

THE USEFULNESS OF MORAL THEORY IN PRACTICAL ETHICS: A QUESTION OF COMPARATIVE COST (A RESPONSE TO HARRIS)

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I find myself agreeing with almost everything in Harris's defense of moral theory except the end:

moral theories can often be useful in resolving moral dilemmas.¹ Both students and practitioners of practical ethics should be constantly reminded of this, because in practical ethics we need all of the help we can get.²

If (as it seems) these two sentences state the conclusion, Harris has committed a *non sequitur*. While making a good argument for the general usefulness of moral theory in practical ethics, he has *not* made any argument for its usefulness to students or practitioners as such. He has simply assumed that what is true of some who engage in practical ethics is true of students and practitioners in particular. *In theory*, of course, moral theory should be useful even to students and practitioners, helping them to identify issues they might have overlooked, to seek information they might otherwise not have thought relevant, and to formulate courses of action that might not otherwise have occurred to them. *In practice*, however, moral theory will seldom, if ever, be useful (or, at least, useful enough). We do not (as Harris claims) need all the help we can get in practical ethics. What we need is all the help we can get at reasonable cost. We should only invest the time and effort needed to learn and use moral theory when the investment is no greater than for an otherwise equally useful alternative. Since there is at least one equally useful alternative requiring much less investment, the time and effort students and practitioners would have to invest in moral theory will (in general) be much greater than necessary for their purposes. So, neither students nor practitioners need moral theory.

By "student," I mean the sort of person an instructor is likely to find in front of her when teaching a course like Engineering Ethics, Business

Ethics, or the like. By “practitioner,” I mean the sort of person who makes a living as an engineer, business manager, government official, or the like. I do not mean someone who serves as an ethics consultant, publishes scholarly work on practical ethics, or otherwise qualifies as an “ethics expert.” For what Harris or I do, moral theory can be useful in the ways Harris specifies—and well worth the extra investment it takes to use it (the costs of learning having long since been paid). But Harris’s conclusion concerns “students and practitioners,” not “ethics experts.”

MORAL THEORY IN THE CLASSROOM AND PRACTICE

Let us begin with the classroom. The first problem with teaching moral theory in a course in practical ethics concerns the instructor. We may distinguish at least three sorts of instructor: 1) qualified moral theorists; 2) philosophers, religious ethicists, or the like who have taken some moral theory courses (whether graduate or undergraduate); and 3) ordinary professors of engineering, business, or the like who have picked up a little moral theory along the way (generally, from reading on their own or from teaching the course before). For purposes of argument, we may assume that a qualified moral theorist will know enough moral theory to teach the two theories that Harris suggests are enough for practical purposes, utilitarianism and “PR theory” (respect-for-persons). But what about those instructors in practical ethics, probably the majority, who are not moral theorists? What reason do we have to believe that they can do a decent job of teaching even these two theories?

Harris’s answer would, I suppose, be that those instructors not “ethics experts” will have a text to draw on, something like his own *Engineering Ethics*. The most recent edition of that excellent book has ten pages on moral theory, five on utilitarianism and five on PR theory.³ The discussion of utilitarianism offers three versions of that theory: cost-benefit analysis (apparently to serve as a bridge to the theory proper), act-utilitarianism, and rule-utilitarianism. The book does much the same for PR theory, distinguishing three versions: the golden-rule approach, the self-defeating approach, and the rights approach. Harris has, in other words, boiled down an enormous literature to ten pages.

Given the space used, the exposition is impressive. But much has been sacrificed. For example, there is far too little about how to measure utility if not (as in cost-benefit analysis) in money. All Harris says is “greatest good.” Determining what “greatest good” means could easily fill a graduate seminar in philosophy, indeed, even determining how to

make interpersonal comparisons of utility could do that. I am not criticizing Harris for failing to say more. I am simply pointing out how limited his exposition of the theory is in fact (and, given the scale of his book, must be).

Judging by allocation of space (half a page to act-utilitarianism against one-and-a-half pages to rule-utilitarianism), Harris prefers rule-utilitarianism. Yet, in the form he gives it, rule-utilitarianism is generally thought to be equivalent to act-utilitarianism. So, why bother with this distinction at all? Harris's answer seems to be that this sort of rule-utilitarianism is valuable in practice even if not in theory: "The rule utilitarian approach to problems brings to our attention an important distinction in moral thinking" (the importance of thinking beyond the particular problem and its solution).⁴

I could say more along these lines concerning Harris's treatment of utilitarianism—and of his treatment of PR theory as well. But I will not because I think I have already made my point. Whatever it is that the typical instructor in practical ethics will learn from the short presentation of "moral theory" in a text like *Engineering Ethics*, it is not moral theory in the sense Harris uses the term in his defense of moral theory—but something much less subtle, a set of rough decision rules or questions with which to approach a practical problem. An instructor who does not know much more about utilitarianism or PR theory than Harris tells him is in no position to teach the theory, only to teach those few rules or questions.

