VCE Ethics and Society

Unit 2 Religion and Ethics
Philosophy, Ethical decision-making and moral judgment

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From the course description….

"How do we make decisions in situations where it is unclear what is good or not good? Do we accept what society defines as good? Do we do what feels right? Or do we rely on a definition of what is good from a religious tradition?"

"*Ethics* is concerned with discovering the perspectives that guide practical *moral* judgment."

"An important influence on ethical perspective is the method of ethical decision-making, made up of concepts, principles and theories."

"In this unit students study in detail various methods of ethical decision-making in at least two religious traditions and their related philosophical traditions. They explore ethical issues in societies where multiple worldviews coexist, in the light of these investigations."

- Think about what kind of questions/statements these are. Are they religious/scientific/psychological/historical/philosophical?

"An important influence on ethical perspective is the method of ethical decision-making, made up of concepts, principles and theories."

- Theories (or "methods") for ethical decision-making belong to what is called "**normative ethics**": they basically indicate how we should make ethical judgements of good/bad, right/wrong, fair/unfair, just/unjust….. i.e. how we should judge our actions in such terms. The study of what ethical terms mean, along with such questions as "Is ethics about objective truth or is it merely subjective?" is called "**meta-ethics**". The distinction between the two areas is not always clear.

  - Key terms (concepts) in normative ethics are "judgement" and "action". While some people may classify beliefs, thoughts and feelings as *right* or *wrong*, we are usually more interested in judging what people *do* (where does *freedom of speech* fit in here?). Judgement is a form of appraisal or evaluation; it is based on certain *criteria* which can often be uncovered by asking "Why?".

In the history of philosophy, there are three main normative theories

- *Virtue or character* ethics (referring to the kind of person you are); [e.g. Aristotle: "The right thing is what a truly good person would do"];
- *Consequentialist or outcome-based* ethics (e.g. utilitarian; referring to the consequences of our actions) [e.g. Jeremy Bentham, J. S. Mill; Peter Singer];
- *"Deontological" (rules or duty-based)* ethics (based on what is the right thing to do) [e.g. Kant and, perhaps, ethics based on religion or other authority??].

To what extent do people base their moral decisions and judgements on such theories? For one thing, most of us have no understanding of them; for another, it is likely that we draw on different theories in different situations. Perhaps our basic moral views and values are not actually based on "concepts, principles and theories" at all (??) [Come back to this]

https://youtu.be/bOpf6KcWYyw

The “is-ought” distinction

In philosophy it is generally accepted that there is a difference between **“is” and “ought”,** i.e. the way things are, or have been, and the way things should be. This is also called the “fact-value” distinction or the “descriptive-prescriptive” distinction.

[But note that there are also non-ethical values (e.g. *beauty*).]

According to this distinction, we cannot justifiably draw an ethical conclusion from purely factual premises. For example, just because there is a rule or a law prohibiting something, it does not follow (automatically) that it is morally wrong.

- Does that mean that facts have no relevance in ethics?
- How, then, *do* we justify ethical statements and judgements?
- It might be thought that if ethical statements are not factual, then they cannot be objective. Is this correct? [This comes from a common but dangerous dichotomy: fact *versus* opinion].

Discussion exercise: Classify the following statements (not concerned with their truth or falsity here)

Descriptive/Prescriptive? Objective/Subjective? Unclear?

1. There are 12 girls and 11 boys in this class.
2. Some of these students often behave badly.
3. You are not allowed to do that!... [because] It's against the rules!
4. It's wrong to do that!...[because] It's against the rules!
5. Many people tell lies.
6. I always feel guilty when I lie.
7. I feel strongly that lying is always wrong.
8. I was taught that lying is always wrong.
9. My religion/culture/society teaches that lying is always wrong.
10. Lying is always wrong. [How could this claim be justified or refuted?]

Examples 9 and 10 raise an issue about the difference between ***religion*** and ***philosophy***. This can be summed up in the famous question asked by Socrates (in Plato's Dialogue *Euthyphro*): "Is something right because the gods (God, the law) ***declare*** it is right, or do the gods declare something is right because it ***is*** right?"

- Think about what follows from either of these options.

The former suggests that what is right is quite random; after all, "the gods" might have made different declarations. (This is what some people might like to say to Israel Folau or Margaret Court.) The latter implies that we cannot answer ethical (normative) questions or justify ethical claims simply by citing theological or biblical sources (or any other authority for that matter). But where does this leave the moral relevance of religion?

And what does it say about the nature of the VCE course we are examining? Is its focus philosophical or moral (about what we *should* do) or is it factual (about different approaches – religious and philosophical – to what we should do)? If the latter, then this is not a course in *moral education*. We are not interested in helping students make good moral judgements (prescriptive), but in understanding how various groups in society make them in fact (???).

The 3 Cs: Common, contestable, central….

Philosophical issues, concepts and values are often both familiar (**common**) and "**contestable**". Does it follow that students have the right to challenge and even reject what they find unacceptable or unreasonable, albeit for good reasons?

- A progressivist or constructivist view of education would say that each generation has to reconstruct those ethical rules and values that it finds important **(central),** and should not rest content with saying "We belong to this cultural or religious tradition, and so we should behave according to what that tradition teaches" . From a philosophical perspective, nothing is sacred or beyond question, even the rules and procedures we use to think with.

- But surely facts are relevant. For example, if we are consequentialists, we need to agree on what the likely consequences of a particular action are. While this might involve predicting the future, it also involves knowing what has previously happened.

- Still, if facts are not enough to support our moral judgements, what else is required? The contestability of philosophy could be a *disadvantage;* it helps to explain why philosophy has not made a greater contribution to resolving real ethical problems, especially in light of the general decline of religion. Is it worth arguing about different normative theories?

