

Ethics and the Good Life

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RATIONALE

“I cannot see how to refute the arguments for the subjectivity of ethical values, but I find myself incapable of believing that all that is wrong with wanton cruelty is that I don’t like it.” Bertrand Russell ⁱ

“If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.”
Alexander Solzhenitsyn ⁱⁱ

Ever since I have conducted student discussion groups on the question of ethical relativism I have noticed the ease with which my students have accepted that philosophy. This is not just because of their age and lack of experience with serious ethical quandaries but because they have not been made to think seriously about the philosophy of ethics. Although I have taught a short unit on ethics as part of the Theory of Knowledge class, I have not spent enough time on both gathering readings from outside their text and using literature to assist in the discussion of various ethical issues. This unit is intended to address these concerns.

In 2009 I participated in a seminar presented by the UNC Humanities Program entitled “What is the Good Life? Searching for ‘Success’ from Plato to Prozac.” Since then, I have wanted to incorporate some of that discussion in my Theory of Knowledge class. I decided to experiment with a short discussion of this topic at the end of last year. Although it went well, the timing of the discussion of such an important topic did not fit well with seniors, many of whom were already checked out of school mentally. So, besides expanding my study of the good life with additional readings, I decided to move up the unit so I could catch those students who had not already developed a terminal case of senioritis.

While contemplating the timing issue of both units I came to the conclusion that I needed to tie both units together. Teaching a unit on ethics in isolation from its connection to our concepts of the good life would be less meaningful. It is for this reason that I decided to follow the ethics discussion with an investigation of the good life beginning by making the important connection between living an ethical life and a good life.

The International Baccalaureate (IB) program requires all its diploma candidates to take the Theory of Knowledge (ToK) class. Trying to state what the course requires is very difficult but if it could be described in one question it would be “How do we know what we know?” The class is loosely organized around two topics. The first one is how do we acquire knowledge? This involves looking at the four ways of knowing: reason, emotion, language, and perception. The second is what are the basic areas of knowledge? Beside ethics, this part of the course is concerned with how knowledge is acquired in the following fields: history, human and natural sciences, the arts, mathematics, and religion. At the center of the course is what the IB program refers to as the “knower’s perspective.” In all the papers and oral presentations required of the students, one of the ways they are evaluated is their expression of their thoughts on the subject at hand, accompanied by an examination of the knowledge issues and always considering counterclaims.

This spirit of critical inquiry is central to the class. In fact the first objective for ToK is that students should be able to “analyze critically knowledge claims, their underlying assumptions and their implications.” The importance of looking at issues from other perspectives, particularly different cultures, is also a key objective of the class. Finally, the IB program has an ambitious goal for its participants in the form of a “Learner Profile.” One of the parts of this profile is the idea that all IB students strive to be “principled.” This is defined as acting “with integrity and honesty, with a strong sense of fairness, justice and respect for the dignity of the individual.” Additionally, “they take responsibility for their own actions and the consequences that accompany them.” I believe that, besides fitting in with the ToK curriculum, these two units go a long way in encouraging my students to indeed be “principled.”

NOTE: Each of the days begins with one or more quotes. They are excellent introductions to the topics of the day and should be briefly discussed.

THE FIRST UNIT – Ethics

“Everything has been figured out, except how to live.” Jean-Paul Sartre ⁱⁱⁱ

SUMMARY

The above quote by Sartre indicates why any study of ethics is so challenging. There seems to be some agreement about what is right and wrong on the grand scale of things but little agreement on the personal dilemmas faced in ethical arguments. This makes it very difficult for individuals to get beyond the idea that everyone’s personal ethical decisions are right for them. It even makes one wonder if it is possible to acquire real knowledge in the study of ethics. However, it is important to at least examine some of the more important ethical theories in the history of philosophy. After having the class wrestle with some ethical dilemmas we will define and discuss the following ethical

theories: utilitarianism, religious and Kantian ethics, contract theory, ethical egoism and libertarianism. We will spend about one day on each of the theories above and use either literature or case studies to dig deeper into the topic. We will also engage in debates on topics that relate to these theories. Hopefully, at the end of the unit, the students will have thought more deeply about important ethical ideas with the idea that they will apply this to future personal moral dilemmas.

Day 1 – Reasoning, Ethical Dilemmas and Defining Terms

“Ethical axioms are found and tested not very differently from the axioms of science. Truth is what stands the test of experience.” Albert Einstein ^{iv}

Moral Reasoning

As the above quote suggests it is necessary to convince students that “not all arguments are equally good.”^v First, any assertion must be accompanied by a logical argument. It is important that students be held accountable for valid arguments. At the beginning of this class students will be introduced to the following arguments. First, we will look at arguments that are based on false premises. Second, we will look at claims that may be logically valid but still not true. Finally, examples of fully true assertions will be studied. Russ Shafer-Landau, in his book *The Fundamentals of Ethics*, has an excellent discussion of this important concept in his introduction. He gives several examples of the three methods of argument above and also includes a three-part test to judge the validity of claims. I particularly like his explanation of the evolution of a claim regarding meat eating from logically invalid to valid.^{vi} For a deeper, yet not exhaustive, discussion of this issue you could look at the following short pamphlet: “The Thinker’s Guide to Understanding the Foundations of Ethical Reasoning” by Dr. Richard Paul and Dr. Linda Elder.

