

The Value of Teaching Moral Skepticism

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Abstract: This article argues that introductory ethics classes can unwittingly create or confirm skeptical views toward morality. Introductory courses frequently include critical discussion of skeptical positions such as moral relativism and psychological egoism as a way to head off this unintended outcome. But this method of forestalling skepticism can have a residual (and unintended) skeptical effect. The problem calls for deeper pedagogical-cum-philosophical engagement with the underlying sources of skepticism. The paper provides examples of how to do this and explains the additional benefits of teaching moral skepticism.

The fact that many college students are both interested in and drawn toward some form of moral skepticism has received widespread attention and acknowledgement.¹ Many of my students express skeptical views or hold views that seem tantamount to moral skepticism. Sometimes the views are merely gestured toward. Thus: “You only do that because you are going to get something out of it” (Egoism), “Well, for me, it’s wrong, but that’s just my view” (Subjectivism, Relativism), “Why do it if it’s not fun?” (Hedonism, Egoism), and “Isn’t it all just a matter of power?” (Nihilism). What makes it appropriate to tag these various views as skeptical is that each of them constitutes at least a *prima facie* threat to morality: they deny that altruistic action is possible, that matters of right and wrong go beyond the eye of the beholder, or that being moved by anything other than pleasure or power makes sense. We should therefore understand ‘Moral Skepticism’ as an umbrella term that, as Walter Sinnott-Armstrong puts it, “names a diverse collection of views” which “differ in the kinds of doubts that they raise” about morality.²

One of the hazards of teaching *Introduction to Moral Philosophy* is that one can unintentionally create or confirm among one’s students a sense of moral skepticism. The danger is often generated by the very structure of the course: major moral theories are first presented and

then each revealed to face serious, perhaps even fatal, objections. One thing this can very easily do is cultivate or seem to endorse the idea that skepticism should be the default attitude toward ethics. Thus: “You can’t prove any of this—it all comes down to what you feel anyway.” Or: “This just shows it is all relative.” Even if students do not leave with rigidly skeptical views, they may be left with the kind of dizzying confusion about value that, due to its potentially dispiriting effect on moral convictions and commitments, is at least skeptical in its practical upshot.

This is a shame, especially since the undesired effect often results from the best of intentions. Philosophy teachers want students to develop their critical thinking skills and to appreciate the problems with the major moral theories on offer. Indeed, this is why students rightly receive credit for showing that they have understood the central problems with the major theories (and why they receive praise, and good grades, for developing their own objections). What this suggests is that responding to the concern about generating moral skepticism should not come at the cost of shutting down healthy skepticism.³ In fact, one problem with much student skepticism about value is that it is so dogmatic and uncritical: one would like those with such views to be a little more skeptical, as it were, about their skepticism. How can one achieve this?

Basic Measures and Beyond

One of the easiest and one of the best ways to avoid sending the unintended message that skepticism should be the default position in ethics is simply to make sure that some of the most common forms of skepticism spend adequate time on center stage. If the problems with Aristotle and Kant and Mill, for example, lead many students to think of moral relativism or moral subjectivism as the best position to adopt regarding morality, then it is important that these latter, more skeptical, views get serious philosophical attention too. This way the skeptic does not get the unfair advantage of only having to ask and never having to answer difficult questions. Rather, the skeptical view must take its place alongside all the other views on offer. Otherwise, skepticism can subtly seem to be confirmed as the default position.

For the students who come into the class as skeptics, and who relish going out on a limb to defend one form of skepticism or another, the process of developing phrases such as “You only do that because you are going to get something out of it” into full-blown philosophical positions is a valuable one, not least because it means that they get to encounter some of the problematic aspects of the view they hold dear. Other students are not skeptics but are more troubled by skepticism.

(One is tempted to say that these students think through more fully the question of what it would actually mean to live such skepticism.) Here the advantage of incorporating substantial discussion of moral skepticism into the syllabus is that it provides a space where students can intensively discuss skeptical views like those mentioned above—views which surround them in popular culture—and where they can discuss their fears and doubts about morality. Thus, in addition to the critical reasoning skills cultivated by the course, I think there is an emotional gain too: the students get to face up to some of their worries about morality.