Those instructors who, though not moral theorists, know more of moral theory than the self-taught, that is, those philosophers, religious ethicists, or the like who have taken some moral theory courses, should be able to teach more moral theory than the self-taught. There are, however, at least two questions remaining about what they will teach. One is how much moral theory the classroom will allow them to teach. I will deal with that question soon. I will consider the other question now: what reason is there to think that such non-experts will get the moral theory they do teach right?

Most moral theorists have, I think, noticed how often those who know something of moral theory but are not expert get a moral theory wrong or, at least, fail to appreciate how problematic certain interpretations of it are. Harris's defense of moral theory's usefulness seems to assume some quality control on the theory taught (for example, the quality control Harris's own book might impose). But, where theory is taught by those not expert, there is generally *no* quality control. Someone who

begins with Harris's text may not stop with what is in the text. Given how thin Harris's explication is, there must often be a temptation to say more when an instructor thinks he knows more (whether he in fact knows more or not).

That is enough about the instructor. Now, what about the students? Let's suppose they have an instructor like Harris, someone who actually understands moral theory. How much moral theory can such an instructor teach typical students enrolled in Engineering Ethics, Business Ethics, or other courses in practical ethics? That question will have a somewhat different answer depending on the amount of time the instructor is willing to allocate to teaching moral theory. Harris's text suggests that the instructor would allocate one or (at most) two hours in a semester course (a course of 50 or so hours) to teach the students the basics of utilitarianism and PR theory.⁵

When I teach an undergraduate course in moral theory, I devote at least four weeks (12 classroom hours) to utilitarianism and about as long to PR theory. That's at least twelve times as much as Harris' text suggests be allocated to the same project. Perhaps I am a bad teacher. But after so much more time trying to teach the two moral theories, my students still have only a very rough grasp of them. I would not want my life to depend on their understanding of either theory. My experience with students who do not sign up for the moral theory course but instead take Engineering Ethics, Business Ethics, or another course in practical ethics is even less happy. Most of them seem to go blank as soon as I start to explain a moral theory. Is Harris much more successful at teaching moral theory than I am? Even if he is, what are we to expect from the ordinary instructor?

That brings me to the world outside the classroom. The typical practitioner is a former undergraduate who has forgotten much of what he learned in Engineering Ethics, Business Ethics, or the like years ago (assuming any formal training in practical ethics). If the typical practitioner had any moral theory as an undergraduate or graduate student (which, of course, the typical practitioner did not), he did not learn enough to use moral theory reliably then. So, now that the theory is no longer fresh in mind, how likely is it that the typical practitioner will make reliable use of it now?

Harris has, I think, as philosophers often do, confused the ideal world with the actual one. His defense of moral theory as useful to students and practitioners is a philosopher's dream, perhaps true in theory but certainly not in practice.

IN PLATO'S CAVE

One conclusion that might be drawn from the foregoing argument is that students (and practitioners) need more moral theory, not less, say, a whole course or more before they take Engineering Ethics, Business Ethics, or the like. While there are doubtless many reasons to require every student to take one or more courses in moral theory, that they will act more ethically is not one of them. There is no evidence that students who take even several courses in moral theory are more likely to act ethically than those who take none.⁶ And we should, I think, have substantial evidence that moral theory does benefit students enough in that way before imposing a required course on them for that reason. A requirement should rest on more than a well-meaning belief that the course will do some good.