One of the objections to a secular society is that many people think that ethics (issues of right and wrong, justice, fairness, etc.) are **completely subjective, relativistic,** or "up for grabs". We live in an age of twitter, slogans and populist media domination where crude appeals to emotion often dominate. What are our prospects – and those of our students – when it comes to solving problems – or even asking questions – which require deeper thinking?

Are there any differences which are *morally relevant* (when deciding on such contestable issues as capital punishment, abortion, same-sex marriage, age of consent, drug-taking…)?

1. Cultural, geographical and ethnic differences (What is right in the West may not be right in China, etc.; same for Islam and Christianity)?
2. Gender/age differences (men and women/adults and children/adolescents have different moral rights and duties)?
3. Differences in time (What is right/wrong today may not have been 500 years ago and may not be in the future)?

Sensitivity to context is an important factor which balances general rules and principles, but can this lead to rampant relativism?

Intuition over reason: there is evidence to suggest that:

(i) Individuals form their basic values and moral views quite early in life, from a variety of sources, including society, religion, family and their own intuitions (this is a factual claim!);(J. Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*)
(ii) They develop a strong sense of conviction – feeling – about them (moral *intuitions* or sentiments);
(iii) If they use reason at all, they use it to back up what they already *feel* to be true (even to the extent of arguing irrationally or relying on "false facts") ["inert knowledge" on top of "activated ignorance" [A.N. Whitehead]. Therefore;
(iv) Thinking and reasoning – the tools most valuable in philosophy – are of limited value when attempting to get others to reflect on, or rethink their ethical views.

For David Hume, *reason alone is merely the 'slave of the passions,'* i.e. reason pursues knowledge of abstract and causal relations solely in order to achieve passions' goals and provides no impulse of its own."

This may lead to a society of individuals who make ethical decisions on the basis of their *own self-interest* (of that of their own families), or on how they feel, etc. Is this a good description of our market-driven capitalist society?

However, there is also considerable anthropological, historical and psychological evidence that most people are – and have long been – *tribal: either* they form groups which then develop their own protective ethical rules and values, *or* they form groups with those who already share their rules and values. Sometimes, such tribes behave in extreme ways, where the individual members give up their own autonomy and individuality, e.g. terrorists, ultra-nationalists, religious extremists (and some students!!)). Tribal communities can be *toxic*.

Tribes and collectives become very protective and defensive, feeling a strong sense of loyalty, empathy, and moral kinship with other group members and, at the same time, animosity to those outside the group (even excluding those who don't meet the required ethical demands). In the words of one moral psychologist (Haidt), these groups both *bind* and *blind* [think of the tribal or hive mentality when people get together in large groups – e.g. **a football game**.]

“The aspects of religion” (from the syllabus guide):

- Beliefs
- Sacred stories
- Spaces, places, times and artifacts
- Texts
- Rituals
- Symbols [and totems]
- Social structures
- Ethics
- Spiritual experiences.

These features have a *binding* function which, taken together, may be more important than a particular set of ethical beliefs and values (this may be a response to Socrates’ famous question!) But, does a religion also have to be *blind* in some sense?

Putting things together: Covering the syllabus (knowledge and skills) but also contributing to moral growth and development.

- We have seen what happens when moral intuitions and beliefs are not challenged.
- Dangers of crude relativism on one hand, and dogmatism/authoritarianism on the other;
- Socrates' question and the idea that we need to engage in ethical decision-making as ***one among others*** (not just other persons!); i.e. not as isolated individuals, and not as cogs in a bigger wheel. *This idea is based on the assumption that morality and ethics are concerned with how we relate to others (*primarily other *persons).*
- Understanding normative theories/methods in ethics, and how different religious traditions draw on these, but also:
- Applying them to moral issues in our own lives (or imaginary "thought-experiments" such as the trolley problem), while understanding (i) how we have formed our moral views and values and (ii) the importance of reflecting on, discussing, analysing, challenging, evaluating and, as appropriate, modifying them for good reasons. SEE next slide.

Are we interested in "moral education"? What would it look like?

Teachers can:

1. "Inform" students about what is regarded as right and wrong (in their society, culture, religion…)
2. Acknowledge that we usually form our own moral beliefs, attitudes and values (from various sources);
3. Teach students how to reason and think well (including "is" and "ought") *then* see (2);
4. Ask and encourage lots of challenging questions, *then* see (2);
5. Engage students in discussion or dialogue with their peers, *then* see (2);
6. Practise moral imagination and *empathy* to try and understand where others are "coming from", *then* see (2).

- The aim here is to encourage students to think carefully about their own beliefs and values, and not be afraid to *change their minds*. By circling back to what they feel intuitively about moral issues (i.e. (2)), we are challenging them to be more *thoughtful* and more *honest.* In other words, we want them to be *ethical inquirers who engage in dialogue about matters of importance.* Such "powerful thinking" can persuade us to rethink our deepest convictions and attitudes.

[OR Avoid the whole area of moral education in the classroom (leave it to family, religion, social media, etc.]

Finally: the classroom as a *community of ethical inquiry*

Students engage, respectfully, in dialogue about:

- The social, cultural and religious sources of our ethical feelings, attitudes, beliefs and values;
- Scenarios and problems (real or imagined) that challenge these;
- Strategies for thinking more deeply about moral issues (reasoning, empathy, questioning, imagination…);
- Finding a "space" for ourselves as *one among others* (alternatively, justifying a different view of "who we are/who I am").

Values and strategies such as respect, empathy, trust, care, intellectual courage and intellectual humility, can be enacted in this community. However, the aim is to internalize these so that they influence students' lives outside and beyond the classroom.