It is crucial, in order to achieve these results, to treat the skeptical view with respect, and to try to make the best case for it you can, just as you would for a positive moral position. Otherwise, you can easily give the impression that you are afraid of the force of the skeptical view and that you are simply trying to sneer it off the stage. This simply reinforces the idea that (deep down) skepticism must be the scary truth of the matter. It is far more effective to make the best case possible for the skeptical view under discussion and then to show in detail just how problematic the view is.

However, it is important to see that the skeptical process can take effect even when some of the more skeptical positions in ethics—psychological egoism, say, or relativism—are taught and scrutinized (as often happens at the beginning of an introductory ethics class). This is because the (unintended) meta-message of the course as a whole can still be construed as: *morality cannot be justified and therefore it is unjustified*. To engage with this skeptical meta-message one has to incorporate some consideration of philosophical methodology into one's lectures and class discussion. Here are some questions I try to make sure I raise (or address):

- Must claims to moral knowledge be empirically confirmed?
- What conditions need to be satisfied for someone to attain or retain reasonable confidence in his or her moral beliefs?
- How should one proceed if all the available views about morality, *including the skeptical ones*, face significant problems?

I shall elaborate on these questions and how I integrate them into class lecture and/or discussion throughout the rest of this paper. And I shall say more about how the tactics I employ help counter the tendency of introductory ethics courses to create or confirm a skeptical attitude toward ethics.

“You Can’t Prove It!”

Many students express the view—in class comments or in their written work—that because ethics is not science there is no sense in thinking of moral claims as reasonable or knowable. When this kind of view is

put forward in class, my first response is often a follow-up question both to make sure that I have understood the student and to make the underlying assumption fully explicit: “So your view is that we can only know scientific claims?” Here, quite often, the student and others in the class will nod their assent. Now, it is tempting at this point quickly to pick a putative case of moral knowledge that seems undeniable: “So you think that we *don’t know* whether we should torture children or not?” Such a response is helpful in communicating a sense of just how extreme a claim is involved in the denial of any ethical knowledge: it makes vivid the practical import of the (up till now) theoretical skepticism. However, a danger in doing this is of putting the student too much on the defensive: students do not wish to be seen as backing down in front of their peers, and a misjudged use of too adversarial a method can have the effect of locking one’s interlocutor into his or her position. The danger, in other words, is of closing minds rather than opening them. Moreover, while it is worth stressing the dramatic implications of denying moral knowledge, one should also look at what is apparently generating the skeptical view: how persuasive, in general, is the claim that all knowledge is scientific knowledge?

There are limits on how far one can go into this question in an introductory ethics class but I think that discussing this question provides a valuable opportunity to demonstrate different philosophical methodologies in action. I invite the class not to answer the question directly but to ask: “How should we go about answering the question of whether science is the only source of knowledge?” Students who are inclined to the view that science is the only source of knowledge often invoke a verificationist epistemology: can one see, touch, hear, and so on? Sometimes, though less commonly, a student suggests instead that we start with what we think we know and then see whether all of this apparent knowledge is scientific knowledge. If no one makes a comment which points in this direction, then I raise some examples of apparent knowledge which are not part of science. You can have fun with this:

“Who is a better basketball player, Michael Jordan or me?”

“Jordan, of course”

“Do you know this?”

Most students, not on the defensive here, are disinclined to deny that they *know* that MJ is better than their professor. We then talk about how we know this to be true. If no one can immediately think of a convincing explanation, then I stress how this does not readily shake our confidence in the fact that we know the claim to be true. I suggest that even if one does not have a theory of how one knows a given claim to be true it does not automatically follow that one no

longer can have reasonable belief in the truth of the claim. That is, it is not obvious that one needs to have a theory regarding knowledge of basketball evaluations in order to know that an NBA player is better than one's professor (at least when I'm the professor). In parallel with this, then, it is not obvious that one needs a theory of moral knowledge in order to know that torturing children is wrong.

