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(
On the Afterlife
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Howard [pseudonym], a student with an interest in athletics and beer but not philosophy, brought in an article about a hockey dad who beat another hockey dad to death during their sons' practice. Howard presented the article and said that it was not totally outrageous, because everyone knows that hockey is a violent sport. He mentioned the high incidence of body blocks and stick attacks among pro players. It was the only time all semester I saw him animated during Ethics 101.

This is a required philosophy class for business majors at Bixby University, a blue-collar, East Coast school. In the late 1990s when the unethical Mike Milkin was the poster boy for financial scandal, the university decreed undergraduate business students take an ethics course. This was received in the spirit it was required — as a cod liver oil pill to grease the consciences of prospective capitalists, bankers, and stock brokers. The students tended to find the standard texts — Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Kant's *Groundwork*, and something by Nietzsche — boring and opaque. Since the newspapers were full of sensationalist stories of financial pillaging, I decided to try to lure the students into the study of ethics through the stories.

Hence, I developed the idea of a news module. Every student was required to bring in a news story, to describe the facts, and to state the ethical problem it invoked.

This was the semester when Dolly the cloned sheep was first announced. This story led to many discussions of identity and experience. We immediately drifted into questions that would arise if persons were cloned, such as: If there is a clone of me, is it identical? This led to speculation about the role of experience in the development of identity. Although their comments may not have been deep, the exercise encouraged them. It gave them a way to begin to see the philosophical implications of events. Thus, if another entity has exactly the same structure at the cellular level, would it be the same, identical? Where does identity reside? Some time later, another scientist began cloning cats. No doubt many pet owners will be shocked to discover after replacing Fluffy for a cost of \$25K that Fluffy 2 has her own personality formed by experience as well as nature; they have a visual replica of Fluffy but a numerically distinct individual.

I developed the idea of a news module for three reasons. The underlying reason is that since students in general undergraduate courses are fairly resistant to thinking seriously about philosophical topics these days, I am always finding ways to trick them into thinking and looking at things in a new way. In the end, a topic such as animal cloning extended speculatively to humans is very seductive. It has a certain science fiction quality, but also a certain fantasy level. Once you think of a person cloned as your duplicate, but x number of years younger — the clone will still begin as a baby — you will think about the influence of environment (parents, siblings, education, the outside world), and realize how much of your personality is the result of experience, not just genes. It is the old nature vs. nurture argument, updated in a sexy way for the twenty-first century.

Second, students love to talk and hate to do the assigned readings. Philosophy readings usually have a high-level vocabulary and contain difficult ideas. By their nature, newspapers are written to appeal to a broader audience. By asking them to select a news article of their choosing, I gave them more control over the subject matter. I recommended the *New York Times*, but did not require that newspaper.

Third, students seem to learn more from each other than from the professor, so I let them teach each other. While teachers may have all the answers, students will listen and hear with more attention when their peers speak. The same students who sit slack-jawed and bored with a professor's presentation will accord each other complete attention. Furthermore, an oral presentation usually assures that students will put actual work into the assignment. While they may not be adverse to plagiarizing material for written assignments off the Internet, the embarrassment of not having anything to say in an oral presentation works in favor of some preparation. Let's call it schadenfreude. The odds are generally higher that they will do some work. Plus the basis of the presentation is directly from a published article.

The news module works as follows: each student is assigned a day to present. On that day, she or he brings a clipping. It might also be from an Internet news source, but TV is not acceptable. They must be able to bring a copy of the original story. Preferably it is a hard news story which has been explained to them. Then the student reviews the facts and everyone joins in critiquing the situation. The teacher (so-called expert) is available if necessary to indicate contradictions, false assumptions, or areas that should be included but are being overlooked.

I also bring in articles that raise issues I find interesting to discuss. One was the case of extreme altruism demonstrated by Joyce Roush who donated one of her kidneys to a stranger. She was a nurse in Indiana who worked as a transplant coordinator. The news article mentioned that she was married and had kids; it even raised questions such as: How would she feel if one of her own children later needed a kidney? Wasn't she risking her life unnecessarily when she had a primary moral obligation to her family first? She said she didn't live her life in the what-if mode. Roush later stated her husband was so upset he threw up when she first mentioned it. Eventually her family supported her decision. None of the best ethical problems has a complete and standard solution — one of the objectives of this exercise was to encourage students to examine many aspects of the problem, or even to see that there are many aspects.

I suppose the knock against philosophy is that students do not see its usefulness. They think it has no connection to the real world. However in ethics particularly there is a real-world application. One man who kills another in a fight over their sons' hockey-playing is a real-world event. So are events such as the president ordering secret wiretapping; the definition of graduate student teaching assistants as either employees or students; a local government's claim to eminent domain of private property for private, not public, development. Many of the most interesting problems may have legal adjudications, but the moral questions remain. These problems relate to what society we want to live in. I often think if our legislators had taken more philosophy courses in college, they would move society in a more intelligent direction by reconsidering the laws and their ethical consequences.

The important features for a successful outcome in fully implementing news module for a course are: make it a constant exercise so the students are presenting every day throughout the semester; ask them to use a source which can be brought to class (a Web article can be printed out); and assign articles a few days in advance. Leave 5-10 minutes at the beginning or end of each class for discussion of the article. I also suggest specifically omitting articles on abortion or capital punishment or the right to die. These three questions are too emotionally fraught and too overworked to yield much in the way of fresh judgments from students. The idea is to make them explore different situations, to see what deeper issues might be involved that they did not think of initially, and not to elicit knee-jerk reactions. To ensure attention, you can always

include an article in the final exam as an essay question. In this case you must provide a copy of the article with the test.

The news module works best in conjunction with a standard reading list. You might back it up with Kant, Aristotle, etc., and you can include other (non-Western) traditions. I also included Maimonides, *Ethical Writings of Maimonides*, translated by Raymond L. Weiss with Charles E. Butterworth (New York: Dover Publications, 1983); and Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995). But students should be reading some solid philosophical texts so they can understand the type of questions philosophers are asking. The goal is to connect the contemporary news article with the reflections of philosophers of the past. For instance, to consider whether Nietzsche's idea that a truly strong society would not punish its criminals or Aristotle's idea that honor is the highest level a human can attain or Gyekye's stress on the individual's relation to their society.

Newspapers give us actual situational ethics, while books give us theoretical frameworks. In the actual situations, we can consider what type of ethics to apply and why it would be useful. The whole point of this exercise is to encourage students to see there is a need for ethics in the world. Ethics appears to be the area where religion and philosophy consider the same question: "How shall I lead a good life?"

In news accounts we see the best and the worst of ethical decisions; we can also sometimes see the consequences of actions, the results which are much more immediate than heaven or hell.