Anyway, the failures of teaching a little moral theory do not force the conclusion that what is needed is more moral theory. There is good reason to think that no amount of teaching moral theory can be justified by the better practical decision-making likely to result. We have already noticed that what Harris's text in fact seems to teach is not so much two moral theories as six rough but useful ways to think about an ethical problem. We might then try to boil down other moral theories in the way Harris has boiled down utilitarianism and PR theory. Indeed, we might even try to boil down those two theories further (turning them into a half dozen or so questions, tests, or directives). What we would then have is a list to guidelines to help students or practitioners think through specific ethical problems. Here is such a list (one I have used—as part of a larger decision procedure in place of moral theory—when teaching Architecture Ethics, Business Ethics, Engineering Ethics, and the like):

- **Harm test**—does this option do less harm than any alternative?
- **Publicity test**—would I want my choice of this option published in the newspaper?
- **Defensibility test**—could I defend my choice of this option before a Congressional committee, a committee of my peers, or my parents?
- **Reversibility test**—would I still think the choice of this option good if I were one of those adversely affected by it?
- **Virtue test**—what would I become if I choose this option *often*?
- **Professional test**—what might my profession's ethics committee say about this option?

- **Colleague test**—what *do* my colleagues say when I describe my problem and suggest this option as my solution?
- **Organization test**—what *does* the organization's ethics officer or legal counsel say about this?

This is neither the only list possible nor necessarily the best.⁷ All I claim here is that it will serve in place of moral theory—doing pretty much *everything* teaching moral theory is supposed to do in a practical ethics course or for a practitioner with a problem but at lower cost in time and effort.

That these tests correspond (roughly) to various moral theories should, I think, be obvious to theorists. The harm test asks about the consequences of a particular act (or policy). It is, then, an act-utilitarian test (though it is silent about benefits). The publicity test asks a question a typical PR theory would suggest, since what we do not want others to know is generally (but not always) something that fails to respect their agency. Something similar would be true of the defensibility and the reversibility tests. The virtue test asks a question that both rule-utilitarianism and virtue theory suggest. The last three tests (professional, colleague, and organizational) ask questions we might associate with relativist theories. For those who think rights represent a distinct category of moral concern, a “rights test” might be added (say, “Does this option violate anyone’s rights?”). The same for care theory, feminist theory, natural law theory, or the like (for example, “Would I choose this option if I cared about the people affected?”).

What makes these tests easier to teach than moral theory is that they are drawn directly from common sense. Students can apply them with reasonable accuracy almost as soon as they have read them because they have in fact already been applying them more or less (though generally using one to make a decision and forgetting the rest). The problem with this method, if it is a problem, is that there is no simple routine for dealing with an option that passes some tests but not others—except to develop a new option that does better. I do not think that *is* a problem for two reasons.

First, Harris makes the point that while all moral theories aspire to completeness, none in fact achieves it. That is why he wants to teach at least two moral theories (and would, apparently, teach more if he had time). The second theory is to catch relevant considerations the first lets slip. Neither theory is to be treated as decisive. Thus the problem of choosing among “tests” (or theories) is not a feature distinguishing my approach from Harris’s—and, according to Harris, it is not a problem at

all but part of a strategy by which to compensate for the (actual) incompleteness of all moral theories. We use the theories as heuristics (as means of learning more about the problem before us); we are not to let any theory make the decision for us. The same is true for my “tests.”

A second reason that disagreement among the tests is not a problem is that, insofar as my approach differs from Harris’s, mine is more likely to catch relevant considerations that slip past Harris’s moral theories. After all, Harris’s approach relies on just two theories (each in three varieties). My approach, however implicitly, relies on at least four. Insofar as Harris is right that moral theories are in fact imperfect guides to conduct, my approach must be better than his. All else equal, four different screens should catch more of what we want to catch than two.

Indeed, I think the worry about conflicting test results may itself be the product of thinking of these tests as (nascent) theories. When theories conflict, we are inclined to choose between the two theories. They cannot all be right. Insofar as all are moral theories, they are competing for the same title, *Correct Moral Theory*. Each includes the implicit claim that all other moral theories, or at least all others interestingly different, are inadequate (if not just plain wrong). Thinking in terms of moral tests rather than moral theories does not carry the same implicit claim. Each test can be relevant without being decisive. We are used to having more than one imperfect way to check for something (say, inoperable prostate cancer, lying in a witness, or good water under our land). If all the tests point to the same answer, we are relatively confident. If some point to one answer and some to another and we have time, we may use a more expensive test. If we lack time, we may decide, aware that we are taking a gamble.

If (as rarely happens) a student asks why a certain test works, we need not explain the moral theory it stands in for (though we could). We may simply advise the student to take Ethics (or Moral Theory) next term and, in the meantime, not to use the test if she does not see the point of it. We might even ask her to suggest a replacement.