The point here is not to dampen the urge to explain and to justify one's beliefs as far as possible. The aim is certainly not to encourage a lazy and thoughtless irrationalism. But certainly one goal is to alert one's students to the dangers of swinging too far in the other direction, toward the kind of extreme and dramatic rationalism to which certain undergraduates in particular are drawn, and which philosophy courses, in their eagerness to foster critical and reflective thought, can encourage. Moreover, the aim is actually to stress the idea that there are various virtues associated with the mature and patient use of reason: that glibness, for example, is not necessarily the same as wisdom. Bernard Williams has noted his gratitude to Elizabeth Anscombe for her ability "to teach one that there was more to philosophy than being quick"⁴ and one of my aims here is to encourage the students not to move too hastily in drawing extreme conclusions.

The discussion of knowledge regarding sport is helpful in that it doesn't let skepticism about ethical knowledge lean on a commonly held, powerful, yet often unexamined epistemological positivism. This is one of the productive effects of considering examples of apparent knowledge which are neither scientific nor moral and of recognizing Wittgenstein's insight that "one nourishes one's thinking with only one kind of example."⁵ An example such as the Michael Jordan one above can, I've found, have a kind of liberating effect by calling into question the narrow understanding of knowledge upon which some forms of skepticism about moral knowledge depend. Some of the students now see a mismatch between what they would, in an everyday context, straightforwardly say that they know, and that to which their avowed theory of knowledge apparently commits them. The judgment regarding Jordan's basketball ability versus mine is a value judgment ("better") but one about which no one is remotely inclined to express skepticism. You can almost see some of the wheels turning: "Hmm, figuring out what is knowledge, and why, is going to be trickier than we thought!" This is a moment of curiosity, however, rather than merely negative doubt: an unthinking rejection of moral knowledge has been replaced with doubts about the overly simple model of knowledge that generated the skepticism about ethics in the first place.

Moral Confusion and Moral Confidence

I like to ask the students why many of them are more confident about knowledge regarding value judgments in basketball than value judgments in ethics. The answer is often, in a nutshell, that the rules are clearer in judging basketball than they are in judging ethics. What this reveals, I suggest, is that a major source of moral skepticism among students is not simply the idea that we “can’t do a lab test in ethics” but rather that there is so much confusion about the criteria of moral judgment.⁶

When the topic of confused criteria is under discussion I find it a valuable occasion to press the question: “Aren’t the criteria clear on some things in ethics?” And this is perhaps the timely moment to ask, for example, the question about torture and children. I encourage the students to notice that even if some of the criteria for moral judgment are confused or uncertain, it does not follow that all we have is confusion. We can know some moral claims to be true without knowing all. This is an important strategy in defusing what I called above the skeptical meta-message, namely that morality cannot be justified and therefore it is unjustified. What lies behind the strategy is the thought that it is not always wisest to think of all moral claims as standing or falling together—the assumption that there is this thing, *morality*, that is either entirely justified or else is a complete sham. Perhaps some ethical claims are more clearly defensible than others. We might have reasonable confidence in some of our moral commitments but not in others. This piecemeal approach to the justification of moral beliefs works against the ‘all or nothing’ mindset that invites global skepticism about morality.

It is also an opportunity to talk with the class about what they see as areas of moral uncertainty and allows one to explore why there is often such reluctance among students to express a moral opinion.⁷ What lies behind the fact that so many students are inclined to say “I don’t like it [torturing children or whatever the imagined moral horror is] but I don’t think we can know that it is wrong”? I think this “retreat from judgment”⁸ is something that is worth exploring in class. What is valuable about doing so is that what often comes into view are some of the students’ *moral reasons* for their (at least ostensible) retreat from morality. What I often hear from some of the more skeptical-sounding students could be summed up as follows: they don’t think they are morally infallible, they are open-minded and opposed to dogmatic moral thinking, and they are alarmed by and opposed to some of the moral certainty they hear from those around them.

