TEACHING AND LEARNING ETHICS

Teaching to the converted: religious belief in the seminar room

I Brassington

J Med Ethics 2006;32:678–681. doi: 10.1136/jme.2005.015818

It is not unknown for participants in discussions of ethics to prefix their claims with a profession of their religious faith—to say, for instance, “Well, I’m a Christian/Muslim/whatever, so I think that ...”. Other participants in the debate may well worry about how to respond without the risk of giving offence or appearing *ad hominem*. Within a teaching environment, the worry may be even more acute. Nevertheless, it is suggested in this paper that such worries should not be allowed to impede debate; moreover, a teacher who let such prefixes pass without critique would be considered a poor teacher. In fact, a kind of duty for a teacher of ethics is to be contrary and to play the apostate.

How should teachers of medical ethics deal with students who add an explicitly religious prefix to their contributions in a classroom debate? Few who have taught applied ethics, and bioethics in particular, will not at some point have been faced with a student whose opening gambit is something like “Well, I’m a Christian/Muslim/whatever, so I think that ...” (hereafter prefix R). The difficulty a teacher may face is related to the way that a topic such as ethics demands a debate of opinions and an examination of their foundations, and although the speaker may have failed to get to grips with the question of whether there is a clear and uniform Christian or Muslim or whatever position at all on a given issue, the teacher may well feel that an attempt to criticise the opinion subsequently expressed runs the risk of mis-construal. It is also related to the sense that many have that there is a difference between prefix R and a prefix of another sort such as “Well, I’m a socialist, so I think that...” (hereafter prefix S).

Syntactically, R and S are the same. Nevertheless, there is a clear difference of another sort. Religion can be crucial to a person’s sense of identity, and religious affiliation is often not something that he has chosen from a neutral initial position. A person may come to discover that he is a socialist and describe himself thus because he has formed certain moral or social beliefs—say, about human solidarity—but religious morality works in the opposite manner: a person may adopt a belief about the moral status of the fetus because he is a Catholic, but, on pain of misunderstanding what Catholicism is all about, would be unlikely to come to Catholicism just because of his beliefs about

the moral status of the fetus. Therefore, we may believe that criticisms of religiously prefixed claims can ricochet towards the person making them and give serious offence, and that a teacher ought, for this reason, to be wary of inviting a direct challenge to a religiously founded view.

I am not convinced that there is any special virtue in taking pains to avoid giving offence—a person whose primary consideration is not to offend has, I think, some strange priorities—but there is nevertheless something vicious about recklessness and about being indifferent to giving offence. Faith may be something people hold very dear, and even if no offence was intended, it is difficult to argue a person into not being offended. I am more confident that there is virtue in avoiding *ad hominem* arguments, but inviting a direct challenge to a religiously based view may at least seem like inviting an *ad hominem* argument. For, just as there is a difference between prefixes R and S, so also, for the same reason, “Smith is only saying that because he’s a Catholic” and “Smith is only saying that because he’s a socialist” differ. The statement that Smith is saying that only because he is a socialist suggests a rejection of Smith’s socialism, whereas the statement that Smith is saying that only because he is a Catholic suggests a rejection of Smith. Only slightly further along the same road, we may believe that “religionism” is similar to sexism and racism, and should be abjured for similar reasons: whatever the differences between “Smith is saying that only because he’s Catholic” and “... because he’s black”, the two are more closely related to each other than either is to “... because he’s a socialist”.

To these considerations may be added the thought that teachers have a relationship of a particular kind with their students. Heated discussion in the pub is all well and good, but the rules of debate there, we may think, are different from those in the seminar room; with respect to students, at least some holds are barred, and we may think that, for the sake of the teacher–student relationship, it is better to take precautions than to risk breaking the rules. We may believe, too, that what matters in a seminar is that all opinions get an airing with serious challenge being reserved for those that are demonstrably false or implausible, and we may wonder what would count as demonstrable ethical falsity or implausibility in respect of many, if not most, of the questions that a medical student may be asked to consider. A palaeontology teacher faced with a young-Earth creationist or defender of “intelligent design”

Correspondence to:
I Brassington, School of
Law, University of
Manchester, Manchester,
UK; Iain.Brassington@manchester.ac.uk

Received 25 December
2005
Revised 2 February 2006
Accepted 9 February 2006

may be confident that he or she could point to powerful evidence that the Earth is old, that Darwin's arguments are better grounded in the evidence than Paley's, and so on. But whereas evidence of good and bad is tolerably easy to produce, evidence for rightness or wrongness is not so easy to come by—only the most unsophisticated act utilitarian claims that the relationship between the good and the right is always straightforward. There may be facts about moral psychology, but there are precious few moral facts. It may, however, be difficult to criticise errors of reasoning without appearing to criticise the person who has made those errors, given the time constraints and the fact that a medical student's expectations and experience of debate are likely to differ from those of, say, a philosophy student.¹

