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**Teaching Ethics to Non-Philosophy Students –  
A Methods-Based Approach**

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## **Teaching Ethics to Non-Philosophy Students – A Methods-Based Approach**

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### **Abstract**

Dealing with ethical issues is a central aspect of many professions. Consequently, ethics is taught to diverse student groups in universities and colleges, alongside philosophy students. In this paper, we address the question of how ethics is best taught to such “non-philosophy” student groups. The standard way of introducing ethics to non-philosophy students is to present them with a set of moral theories. We refer to this approach as the “smorgasbord approach”, due to the impression it is likely to make on non-philosophy students approaching ethics as an academic discipline for the first time. This approach invites the assumption that adopting an ethical position is mainly a matter of choosing from this smorgasbord of different theories. We argue that this approach is problematic for several reasons, both theoretical and practical, and we suggest a methods-based approach – focusing on methods for moral reasoning – as a more fruitful alternative. The main purpose of this paper is to explain and defend this methods-based approach to teaching ethics to non-philosophy students. In so doing, we also consider and meet some expected objections to this approach.

**Keywords:** Ethics education, teaching ethics, moral methodology, methods-based approach, smorgasbord approach

## Introduction

Philosophy students are not the only ones who read ethics in universities and colleges. Nor are they the only ones who have reason to do so. Dealing with ethical issues is a central aspect of many professions, and hence many students (e.g. teacher students, engineering students, police students, medicine students, social worker students and research students) are commonly taught ethics within their educational programs.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, which is best described as a philosophical discussion paper, we address the question of how ethics is most appropriately taught to such “non-philosophy” student groups.<sup>2</sup> More accurately, we address the question of how *normative ethics* is best taught to these student groups, since this is the branch of ethics they first and foremost have reason to study. Henceforth, when we write about teaching ethics, what we have in mind is teaching normative ethics (and not, e.g., metaethics).<sup>3</sup> Our argumentation rests on the assumption that non-philosophy students study ethics mainly for practical reasons, i.e., to acquire tools helping them to reach justified moral decisions. Philosophy students, on the other hand, arguably have an additional theoretical interest in ethics, since it is one of the main areas of philosophy.

The standard way of introducing ethics to non-philosophy students is to present them with a set of moral theories, such as utilitarianism, Kantian ethics, virtue ethics and moral pluralism.<sup>4</sup> We refer to this approach as the “smorgasbord approach” to teaching ethics, due to the (false) impression it is likely to make on non-philosophy students encountering ethics as an academic discipline for the first time.<sup>5</sup> This approach invites the assumption that adopting an ethical position is mainly a matter of choosing from this smorgasbord of different theories. We argue that this approach is problematic for several reasons, both theoretical and practical, and we suggest a methods-based approach as a more fruitful alternative. Instead of presenting a set of theories this approach focuses on conveying basic methods for moral reasoning. These methods can be

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<sup>1</sup> By “philosophy student” we simply mean a student taking a philosophy course at a university or college, while a non-philosophy student is a student reading some other subject. Here we are particularly interested in non-philosophy students studying for some profession where ethical questions occupy a central place (such as the ones mentioned in the text above).

<sup>2</sup> On a general level. There may be important differences between these various professions and areas of study, calling for partly different approaches to teaching ethics.

<sup>3</sup> Normative ethics is concerned with questions regarding what is right and wrong, while metaethics – roughly speaking – is concerned with questions about the nature of morality.

<sup>4</sup> Somewhat simplified, a moral theory is a theory about what makes an action right or wrong (e.g. the value of the action’s consequences, that the action does or does not violate rights, etc.). Hence, a moral theory generally provides a criterion of rightness. In doing so it also (ideally at least) provides practical guidance (e.g. “Maximize the net value of consequences!”, “Do not violate any rights!”, etc.). There are some ethical theories that do not fit this general pattern, such as versions of virtue ethics and particularism, but even those theories are supposed to give practical guidance and explain the most fundamental structure underlying the deontic status of actions. (See e.g. Timmons 2013, 2-5.)