CONCLUSION

When I teach moral theory, I stress that the theories are *supposed to be* extensionally equivalent (that is, yield the same decisions as the others at least in cases considered clear)—even though they approach decisions in radically different ways. Any theory not extensionally equivalent to the others will, in that respect at least, be open to counter-example, and every

counter-example makes a theory less appealing. The great moral theorists are great in part at least because they found ways for their moral theory to absorb (or otherwise disarm) many of the supposed counter-examples (and related objections). Moral theory is a sort of arms race between theorists who develop new counter-examples (or related objections) and theorists who find ways to absorb them into the theory. The theories as such, the few simple principles that constitute their opening statement, are not what make moral theory interesting to those of us who like doing moral theory. Those principles generally come from common sense, philosophers contributing little more than clarity and precision. What makes moral theory interesting is the arms race. Can we find a counter-example that will shake up those who defend this or that theory? Can we absorb this or that supposed counter-example that now seems to threaten our theory?

For anyone else but a moral theorist that arms race is not likely to be interesting (which explains the blank look on so many students in practical ethics whenever I get into the details of a moral theory). What often does interest many non-theorist is a certain version of the moral theory understood as a decision procedure rather than an attempt to understand morality. What interests the non-theorist is typically something strikingly novel about the decision procedure, for example, that it gives clear results where the usual ways of thinking about a problem do not—the very feature that, for a theorist, is a sign of trouble. For that reason alone, I think a little moral theory, say, an hour or two in a semester, is dangerous—more likely to mislead students and practitioners than to lead them to a good decision. I always worry when a student begins a response to a practical problem with some such words as this: “I am a utilitarian [or a Kantian or whatever] and *therefore* I would....” What usually follows is a caricature: Mill or Kant as Voltaire would have presented him in *Candide*. What we want from students and practitioners alike is instead something like, “All things considered, including the consequences, our purposes, what my colleagues would do...., I would....” The test approach defended here is, I think, more likely to achieve that than the moral-theory approach, however boiled down the theory. For students and practitioners, the less said about theory, the better.

NOTES

¹ I have an objection to the use of “dilemma” here. What Harris seems to intend is “problem.” “Dilemma” is a useful term from logic for a choice between two options that are or at least seem to be mutually exclusive, exhaustive, and equally unfavorable. “Dilemma” should be saved for that unusual choice, not wasted on situations that might more accurately be described in less melodramatic terms. Harris’s own example of a dilemma in which moral theory might help, the Engineer James case, does not seem to be a dilemma at all (Harris, 10). James has several options open to him beside simply keeping the secret or simply using it. He might, for example, check with his present company’s legal department to see whether the “secret,” the general approach to organizing the assembly line, is legally a trade secret (given that James himself developed the approach). The lawyer may suggest that the company can simply buy the right to use the secret. The engineer might also want to check with his professional society to determine whether this is even the sort of information an engineer should keep secret. (My impression is that what the knowledge James wishes to use is the sort engineers are supposed to share.) Practical ethics would be better if the term “dilemma,” with its suggestion of only two bad options, were banned outright.

² Charles E. Harris, “Is Moral Theory Useful in Practical Ethics?” *Teaching Ethics*, Fall 2009.

³ Charles E. Harris, Michael S. Pritchard, and Michael J. Rabins, *Engineering Ethics: Cases and Concept, 4th Edition* (Wadsworth: Belmont, CA, 2009), 58-69.

⁴ Harris, Pritchard, and Rabins, 63.

⁵ I reach this (rough) number—about 1 in 30—by dividing the 10 pages Harris assigns moral theory in his text by the total number of pages in the text (299)—and assuming he might expect an instructor to skip some sections on specific issues in engineering ethics.

⁶ The only evidence here concerns moral judgment and philosophy courses in general. Graduate students in philosophy average higher scores on tests of moral judgment than most other graduate students—and than most undergraduates or practitioners. See, for example, James Rest, “The Major Components of Morality,” in *Morality, Moral Development, and Moral Behavior*, W. Kurtines and J. Gewirtz (eds.), New York, Wiley, 1985, pp. 24-38 (and research described there). Unfortunately, this evidence leaves open several questions relevant here, including: whether the moral theory component of philosophy training is what explains the higher average score; whether these philosophy students are in practice any more moral than those with lower scores on moral judgment; and what moral judgment has to do with the ethical judgment we seek to teach in engineering ethics, business ethics, or the like.

⁷ For several other lists, see http://commfaculty.fullerton.edu/lester/courses/517/decision_making.doc (accessed October 24, 2009). See also the quite different list in Bernard Gert, *A New Justification of the Moral Rules* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 285.

