asks them to take part rather than remove themselves from moral inquiry. It is a distinction that helps them in their effort to move beyond merely having an opinion to having a justified belief. It is a distinction that aids

in their effort to claim ownership over the sense of morality that claims them. More importantly, when they come to appreciate the way in which moral inquiry is a shared undertaking and not an individual pursuit, it is a distinction that helps in our effort to cultivate growth. And this, after all, is the essence of a moral education.