<sup>5</sup> For examples of textbooks partly taking this approach, see e.g. Haynes 1998; Murphy et al. 2005; Loewy and Springer Loewy 2005.

summarized roughly under three main headings: information, vividness, and coherence.

The main purpose of this paper is to explain and defend the methods-based approach to teaching ethics to non-philosophy students. This is done by using standard philosophical methodology, and in so doing we also consider and meet some expected objections to this approach.

### **The Smorgasbord Approach**

When students are introduced to ethics, this is generally done by presenting them with a set of moral theories. Since ethics courses for non-philosophy students – and the literature typically used in such courses<sup>6</sup> – only give a shallow and elementary account of a selection of moral theories, they usually do not provide the background needed to obtain a deeper understanding of these theories and put them in context (see also Davis 2014). For instance, a particular version of a moral theory may have been developed in light of other already existing theories, partly as an effort to handle problems facing these earlier theories. Such a theory may also be part of a broader philosophical framework the understanding of which is important for comprehending the theory in question. Non-philosophy students are not generally given the opportunity to acquire an understanding of such circumstances. Rather, what these students get is simply a list of theories, a “smorgasbord”, with a short description of each theory, perhaps involving its criterion of rightness.

Sometimes the theories are applied to some examples relevant to the student group in question, and some problems with each theory may be brought up. However, the main picture mediated by this approach to teaching ethics is roughly that “here we have a list of theories – conjured up by various philosophers – that one may choose from”.<sup>7</sup> Usually, the students presented with such a list have not been given the opportunity to form any deeper understanding of how and why these theories have evolved, how they fit into more comprehensive philosophical frameworks and how philosophers go about defending and criticizing them. We shall now turn to our main reasons for dismissing the smorgasbord approach to teaching ethics to non-philosophy students.

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<sup>6</sup> See for instance the books listed in the previous footnote.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, Murphy et al. (2015, 17) write: “What is meant by *ethical reasoning*? It is the process of systematically analyzing an ethical issue and applying to it one or more ethical standards [theories] ... Once an ethical standard is chosen, it still must be applied to a specific situation”. This makes it sound as if the ethical reasoning is not invoked until after the theory (or standard) is chosen, i.e., that it is not invoked in the very choice of theory itself.

## Problems with the Smorgasbord Approach

We find the smorgasbord approach to teaching ethics to non-philosophy students problematic for three main reasons. To start with, it tends to misrepresent the field of ethics, as well as moral reasoning. Choosing which moral theory to adopt (if any) is not a matter of simply picking from a set of theories, based on personal taste or the like. Instead, it is a matter of thoroughly examining the existing alternatives – perhaps considering new ones as well as possible modifications of old ones – using philosophical tools and reasoning, carefully reviewing the arguments for and against each theory, and relating them to reasonable criteria for evaluating moral theories (see Timmons 2013, 12-16). This is a project that one may begin to undertake in a course dedicated entirely to moral theory, using a detailed and comprehensive ethics textbook (such as Timmons 2013). And such a project arguably requires at least some philosophical background on part of the students.

This leads us to our second major reason for resisting the smorgasbord approach, namely that there simply is not enough room within ethics courses for non-philosophy students – “*Given the time normally allotted to a course in professional ethics*” (Davis 2014) – for a focus on moral theories to be meaningful. Indeed, it is even difficult – given the usually very limited time frame for such courses – to give the students an appropriate understanding of what moral theories are about. Our own experience from teaching ethics to teacher students and engineering students, for example, is that these students tend to regard moral theories as different perspectives that one may adopt to solve a moral problem, where one may change perspective between problems – or even with regard to the same problem – or just combine different theories. In reality, these theories are typically incompatible with each other; adopting one theory theoretically excludes adopting another. Even when students do not mix theories in this way, they still tend to view the application of moral theories to practical problems as a matter of “pick and choose”.