These considerations—compounded by the fact that there is a cultural expectation that religiously founded opinions are in some way sacrosanct: we are under no obligation to say that they are correct, but we are under an obligation not to say that they are not—may give teachers cause to believe that they should be wary of inviting (or making) a challenge to religiously founded moral claims. Doing this is dangerous, and a teacher may be misunderstood and may seem dogmatic. All in all, when students give their claims a religious prefix, teachers may have quite a serious incentive to try to say something neutral and move on.

This would be exactly the wrong response. Whatever reason we may have to let a religiously based claim pass without comment, we have stronger reasons not to. Ethics teachers who did not challenge opinions would be bad ethics teachers: they would fail to fulfil their role as a teacher, and would be undermining ethics as a discipline. These are points that stand or fall irrespective of the teacher's religious affiliation, and it makes no difference whether expressed opinions have a religious background or not: they just have to do with the nature of ethics and the nature—the ethos, if you will—of teaching it.

A good way to begin is to consider what we hope to achieve when we teach ethics. Clearly, there is a concern that students should do the right or best thing, but three other things are equally clear: firstly, "do the right or best thing" lacks content; secondly, psychologically plausible people only ever do what they think would be right or best anyway (can we imagine a person who acts because, all things considered, he has a reason not to?); and thirdly, telling students the content of what the right or best thing is smells of polemics, not ethics. Additionally, expressions of opinion have a place in the ethics seminar, but there is more to ethics than pontificating. Ethics requires reasoning about the right or best thing; ethics teaching, therefore, entails teaching students to reason about the right or best thing. If some conclusion is reached about what we ought to do in a given situation, this is fair enough; but what really counts in the seminar room is the process by which this conclusion is reached. The inculcation of correct opinion is less important than the encouragement of clear and critical reasoning; ethics is not something that a medic-to-be is expected to study so much as to practise, perhaps with the help of moral philosophy.²

Inescapably, the practice of ethics is closely related to criticism: ethics, as a practical activity, requires the criticism of particular moral positions. At the same time, it seems fair to say that agents, as agents, cannot choose whether to engage in ethical critique. A fully-fledged moral agency requires that we adopt a critical (although not hostile) stance towards particular moral positions. Moreover, being uncritical is worthy of censure: people who believe that they ought always to bite their tongue, or to defer to authority or something else along these lines, seem to have thrown their agency away or to be acting in bad faith or simply to be

buffoons (and this statement applies equally well to soldiers, historians and chemists as to medics: people in any walk of life who accept what they are told too readily, or never wonder about their own certainty, seem to be missing something). If an agent is to be understood as an agent, he or she ought to be willing to criticise moral positions. Ethics is not the same as critique, but it is critical, and criticism is somehow required.

Thus, it is fair to say that ethics teaching aims at instilling in a student a certain critical perspective on available moral positions, and that a teacher who does not encourage criticism of available positions has therefore failed as an ethics teacher. Implicitly, what the ethics teacher has to get across is the idea that, whatever a person's moral position on an issue, it can only be something to which correctness can be ascribed tentatively and provisionally, and which a fully fledged agent should be prepared to defend or, if necessary, ditch. Naturally, this criticism cannot be limited to criticisms of other people's moral positions; the required criticism of available positions stretches to criticism of our own.³

Importantly, there is no incompatibility between holding a belief and being willing to subject that belief to scrutiny (just as historians can quite coherently say that they believe that the document is genuine and that it could be a forgery, and just as Descartes never seriously doubted that he was sitting in his stove but still wondered whether this was something he knew). No matter how sincerely it is occupied, a moral position is a position; as such, it grants a perspective, but nothing more.³ This intellectual modesty seems to be built into ethics, and therefore to be essential to the teaching of the subject.

What, then, does this mean when our students' answers are prefixed by a confession of faith? On the basis of what I have just argued, my claim is that to let religiously founded comments pass without comment would be to undermine the critical spirit of ethics and the point of teaching ethics. Thus, there is a need for teachers to be relentlessly sceptical and contrary. For just as good ethics teachers will play the Kantian to utilitarian students and vice versa, not because they are Kantian but because their role is to develop their students' rigour and intellectual liveness and because wilful contrariety helps towards this end, so they will also play the apostate to the believer, at least as far as the believers' moral claims are informed by his belief. So, for example, just as teachers may challenge the students' utilitarianism by asking them whether some things are not just wrong, irrespective of how desirable the outcome, or challenge their deontology by asking them whether outcome counts for nothing, so they may challenge a religiously founded claim on the wrongness of euthanasia with a question about whether a benevolent god would really forbid euthanasia as a means of escaping pain.