I encourage students to notice that their critical views depend upon holding some values: their criticism of dogmatism draws on their support for the value of open-mindedness and tolerance; their ‘live and let

live' ethic depends, among other things, upon adherence to such values as freedom and pluralism.⁹ It is the stuff of teachers' bad jokes: You can't have your values and eat them! But the point is an important one. The students who are very keen not to "impose their values on others" have a tendency to think of their own position as somehow value-free. To reveal the values implicit in the "retreat from judgment" stance emphasizes the fact that a value-free position is not possible. Furthermore, if students are encouraged to recognize their own (inevitable) commitment to certain values, there is a greater likelihood that they will also take some ownership and responsibility for those values and recognize that they have a practical stake in sustaining such values in the broader culture. That is, students are encouraged to move from a negative position (estrangement from excessive moralizing) to a more positive one (affirmation of a more generous, tolerant ethic) that is at the same time owned and acknowledged to be a position that is not outside ethics but it itself very much an ethical position.

Broadening the Syllabus

The concern to encourage this last goal is why I think it is well worth incorporating some discussion of moral pluralism, perhaps along with some representative texts, into the standard *Introduction to Moral Philosophy* syllabus. I especially draw on arguments made by John Kekes and Susan Wolf.¹⁰ Kekes argues in his *The Morality of Pluralism* that we are in a period (and have been for some time) of considerable moral change, that this moral change generates considerable moral uncertainty, and that one (mistaken) response to the uncertainty is moral skepticism. He writes:

We are gnawed by the growing suspicion that our adherence to our values reflects centuries of moral conditioning, but it has no rational warrant. Our morality is disintegrating, it is said, because we are unable to assuage this suspicion. We are constantly helpless in the face of challenges. There was a time, we are told, when our morality did provide clear standards of good and evil, generally accepted rules for living together, and it gave meaning and purpose to our lives. It no longer performs these all-important functions; we have nothing to put in its place, and so the disintegration of morality is producing a cultural crisis of the first order.¹¹

Kekes rejects the interpretation of moral confusion suggested by the "disintegration thesis"¹² he describes here: what he suggests is that much moral confusion is premised on a misguided background assumption that if ethical thought and practice is to be rationally vindicated then rational inquiry in ethics must result in the monistic view that "there is only one reasonable system of values" and that this must be "the same for all human beings, always, everywhere."¹³ Kekes argues

that a pluralistic conception of morality provides a way of allowing for reasonable, and perhaps interminable, disagreement over ethical values without any suggestion that this disagreement should invite a skeptical interpretation such, as for instance, the view that we cannot know any moral truths. The pluralist acknowledges that at least some moral disputes admit of more than one reasonable position or response. It does not follow from this that there are no moral truths or that no answers to moral questions are better than any others.

The skeptical interpretation is only forced upon one if one has, as Susan Wolf puts it, confused or identified “objectivity with uniqueness.”¹⁴ She mentions in “Two Levels of Pluralism” how Bernard Gert, when he teaches ethics, compares the question of the best policy regarding euthanasia with the question of the best hitter in baseball. There might be “several plausible candidates” when it comes to answering the question of who is the best player in the major leagues.¹⁵ But the fact that there is more than one reasonable answer is compatible with the fact that there are many clearly mistaken answers and that this judgment will not, as Wolf stresses, “be subjective—after all, there are lots of statistics with which to back it up.”¹⁶

To teach representative examples of pluralist theories is to provide some of the students with a way to articulate their own inchoate beliefs. The pluralist offers the students a way to accommodate some of their sense of the “messiness” of morality without equating such a view with the rejection of morality. I have found that many of the students who come into the course describing themselves as relativists leave describing themselves as pluralists. Part of this I put down to the fact that they have had a chance to learn that, in Kekes’s words, “monism and relativism do not exhaust our moral options.”¹⁷

The rewards of incorporating some discussion of moral pluralism such as that presented by Kekes or Wolf into one’s course shows the benefits of making room even in an introductory class for some of the more recent developments in the field. I am particularly interested in presenting the students with an adequate set of alternatives to the kind of classic, monistic, foundationalist theories that often dominate introductory courses. The point is to show that there are some non-skeptical ways of rejecting what has become the traditional approach to the subject. Thus, for example, the theory of reflective equilibrium offers an alternative to foundationalist conceptions of justification,¹⁸ moral particularism offers reasons for rejecting the search for general moral principles,¹⁹ and there is a considerable literature which questions the whole enterprise of ethical theory altogether.²⁰ If students have a chance to learn about some of these approaches, there is a greater chance that they will not misrepresent to themselves the kind of choices they face regarding which view or views to adopt about

morality and moral justification. They will not, in particular, think that their choices are exhausted by the following options: accept one of the classic theories, become some kind of skeptic, or fall back in despair or frustration to an unthinking form of religious ethics.