This brings us to our third major reason for rejecting the smorgasbord approach, namely its impracticality. As indicated above, these students generally have not been given the opportunity to acquire the theoretical background necessary to be able to critically examine and evaluate moral theories, to understand the different motivations behind them, and to accurately apply them to real moral problems. Applying moral theories can be difficult, especially when considering versions of these theories that are more complex – and perhaps, accordingly, more reasonable – than the standard versions (i.e., complex versions that non-philosophy students will probably not encounter).

Even if we put this problem aside, the smorgasbord approach is likely to be practically infeasible. It is far from obvious how such an approach is supposed to aid the students in practical decision-making, which is the rationale for having them take ethics courses in the first place. Which of these theories should they apply, and why? The different theories give different verdicts in many tricky cases, and, as argued above, these students usually do not have the background knowledge required to critically choose between

them. There is also a risk that students dismiss certain moral theories prematurely, since they are presented only with the most basic, common or general versions of them, and with simplified arguments for and against them (if any). Hence, applying some moral theory does not seem to be a good way for most people to justify their choices and opinions.

Indeed, it is not clear that it is even desirable to choose one such theory and then apply it in one's practical reasoning. It would take a very comprehensive ethics course to enable students to acquire the necessary skills to critically examine ethical theories, understand their motivations, evaluate their content, and eventually decide between them. Actually, many philosophers – even moral philosophers – do not adhere to one specific moral theory, at least not as very convinced or committed adherents. One reason for this is precisely the theoretical difficulties of evaluating these theories – they all have considerations both in favor and against them. Another motivation for some philosophers not to adopt a moral theory may be a hesitation about the existence of one correct moral theory, or the suspicion that the correct moral theory has not yet been formulated.

However, we do think that it is a good idea to let the students know that there exist a variety of moral theories, defended by different philosophers, and that some of these theories focus on consequences, some on respect, some on rights, some on virtues, and so on. It should simply be part of general education to know about the existence of these theories, and to know the names of the most common ones. On the other hand, we see no point in dwelling on these theories in ethics education for non-philosophy students; just mentioning them and making the students aware of their existence should be enough. In doing this, it is important to stress that these moral theories themselves are the result of thorough moral and philosophical reasoning. They do not provide the starting point for such reasoning, which is an impression that one may easily get from the smorgasbord approach. Rather, both philosophical skills and a conversance with the methods for moral reasoning are prerequisites for understanding, evaluating and applying these theories. Hence, if one wants to begin studying and evaluating moral theories with the purpose of getting practical guidance, one needs to understand and be capable of applying the methods for moral reasoning, since these methods are crucial for that task. This means that even if one wants to teach moral theories – at least if the purpose of doing so is the least practical – one needs to pay attention to the methods for moral reasoning.

Before we turn to our suggestion for an alternative to the smorgasbord approach, we want to emphasize that we are not alone in criticizing a theory-based approach to teaching ethics to non-philosophy students. Other philosophers/philosophy teachers have raised similar objections – most prominently, perhaps, Michael Davis (e.g. 2011; 2014) – but none of them has (as far as we know) taken the methods-based route that we suggest as a remedy for the problems associated with a theory-based approach. As will be developed in the following sections, the methods-based approach has several

merits – in particular, it introduces students to moral reasoning and can be practically useful.

### **Shifting Focus to Methods for Moral Reasoning**

In light of the problems facing the smorgasbord approach to teaching ethics to non-philosophy students, we suggest a methods-based approach as a more fruitful alternative. Instead of presenting a set of theories, this approach focuses on conveying basic methods for moral reasoning. As we set out to show below, there are in fact certain valid, basic and fairly uncontroversial methods for moral reasoning – although these methods are rarely explicitly formulated in the ethics literature. These methods can be summarized roughly under three main headings: information, vividness, and coherence.