This is not to suggest that teachers should feel free to take potshots about the details of a particular creed and the manner in which they were disclosed, as taking these pot shots can be, at best, counterproductive, and enthusiasm (I may be using the word in its theological sense) to play the apostate can misfire. Worries like this may well be what lead teachers to play it safe with believers. It is easy, for example, to point out that there are hermeneutic difficulties when it comes to looking for guidance on, say, embryo selection from a text that is many centuries old. (It is interesting that those beliefs that seem to show the most explicit engagement with modern technology are exactly those that we tend to think the crankiest. This raises interesting anthropological

¹An elaboration of this claim and a consideration of how we might ever be able to ascribe truth to any moral claim whatsoever—this is no small problem—is given in my forthcoming *Truth and normativity*.

questions on whether and why a faith has to be antique to be venerable. But this is another matter.) But such a response would quite possibly alienate the student, who may well reject it as just another atheist broadside, and so it would fail didactically. Moreover, in having failed didactically, it would do nothing to encourage the student to subject his moral beliefs to scrutiny—remember that an ethics teacher is looking for the scrutiny rather than the abandonment or confirmation of beliefs—and so would fail to train him as a thinker about right and wrong. Finally, such a response would distort the point of an ethics seminar, for it would seem to rely on the teacher jettisoning a discussion of embryo selection in which exegesis may play a part that is for an exegetical debate in which embryo selection gets mentioned.

Is there a way available that can do justice to the critical spirit of ethics without undermining the point of ethics teaching and without secular dogmatism? There is no reason why not, although this is not to say that it is easy to locate. Nevertheless, a couple of clues about how we could locate it are available from claims that I made earlier. One of these claims was that ethics demands criticism of moral positions. The other claim was that someone who behaves in a manner that is consistently uncritical is either lacking some dimension of agency or acting as though he lacked this dimension.

To begin with, while a prefix such as R may appear to shut down debate, it actually does no such thing, and although there are dangers present in a clumsy articulation of exegetical problems, it does not follow that it is ill advised to articulate them at all. Canonical texts often avoid pronouncements on specific moral issues, giving instead more general moral claims that must then be interpreted; we can always productively ask whether the interpretation of the text on which moral claims are based is something about which the student is entirely certain—and, of course, the student that I mentioned at the start of the paper whose opinions about the moral status of the fetus are informed by his Catholicism may equally well think that there are problems with the mainstream Catholic position without being any less a Catholic for that. A good ethics teacher need have no scruples about asking the religious student to criticise the teachings of the congregation to which he or she belongs.

Still, we must assume that the students who use prefix R think, and have judged, that their own or their congregation's teaching is broadly correct, for if they think it problematic, it would be puzzling why they adverted to it. (The other alternative, that they have used R without ever having attempted to reach a judgement about the propriety of the prefix, is something that we have no reason to choose without other evidence, and so can be ignored, at least to begin with. However, if it becomes clear that R is invoked unthinkingly, then I think that the students can be said to be too uncritical, and it is the job of the teacher to attempt to awaken them from their dogmatic slumber. Naturally, this point applies to uncritical secularists as well.) As a holder of a set of beliefs, students are responsible for having adopted or accepted those beliefs and a particular interpretation of the canon; and, just for that reason, that adoption or acceptance can be criticised unproblematically—again, note that there is no reason why criticism has to be hostile. If, as may sometimes be the case, students think that they ought not to question the teachings of their congregation, they inevitably must have concluded that the assertion that we ought not to raise these questions is correct, and even if every other claim is somehow protected from scrutiny, this one cannot be without regress. Analogously, we may join a political party and remain members because we support its programme in broad terms, but this does not mean that we may never criticise its policies or leadership. And as for the

point that often people do not choose their faith so much as understand themselves through its prism—well, some people think that their nationality is important to their moral identity, but people who decided that, being British, they would agree with whatever the British government said would be odd people indeed, and we may properly rebuke their naivety. The same applies to religious affiliation.