What Moral Skepticism Reveals: A Class Exercise

Close examination and discussion of moral skepticism makes clear that each form of moral skepticism comes with its own set of positive assumptions. The moral skeptic has an implicit conception of what morality requires in order for moral beliefs to make sense or in order for commitment to morality to be justified (or not unjustified). Think, for instance, of a certain kind of nihilist: an atheist who subscribes to Dostoyevsky's oft-quoted claim that everything is permitted if God does not exist (an idea popularized by many a Woody Allen film!).²¹ Here the moral skepticism depends upon an implicit theological conception of the conditions of moral obligation. If one wants to rebut the skepticism, one can argue that God does exist, or one can reject the underlying assumption about the need for a divine basis of morality. Hence any view that is skeptical about morality can always be rejected by rejecting the conception of morality that it is parasitic upon.²²

This point suggests a valuable exercise for students: I get them to work out what aspects of morality they see as indispensable and which they might be prepared to give up. Does morality require God? Does it require the existence of free will? Does it require human altruism and, if so, how much? Does it require the equal moral capacity of all human beings? Does it require the existence of non-natural moral properties? Does it depend on the convergence of morality and self-interest? In this way engagements with moral skepticism educate us about the structure of our conception of morality and the depth of our commitment to various parts of that conception.²³

Summarizing the Strategies

The key point I try to get across throughout the course is that if all views about morality, including the skeptical ones, face difficulties, then adopting a skeptical position is not an escape from difficulty. The mature response is to try to work out which approach to morality out of all the views on offer is in the best overall situation (difficulties included). Here is a list of some of the points I have found it particularly effective to stress in responding to, or even preempting, the skeptical message that introductory courses can unintentionally send:

- The bar can be set unreasonably high when it comes to justifying ethical knowledge versus other forms of knowledge.

- The fact that we do not know how we know a given belief to be true should not always undermine our claim to know the truth of the belief in question.
- Justification of morality is not all or nothing. Perhaps some moral beliefs deserve great confidence even if others do not. We can know some moral claims to be true without knowing all.
- Just because a particular belief is not perfectly justified it does not follow that one should lose all confidence in the belief. One can have *degrees* of confidence.
- The view that “one should not impose one’s values on others” is not a rejection of ethics: it is itself an ethical claim.
- It does not follow from the fact that we do not know what the right answer to a moral question is that any answer is as good as any other—or from the fact that there is more than one reasonable answer to a moral question that anything goes.
- Test your view with a wide range of examples. If you think that no value claims can be true, think of examples from areas such as sport. If you think that ethics is created by humans and therefore cannot be factual, think of the implications of this claim: does this mean that there are no facts about banking, or about how much rent you owe?
- Your view will be the best, even if it has problems, if it has fewer problems than all the others!

Conclusion

I often begin and close introductory ethics courses by reminding students that courses in philosophical ethics tend to focus on areas of moral disagreement but this should not lead one to overlook the substantial amount of agreement in ethics. I think this is a helpful reminder for them to keep some of the confusion the course may well generate in perspective. However, at the same time, I also talk about the benefits of doubt. There is much to be said for the value of skepticism.²⁴ Healthy skepticism recognizes the value of critical thought, of not imposing false certainties on unclear situations, of rejecting easy but fraudulent comfort, of being alive to perspectives other than one’s one, and of not being taken in by blustering rhetoric. Skepticism of this kind is of enormous personal and social value and can represent an inspiring ideal. And here I encourage students to see that there is no direct path from skepticism to passivity: inaction, after all, can be questioned just as much as action. The healthy skeptic is able, in reflexive fashion, to take skepticism itself as an object of scrutiny, and to question the value of any doctrine that sets the bar of justification so high that it can never be reached.