In order to grasp our suggestion of a methods-based approach to teaching ethics, and the merits we claim for such an approach, it is important to understand these methods and why they are to be considered valid methods for moral reasoning. We therefore turn our attention to these methods, their contents, and their underpinnings.<sup>8</sup>

#### *An Account of the Methods for Moral Reasoning*

How should one go about finding out what to do in a certain situation? Which are the methods for sound moral reasoning?

#### Information

To start with, one should try to base one's moral decisions on correct information. Ideally, one should possess all correct information relevant to one's decision and no incorrect information. Accordingly, one ought to investigate the relevant factual matters as thoroughly as possible in order to make a justified moral decision in a certain situation. This method hardly needs defending. To the extent that one's moral decisions are based on incorrect or incomplete information, one is open to legitimate criticism.

#### Vividness

However, when it comes to moral decision-making, information as such is usually insufficient. Simply possessing the correct information is often not enough for making moral decisions that can be justified to those affected by them. In addition, one's mental representation of this information should be "vivid" (see Kagan 1989, 283-291; see also Brandt 1998, 58-64, for illustrations of the importance philosophers have assigned to vividness historically). If you fail

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<sup>8</sup> The account below draws extensively on that provided in Samuelsson and Rist 2016; see that paper for further elaboration of these methods, their underpinnings, and how one might achieve the requirements on moral reasoning to which they correspond.

to vividly entertain the circumstances of those affected by your decision, this failure may be legitimately held against you. As Shelly Kagan observes, it is not entirely clear how vividness should be understood:

It seems possible that vividness simply is a matter having a wealth of details. Or it might be more directly a matter of how adequately the belief is displayed in the representational system of the mind – where the influx of information simply acts as a stimulus for more adequate representation of the belief itself. These are tricky issues ... But I believe that we can leave them to one side without ill effect. (Kagan 1989, 284)

Now, we take it that the details of vividness are unimportant in relation to our suggestion of a methods-based approach to teaching ethics to non-philosophy students, as well.

### Coherence

A central feature of moral reasoning is that we try to provide reasons for our actions, decisions or other responses. In this exposition, this feature is not regarded as a distinct method, but rather as the basis on which the methods for moral reasoning are then applied. Perhaps one cites as a reason for a certain action that it causes less harm than would the available alternative actions, or that it is the action of the available options that to the largest extent respects the integrity of the persons affected by it. In accordance with what has been said so far, it is important that one's alleged reason is based on correct and vividly represented information. However, in order to be able to justify one's decision, one also has to reason coherently on the basis of this vividly represented information. That is to say, the reason one proposes has to be coherent with the reasons one proposes in other situations as well as with one's overall set of beliefs and reasoning.

There are many ways in which one's reasoning may fail. Jonathan Glover (1990, 25-26) lists some of these: (i) one's reasoning may be grounded in concepts that are blurred or incoherent; (ii) one's reasoning may be logically flawed (some fact which is cited as a reason for some claim may not be relevant to that claim, or one's reasoning may be logically inconsistent); (iii) there may be previously unnoticed consequences of one's moral views that one is not prepared to accept. This last point can be recognized from the often-emphasized interaction between applied ethics and general normative ethics. One important way in which we evaluate moral theories is by considering their implications in particular cases, and the extent to which we find these implications acceptable or plausible.<sup>9</sup>

We can assemble these ways in which our reasoning can be flawed under the heading "incoherence." Let us add to this list that one's reasoning can also be incoherent by (iv) involving *ad hoc* assumptions, or in some other way

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<sup>9</sup> In relation to this point, it may also be helpful to draw to mind John Rawls's reflective equilibrium (Rawls 1971, 20-21; 48-51).

involving views that do not fit with the rest of one's beliefs and judgements (e.g. Kagan 1989, 12-14), and by (v) not respecting *universalizability* in at least a minimal sense:

