

Logical Self-Defense

By Tim McAleer
Germantown Academy
Fort Washington, PA

In the first week of "Bioethics" we were presented with a seemingly simple question that became the theme of the course: "What makes an action right or wrong?" We were then offered biomedical scenarios designed to make us deal with this question. In each case, the rightness or wrongness of the action portrayed seemed obvious to most of us. Of course, one shouldn't kill an innocent person in order to save several others. Obviously, cloning oneself is wrong. We didn't feel the need to explain ourselves; things just are right or wrong. I don't think we really knew why we thought or believed what we did. Our reasoning did not rest on a basic theoretical structure, and our attempts to support our opinions were ineloquent and illogical. We quickly learned that in order to support an opinion, one must form an argument, but the creation of this magical thing called an argument proved to be a challenging task.

The first ethical tradition we discussed in class was utilitarianism. Most, if not all, of us had never been introduced to this idea, but after reading about Bentham and Mill, the class seemed to be unanimously utilitarian. Next we studied the basics of deontology, and overall, I would say the categorical imperative sounded pretty good to all of us, and thus we became Kantians. The malleability of our young minds began to trouble some of us. We felt a need to develop our logical skills and knowledge base so that we could develop coherent, well-supported, individual positions of our own.

As we continued through the semester, many of us have moved beyond simply adopting the ethical theory of the week; we began to form more stable, personal, ethical perspectives. We often contradicted each other and ourselves, and in the process grew as analytic thinkers. In one of our first classes our teacher, Mr. Merow, told us that if we did not put ourselves out there to be shot down we are not actively learning philosophy. I've come to accept this advice, as class discussions have made it clear that my arguments are not always as strong as I would like. Sometimes the easiest way to recognize the flaws in one's own argument is to try it out on other thinkers.

High school students need the tools to evaluate and construct arguments. For this reason, philosophical, reason-based courses are incredibly significant at this level. In my experience in the bioethics course, I have come a long way from belief without reason to logically thinking things out and perhaps even applying ethical theoretical structures to my day-to-day disputes. "Bioethics" has provided us all with a start, but most of us are aware that we have a long way to go. I might also add that many of us plan to continue with philosophy courses in college, as bioethics has served as a valuable introduction.