The concern animating this paper is not therefore to coddle students or to encourage a kind of unthinking complacency in one's view of the world. What I have offered are some ways to ruffle the kind of unhealthy skepticism about morality that is dogmatically (and incoherently) negative and to suggest ways in which teachers of moral philosophy can avoid leaving the impression that one's practical commitment to ethics should depend on the existence of an incontrovertible theory of ethics. Hume believed that, in general, "the errors in religion are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous,"²⁵ but of all areas in philosophy it is presumably in ethics that the practical risks are greatest.²⁶

Notes

I am grateful for the comments of Jennifer Fisher and for those of the anonymous reviewers for this journal whose guidance helped make this a better paper.

1. Probably the most attention-grabbing observation in this regard is Allan Bloom's claim in *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster Inc., 1987) that the "one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of" is that "almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative" (25). Russ Shafer-Landau, in *Whatever Happened to Good and Evil?* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), remarks: "Ask any ethics professor nowadays, and you are bound to get the same report—most students regard moral skepticism as the default position in ethics" (30). And see Judith Jarvis Thomson's interesting discussion in *Goodness and Advice* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001) of how "many people lack nowadays . . . the second-order belief that they have good reason to believe that their first-order moral beliefs are true" (4). Shafer-Landau's book is clearly motivated by a concern to respond to these issues: I highly recommend it for classroom use.

2. See Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, "Moral Skepticism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2002 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta; <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2002/entries/skepticism-moral/>. Some readers might already have disagreed at this point (and continue to do so in the rest of the paper) about which views deserve to be called skeptical. Is moral subjectivism, for example, necessarily a skeptical view? What I want to stress here is the following point: one's answer to whether a given position threatens morality or not (and thus is skeptical or not) depends on what one thinks morality requires in order to make sense. (Does morality require objectivity? Does it require the existence of free will? Or altruism?) Thus the question of what counts as a morally skeptical view is ultimately inseparably connected to (and perhaps just as contentious as) the question of what constitutes morality itself. I explore this topic in greater depth in my doctoral thesis, *Bernard Williams and the End of Morality* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2003). The fact that not everyone agrees on which positions in ethics should be classified as skeptical is part of what makes discussion of moral skepticism philosophically and pedagogically extremely fruitful. I describe one particularly valuable class exercise that flows directly out of these observations later in the paper.

3. Healthy skepticism could perhaps sound like an oxymoron. I say more below about what constitutes healthy skepticism, how it differs from the unhealthy kind, and why there is some reason to think that the former won't have the same negative effects as the latter (*i.e.*, why healthy skepticism might in fact be healthy).

4. Bernard Williams, "Replies," in J. E. J. Altham and R. Harrison, *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 220, n. 1.

5. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and Rush Rhees, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), §593.

6. This cannot help but bring to mind Alisdair MacIntyre's well-known argument that contemporary moral disagreement is doomed to be shrill, emotive, and interminable in character because the criteria for what counts as a good moral argument are (for a variety of philosophical and historical reasons) confused and incoherent. See his *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), chap. 1.

7. Questions of sexual ethics, perhaps unsurprisingly, often come to the surface. Part of the appeal to students of HBO's TV show *Six Feet Under* is that it presents, in dramatic form, an ongoing exploration of moral uncertainty (including uncertainty about sexual matters in particular). I sometimes use examples of dilemmas raised in the show.

8. I have taken this nice phrase from Barry Gewen's discussion of a similar phenomenon in the world of art criticism in his "State of the Art," *New York Times* (December 11, 2005).

9. The best paper I have found for teaching the value-laden nature of tolerance is Bernard Williams's "Tolerating the Intolerable" in *The Politics of Toleration in Modern Life*, ed. Susan Mendus (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000), 65–75.