The requirement that moral judgments be universalizable is, roughly, the requirement that such judgments be independent of any particular point of view. Thus, an agent who judges that *A* ought morally to do *X* in situation *S* ought to be willing to endorse the same judgment whether she herself happens to be *A*, or some other individual involved in the situation (someone who, perhaps, will be directly affected by *A*'s actions)... (Jollimore 2014, 4.2)

A requirement to respect universalizability in this minimal sense seems inherent in the very idea of moral reasoning. To insist, for example, that different standards for moral justification hold with respect to oneself than with respect to others just seems unethical. Here it is important to note that universalizability is not the same as impartiality. For instance, ethical egoism is usually formulated in such a way that it respects universalizability, but it is obviously a partial theory. Simplified, a theory may respect universalizability as long as it allows the same amount of partiality for everyone. While universalizability is plausibly regarded as a formal requirement on moral reasoning, impartiality is arguably far too strong to be such a requirement. A requirement of impartiality would exclude too many moral theories as reasonable candidates from the start – not only ethical egoism, but also for instance versions of “common sense morality” and ethics of care.

### *Underpinning of the Methods for Moral Reasoning*

We have presented the following methods (or kinds of method) as valid for moral reasoning:

1. *Information*: Collect all relevant (correct) information (and get rid of false information)
2. *Vividness*: Represent (mentally) the relevant (correct) information as vividly as possible
3. *Coherence*: Reason coherently

(Samuelsson and Rist 2016, 80)

For each of these methods there is a corresponding requirement on ideal moral reasoning, and on moral justification. Hence, it is a requirement on ideal moral reasoning that it is coherent and based on all relevant (vividly represented) correct information (and no false information). Now, why is this a requirement? To begin with, we take it that these requirements (or methods) are close to self-evident. It is very hard to see how it could be disputed that it is a good thing, in moral reasoning, to collect relevant information (and get rid of false information), to reason correctly (i.e., coherently), and to represent the relevant information

as vividly as possible. How could one argue against this claim? What could the rationale for rejecting these methods reasonably be?

Furthermore, these requirements (and hence the corresponding methods) are extracted from our actual moral practice. Common to these requirements is that to the extent that an agent, in defending some moral decision, seems to fail to satisfy one of them, we do consider her decision open to legitimate critique. Unless this person (or someone else) finds better support for her decision, we simply do not consider it justified.

Due to the role these requirements play in our moral thinking, it should come as no surprise that there is almost unanimous agreement among moral philosophers (at least within a broadly analytical tradition) about these requirements and their corresponding methods. The very idea of moral reasoning involves these requirements (see also Strömberg 2001, 346). Hence variants of these requirements appear with slightly different but similar roles in most metaethical positions: Normative naturalists tend to understand the meaning of moral claims partly in terms of these requirements (e.g. Firth 1952; Brandt 1998; Smith 1994), non-naturalist cognitivists typically regard failure to meet these requirements as something that may blur our moral intuition or responsiveness to normative reasons (e.g. McNaughton 1988; Parfit 2011, 546-563), and some non-cognitivists take them to be requirements on (in some sense) valid non-cognitive “judgments” (such as prescriptions, imperatives or the expression of emotions) (e.g. Hare 1981).<sup>10</sup> These kinds of requirements seem to be accepted even by a moral relativist such as Gilbert Harman, although he takes them to yield different sets of locally valid systems of morality (Harman 1977, in particular parts II to IV).

### **The Methods-Based Approach**

The central tenet of the methods-based approach to teaching ethics to non-philosophy students is simply to convey the methods for moral reasoning to the students. One part of doing that is to explain the methods and their validity (or their underpinning) to the students, roughly in a manner like the one above – but adjusted, of course, to the student group in question. However, it does not stop with that. When talking about “conveying these methods” we do not merely mean presenting and explaining them to the students. The students also need to practice these methods: to actually use them in their own moral reasoning; to test their own and others’ moral opinions and decisions by way of applying these methods to them.