The point is this: if people believe that god has forbidden something and that god has moral authority, then this gives them reason to avoid it (just as a belief that Bentham says that it is forbidden and that Bentham has moral authority is a reason to avoid it). But establishing beyond doubt that god says something about specific issues and that He is morally authoritative is impossible; as a matter of definition, these are matters of belief, not knowledge—and while knowledge entails belief, belief cannot sustain a claim to knowledge. Hence, we need not be chary about subjecting the religions that claim to represent god to a critique. Establishing that god is understood to forbid something and is understood to be morally authoritative is more straightforward, but yields a much less good reason to avoid those things that are apparently prohibited, just because the prohibition can run no deeper than human divination of divine will. In no way does the fact that people subscribe to a particular understanding of god mean that their beliefs are protected from critique; and irrespective of whether or not god's pronouncements are beyond criticism, religions or the moral positions that they sanction certainly are not.

Considering these points does not commit teachers to telling their students that their beliefs are mistaken or even shaky. What it can do, however, is provoke students to evaluate what they believe and why they believe it. Analogously, if a student relies on Aristotle to sustain a moral point, there is no harm in probing the student's understanding of Aristotle or asking whether Aristotle and Aristotelians are correct to claim, for example, that goodness is essentially a practical matter. The same may apply to students whose response to a resource allocation question is informed by their socialism. The only difference between this kind of probing and critique of a religiously founded position is that people tend to care more about religious than non-religious traditions. But this, surely, cannot legitimately determine whether or not they and their positions are subjected to scrutiny. If the mere fact that people were deeply committed to a position meant that their advocacy thereof had to pass uncommented, we would have replaced ethics with anaemic discussion in which the only positions that could be criticised are held by those who have no strong opinions about them.

Religious prefixes, therefore, ought not to close down debate, if only because people who rely on them are either basing their argument on a conclusion that does not logically follow from the argument—the ambiguity of religious canons very rarely means that a commitment to belief *x* necessitates a commitment to belief *y*—or psychologically puzzling for the same reason that people who claimed affiliation to a nation and try to use that affiliation to deduce their political beliefs would be puzzling. “I’m a Christian/Muslim/whatever, *and* many Christians/Muslims/whatever believe that ... *and* they’re right because ...” is a much more reliable tone of argument, but it is reliable because it requires an assessment of beliefs—that is, it requires exactly the kind of critique that ethics teaching should be instilling, forcing people to take responsibility for their beliefs. It does not say that one belief implies another, but that one belief leads the student towards another. And it is the leadership that we can question and ought to question in the name of ethics. Taking account of this point would also help to prevent ethical debate from becoming exegetical debate—the problem that I am

considering is not related to the question of whether god says this or that, but is that which is presented to teachers by students who invoke religion to bulwark moral claims.

One more point that merits being made has to do with the idea that good ethics teachers will strive to be contrary with all their students. Without wanting to pick out religious students particularly, there is an asymmetry between dealing with the believer and with the non-believer. For one thing, atheism provides no positive moral beliefs. The most that a student may properly say from an atheistic starting point would be something along the lines that, “given that I’m an atheist, I see no reason to accept your claim that human life is sacred”; a claim that human life is supremely valuable may coherently follow in short order, but it would have no logical link to a particular theological stance. For another, the point that I have tried to make is that the role of ethics teachers is to use scepticism as a goad towards rigour; and, as such, it is not the role of the teachers to make positive claims. They will test the strength of a positive moral claim (whether it be of religious or secular provenance) and raise problems with it, but this does not simply mean counterposing it with another positive claim. To do this would be to make the cheap potshots that I mentioned before: the task of the teacher with religious students, as with any student, is to test their moral claims—whether they grow from Kantian or Koranic soil is unimportant—not simply to deny their validity (which would

be equivalent to criticising Kantians for not being utilitarian). We can test the believers’ claims without making positive claims of our own, but we cannot do this with the infidel. Rather, we must find out what their positive beliefs are first and then criticise them. We do not criticise the hypothetical atheists’ contention that human life is not sacred by voicing the opinion that it is: we scrutinise their residual positive claim that such a life is nonetheless supremely valuable. To this extent, “I’m a Christian/Muslim, so ...” *does* share an intellectual plane with “I’m a humanist/socialist/Aristotelian, so ...”; it does not share one with “I’m an unbeliever.”

The middle path between unethical permissiveness and counterproductive dogmatism that I have attempted to mark out is, I suspect, quite a narrow path. And it may well be difficult to follow correctly—to get just the right tone of contrariety. And the price of getting it wrong, at least in terms of the damage that it may do to the student–teacher relationship, may well be high. But an attempt to be neutral and deliberately avoid certain kinds of critique does not mean that we have not taken ethical questioning as far as we can. It undermines ethics wholesale.

REFERENCES

- 1 Cowley C. Why medical ethics should not be taught by philosophers. *Discourse* 2005;5:50–63.
- 2 Cowley C. The dangers of medical ethics. *J Med Ethics* 2005;31:739–42.
- 3 Nietzsche F. *The genealogy of morals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.