10. The texts I have in mind are John Kekes, *The Morality of Pluralism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993); and Susan Wolf, "Two Levels of Pluralism," in *Ethics* 102:4 (July 1992): 785–98. All references to Kekes and Wolf are to these works. Both Kekes and Wolf are clearly indebted to Isaiah Berlin's seminal writings on, and expressions of, moral pluralism. For a nice overview of Berlin's thought, see his "The Pursuit of the Ideal," in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 1–19. The following collections are useful to draw on both for understanding some of the basic issues raised by pluralism and for finding readings suitable for classroom use: *Moral Disagreements: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Christopher W. Gowans (London and New York: Routledge, 2000); *Pluralism: The Philosophy and Politics of Diversity*, ed. Maria Baghramian and Attracta Ingram (London: Routledge, 2000); and *The Politics of Toleration in Modern Life*, ed. Mendus.

11. Kekes, *The Morality of Pluralism*, 4.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, 8.

14. Wolf, "Two Levels of Pluralism," 791.

15. *Ibid.*, 790.

16. Wolf, "Two Levels of Pluralism," 790.

17. *Ibid.*

18. As many contemporary epistemologists have stressed, foundationalism and skepticism frequently go hand in hand: the skeptic is often nothing so much as a disappointed foundationalist. Thus there would be considerable value in incorporating greater acknowledgement of Rawls's anti-foundationalist model of reflective equilibrium into standard introductory ethics classes. The importance of Rawls's model, especially in the context of responding to moral skepticism, lies in the way that it gives significant weight to our everyday moral convictions as an indispensable part of moral theorizing. The temptation in teaching ethical theory is still to place theoretical beliefs higher up on the epistemological

hierarchy than our everyday moral beliefs without questioning vigorously enough whether the fact that a belief is part of a theory really ought to endow it with privileged normative status at all. Rawls's model also counters the tendency to conceive of moral philosophy in such a way that epistemological and metaphysical convictions are assumed to have priority and thus ethical beliefs are always "the dependent variable," as J. B. Schneewind put it in "The Divine Corporation and the History of Ethics," in *Philosophy in History: Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy*, ed. Richard Rorty, Quentin Skinner, and J. B. Schneewind (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 173. Schneewind and others (including Rawls himself) have pointed out the distorting effect of forcing this conception of moral philosophy on the history of ethics (and on histories of philosophy in general). See, for example, Schneewind's *The Invention of Autonomy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998), 10–11. Schneewind's recent edited collection, *Teaching New Histories of Philosophy* (Princeton, N.J.: University Center for Human Values, 2004), explores what difference some of the new histories of philosophy should make to the teaching of philosophy.

19. My favorite piece to use as an introduction to moral particularism is Margaret Little's "Wittgensteinian Lessons on Moral Particularism," in *Slow Cures and Bad Philosophers: Essays on Wittgenstein, Medicine, and Bioethics*, ed. Carl Elliott (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001), 161–80. It often makes sense to introduce moral particularism when covering virtue ethics (for the perhaps obvious reason that views such as Aristotle's are frequently the inspiration for contemporary alternatives to principle-based accounts of ethics).

20. A fine collection of anti-theory perspectives can be found in *Anti-Theory in Ethics and Moral Conservatism*, ed. Stanley G. Clarke and Evan Simpson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998). One wants students to be exposed to the kind of view that rejects the premise, as Bernard Williams puts it in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985) that "the only alternative to ethical theory is to refuse reflection and to remain in unreflective prejudice" (112). As Williams mordantly remarks (earlier in the same text) on the project of constructing moral theories, "A good deal of moral philosophy engages unblinkingly in this activity, for no obvious reason except that it has been going on for a long time" (17).

21. I have used Woody Allen's filmic tribute to (and twist on) Dostoyevsky, *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, to great effect when teaching this issue.

22. I discuss this idea at greater length in my doctoral thesis, *Bernard Williams and the End of Morality* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2003).

23. This is also a valuable occasion to deepen students' historical sense of the changing conceptions of what has been considered indispensable to ethical life. This is a lesson I very much owe to Jerry Schneewind.

24. Jennifer Michael Hecht traces the contributions of skeptical thought in *Doubt: A History* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2003).

25. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, rev. P. H. Niddich (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 272.

26. My concern about the potentially skeptical effect of teaching ethical theory has led me not only to incorporate substantial consideration of moral skepticism into my introductory ethics classes but also to develop a course devoted to discussion of the issue of moral skepticism. I hope to describe and explain the detailed rationale for an entire course on moral skepticism in a future paper.

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