There are several different ways to accomplish such practice, and which way one chooses may depend both on one’s preferences and abilities as a teacher, and on the student group and its prerequisites. For instance, one may let the students work with realistic moral cases in which they are to find the most justifiable decision – this kind of exercise is probably most fruitfully

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<sup>10</sup> There are different uses of the terms ‘naturalism’ and ‘cognitivism’; for our use, see Parfit 2011, 265-266.

carried out with the students working together in small groups.<sup>11</sup> Another possibility is to give students assignments to defend or criticize certain decisions or opinions by using the methods for moral reasoning – where it is fruitful to let them defend other opinions than their own. One may also use tools to reveal to the students their own often unconscious evaluative attitudes and let them problematize them using these methods (for an example of this procedure with groups of teacher students, see Lindström and Samuelsson 2016). There are certainly more ways than these to accomplish practice of moral reasoning within a student group (and different versions of the ways brought up here); the point here is merely to stress the importance of finding some way for the students to practically work with these methods.

For ethics teaching to have lasting effects, it is of course necessary that the students continue to practice the moral reasoning they have been taught even after their education, throughout their working life. There is nothing to replace continuous genuine experience when it comes to the ability to reason morally and make well-grounded defensible moral decisions – but it is important that ethics education gives the students an adequate and useful ground to proceed from. Once that ground is in place it is of course up to the students themselves what they choose to do with it. No ethics education can guarantee that the students will actually develop and nurture their ability to reason morally. Perhaps needless to say, this point holds true irrespective of which approach to teaching ethics one opts for.

### *The Merits of the Methods-Based Approach*

One of the problems that we have stressed for the smorgasbord approach is that non-philosophy students generally have not been given the opportunity to acquire the theoretical background necessary for understanding moral theories at such a depth that they can grasp the different rationales behind them and critically evaluate them. The methods for moral reasoning accounted for above, on the other hand, are not difficult to understand. Nor does it require too much time to present and explain these methods to the students. Both these points are confirmed by our own experiences from teaching ethics to non-philosophy students.

Whereas the smorgasbord approach tends to give a distorted picture of ethics and evades moral reasoning, the methods-based approach introduces the students to moral reasoning, thereby also providing a more adequate picture of the field of ethics – a field where the practice of justifying our actions to each other is central, a practice in which moral reasoning is pivotal.

Since not many people adhere to one particular moral theory, nor can they give convincing arguments for doing so, the practical significance of a theory-based approach is questionable even if one has the knowledge required to correctly apply moral theories to real-life cases. The methods for moral reasoning, on the other hand, are valid irrespective of which moral theory that

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<sup>11</sup> See Samuelsson and Rist 2016 for the particular merits that may be achieved – in relation to the requirements on moral reasoning – by discussing difficult ethical issues in groups.

is correct, or irrespective of whether any moral theory is correct. Any moral theory should be compatible with these methods – indeed, we evaluate moral theories partly on account of how well they meet the requirements corresponding to the methods for moral reasoning. Moreover, these methods are not, in principle, particularly difficult to apply. They may certainly be difficult to *fully* apply in practice, but making justified moral decisions is often difficult, so this is just as it should be.

More importantly, it can arguably be very fruitful to apply these methods if the aim is to make justified moral decisions or reach justified moral opinions. Gathering relevant information and trying to represent it vividly is likely to lead to progress. However, the most challenging and eye-opening methods are likely to be the ones we have labeled “coherence.” To try to relate one’s various moral views on different matters while remaining coherent, to try to be consistent in defending one’s different moral opinions, and to sincerely try to universalize one’s moral judgements, are tough challenges. Here students may work together in smaller groups, where they challenge each other’s moral views. They will probably realize how hard it is to fully meet the requirements on moral reasoning, but also see that there is room for rational argument and genuine progress. Much can be learnt from such exercises, both about oneself and about the reasonableness of various moral views, decisions and arguments.

### **Some Expected Objections**

Let us end this defense of the methods-based approach by considering and responding to some objections that are likely to be raised.

#### *Too Rationalistic*

Some might think that the methods-based approach, as we have presented it, is too “rationalistic”. The methods focus on information and coherence, but what about sentiment, emotions, affection? It is true that the approach puts great weight on our rational faculties and abilities, and here we want to insist that this focus on rationality – as conveyed by the methods – does indeed mirror our moral practice, so it should not in itself be thought problematic.

However, it is important to emphasize that the methods-based approach is not all about rationality. Far from it. To start with, as explained above, moral reasoning begins with providing moral reasons. The reasons we cite are partly a result of our responses to various situations. We see or imagine someone being harmed, or not being shown the respect she deserves, and we react on this situation, trying to frame our reaction in terms of some more general moral reason. The methods then play on these responses, or reactions, and on the reasons we formulate as a result of them. Our responses and reasons should be coherent with our other responses, beliefs, etc., and based on correct information. Such responses are arguably to a large part emotional in character. Another way to put it is that at the bottom of the moral judgements that we test by way

of using the methods for moral reasoning, we find what seem to be in some sense emotional responses, what philosophers often refer to as moral intuitions.

Furthermore, one of the methods that we have presented is vividness. While it is not entirely clear what, exactly, vividness amounts to (as explained above in the quote from Kagan), there certainly seem to be emotional elements involved. Vividly grasping the situation of others, for instance, often seems to require a great deal of empathy. So, to sum up, we do not think that the approach we suggest is too rationalistic; it is just as rationalistic as it should be. Importantly, there is no reason to regard it as more rationalistic than the smorgasbord approach, since the theories presented in such an approach are themselves the result of rational philosophical reasoning. That approach presumes the same kind of methods that the methods-based approach focuses on – these are the kind of methods used to defend and criticize moral theories.

### *Too Universalistic*

Some might worry that the methods-based approach is too universalistic. We did claim that “the methods for moral reasoning ... are valid irrespective of which moral theory that is correct.” However, this claim should be understood in relation to the moral practice that we aim to capture by spelling out these methods. These methods are claimed to be valid in relation to that moral practice – i.e., the practice where we try to justify our actions, opinions and decisions to each other in a rational manner, providing arguments for our views and trying to identify and defend moral reasons. We have not said anything about how universal that moral practice is. We do believe that it is fairly universal among human beings, but it might be that there are other practices that could also be correctly labeled “moral practices,” such as one where what is to be considered right and wrong is entirely determined by consulting religious sources. We do not claim that the methods we present are valid in relation to such a “moral practice”.

However, we believe that the kind of moral practice that one should proceed from when teaching ethics to non-philosophy students in universities and colleges is precisely the one that we aim to capture by way of presenting the methods for moral reasoning, in which one tries to justify one’s actions, opinions and decisions to one another in a rational manner, providing arguments for one’s views and trying to identify and defend moral reasons. This is also the practice presumed when taking the smorgasbord approach to teaching ethics. Again, there is no reason to regard the methods-based approach as more universalistic than the smorgasbord approach, since the theories presented in such an approach typically have universalistic pretensions.

### *Impractical*

One of our major reasons for resisting the smorgasbord approach is its impracticality. It does not seem very helpful – for non-philosophy students – to the practical purpose of solving moral problems and reaching morally justified

decisions. Perhaps it might be thought that the methods-based approach is equally impractical. These methods might be considered very theoretical and hard to apply in practice. We do not think they are, if appropriately taught. As stressed above, the theoretical mediation of these methods is not enough. In the end, one's success in reaching morally justified decisions is largely a matter of practice and experience. Such practice can be incorporated to quite a large extent in ethics education in universities and colleges, by using practical exercises, e.g. working with realistic and relevant cases as explained above.

Furthermore, there is nothing to hinder the teacher from complementing the methods-based approach with other tools for aiding moral decision-making. Michael Davis, for instance, suggests as an alternative to a theory-based approach that one provides students with a check-list – a list of questions to test the moral plausibility of the choices one has in some situation where a decision has to be made: “Harm test – does this option do less harm than any alternative? Rights test – would this option violate anyone's right, especially a human right? [...]” (Davis 2014, 7), and so on. Complementing the methods-based approach with such a list might be a good idea if the list is appropriately designed – such a list can then be seen as a list of tentative moral reasons to be tested in a situation. Such tentative reasons can also be derived from the various moral theories – one possibility for an ethics teacher is to derive a list of such tentative reasons in connection with making the students aware of the existence of such theories. Providing a source for possible moral reasons might be the limited role that moral theories could reasonably play in an ethics course for non-philosophy students.

However, neither a list of test-questions nor a list of reasons derived from theories can replace the methods for moral reasoning. Reasons may conflict with each other, there may be no option that passes all the tests on the list, there may be relevant aspects that are not captured by the questions on the list, and so on. In order to deal with tricky moral problems in a responsible and justifiable manner, one has to be able to manage the methods for moral reasoning. Moreover, these methods are not limited to dealing with particular decisions, but may also be applied to more general moral opinions or views.

### *Insufficient*

Lastly, the methods-based approach might be deemed insufficient when it comes to teaching ethics to non-philosophy students. Our reply to the previous worry partly answers this objection as well. There is nothing to hinder the teacher from supplementing this approach in some appropriate way. As explained above, our claim is not that simply presenting the methods for moral reasoning to the students is all that should be going on in ethics education directed to non-philosophy students, or that these methods are the only important thing from a practical or any other perspective. What we claim is that these methods provide the appropriate focus for ethics education directed to non-philosophy students, and we suggest the methods-based approach as the starting point for such education. Depending on context, it may be feasible to

supplement it in various ways. For instance, one useful supplement – if the time and space in the educational program in question allows it – could be to bring up the question of character traits, what kind of person one should be – in particular in relation to one's coming profession. That question may be more or less crucial depending on the context in which ethics is studied.

Even if one wants to go on to teach moral theories, or if one wants to deal with moral issues by way of applying such theories, the ability to manage the methods for moral reasoning is necessary to critically examine, evaluate and ultimately choose among these theories. Hence, starting with the methods is recommended anyway.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we have defended a shift of focus from a theory-based approach to a methods-based approach to teaching ethics to non-philosophy students. The reasons we have given for such a shift are both theoretical and practical. These students have usually not been given the opportunity to form any deeper understanding of how and why moral theories have evolved, how they fit into more comprehensive philosophical frameworks and how philosophers go about defending and criticizing them. Hence, we conclude that a purely theory-based approach to teaching ethics tends to mediate a faulty picture of moral reasoning, where adopting an ethical position appears to be simply a matter of choosing from a smorgasbord of theories. Furthermore, we conclude that the practical usefulness of such an approach is limited. Philosophers widely disagree about which moral theory, if any, that is the correct one. Thus, it is difficult to see why students should be expected to choose between these theories. In addition, without appropriate resources to choose between moral theories, it is difficult to see how the application of such a theory will lead to justified decisions.

The methods-based approach, on the other hand, should arguably be accessible to these students, which is also our experience from teaching ethics to non-philosophy student-groups. The methods for moral reasoning are not difficult to understand and, in theory, are not difficult to apply. In practice, they are often difficult to *fully* apply, but ethics in practice is often difficult, so that should not come as a surprise. In any case, there is no other way to try to justify one's moral opinions and decisions than by trying to apply these methods as carefully as possible. Provided that the students get substantial opportunities to practice these methods, we conclude that the methods-based approach can be practically useful, while still giving the students an accurate picture of moral thinking.

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