Ethical Dilemmas

There are many examples of hypothetical moral dilemmas that can spark significant discussion. I believe that you should mix the hypothetical with the real. That is why I would choose the 2 examples Michael Sandel uses in his book *Justice*.^{vii} The first example is in most ethical theory books and it concerns a runaway trolley. Rather than discuss the specifics of the dilemma I will simply say that it (there are several variations) involves a decision to save many lives while sacrificing one life. The second dilemma is a real life quandary that occurred in the Afghan war in June 2005. American soldiers were on patrol and they spotted a goat herder and his son. Because they were in the middle of territory controlled by the enemy (the Taliban) they didn’t know what to do with these civilians. If they let them go they might tell the Taliban where they were. Taking prisoners was not an option, so they decided to let them go. The result was that the 2 did indeed inform the enemy and all but one of the patrol was killed. Additionally,

a helicopter was shot down as it was trying to rescue the US soldiers. Both of these examples should spark plenty of discussion but I think the conversation should be conducted with the previous points about logical argument in mind. Much of this discussion is also an excellent introduction to the first unit that will be discussed- utilitarianism.

Defining Terms

If possible (and this may have to be postponed to the next day), the major ethical terms to be discussed should be defined. There are many ethical theories but I have chosen to discuss 5 general ones: utilitarianism, religious and Kantian Ethics, contract theory, and ethical egoism and libertarianism. The definition of these ideas can be found in any general book on philosophy. Rather than give the definitions here I will direct you to 2 books that have reasonably concise discussions of all of these terms. First Robert C. Solomon's book *The Big Questions: A short Introduction to Philosophy* discusses these theories in his chapter on "Morality and the Good Life." This also is helpful in the transition between the two units. For a deeper discussion you could consult Shafer-Landau's book (chapters 5,7,8,11-14).

Homework

Students will have 2 reading assignments. First, they will read a brief selection from the first chapter ("The Principle of Utility") of Jeremy Bentham's *An Introduction to the Principals of Morals and Legislation*. Students should pay close attention to Bentham's arguments and his definition of the principle of utility. Second, students should read the short story "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas" by Ursula LeGuin. They must come to class prepared to state whether they would have left Omelas or stayed and done something to help the little girl.

Day 2 – Utilitarianism

"When a man attempts to combat the principle of utility, it is with reasons drawn, without his being aware of it, from that very principle itself." Jeremy Bentham^{viii}

Introduction

Students may have struggled a bit with the Bentham reading, so I think it is important to give some context to Bentham's thinking and the way he used his theory. It was his belief that he had developed a "science of morality" and that this ideology could help improve early 19th century Britain.^{ix} Examples of his application to British society can be seen in his efforts for prison reform. A good discussion can be found in Sandel's *Justice* (34-48).

The Class

After the introduction students should be prepared to discuss Bentham's principle of utility. As much as possible students should support their assertions by reference to the text. As an illustration of the theory you should discuss Bentham's utilitarian solution to the beggar problem in London. That is, he thought that they should all be placed in a workhouse. Comparisons of this to applying the principle of utility to today's homeless might spark a great discussion and would naturally lead into a look at the drawbacks of that philosophy (ably discussed in Sandel).

LeGuin's work is similar (but slightly shorter) to the short story "The Lottery." It lends itself well to a perfect illustration of the philosophy of utilitarianism and also its problems. In the "perfect" world of Omelas everybody's happiness is connected to the misery of a young girl. At the end of the story, several of the inhabitants of the town decide to leave rather than live happily at the expense of the girl. Would the students leave or would they do something about the girl knowing that it would risk their society's perfect life?

The Debate

To complete the discussion of the theory of utilitarianism students will engage in a debate on the use of torture. The issue at hand should be the classic dilemma posed by the possibility that a terrorist might know the location of a nuclear bomb in a major American city. Should he be tortured? The debate should be conducted in the following format. Two groups of students will develop the opening statements and two groups will prepare questions to ask the other side. While each side is listing its supports the other side is writing them down. After a brief interval, they will present a rebuttal to each point. Following the other presentation and rebuttal, each side will ask questions of their opponents. Hopefully, this process will give a practical application to the utilitarian principle.

Homework

Students should read James Rachels' "The Morality of Euthanasia" in Shafer-Landau's *The Ethical Life*. This provides a great transition between utilitarian and religious ethics. Rachels makes the case for active euthanasia using a utilitarian argument and his own defense of the claim. Students can answer the questions at the end of the reading. Students participating in the debate on Oregon's assisted suicide law (The Death with Dignity Act) should read about the law and the 2010 report.

Day 3 – Religious Ethics

“When men cease to believe in God, they don’t then believe in nothing – they believe in anything.” G.K. Chesterton ^x

Introduction

One of the most powerful arguments for the existence of God and the religious institutions that evolve out of this is the argument for an ultimate source for moral authority. It is often argued that without religious ethics the world would be absent a true moral compass. The purpose of this class is to examine the assumptions upon which this is based and to provide counter arguments. The real life dilemma of euthanasia will be the primary vehicle to explore these arguments.

The Readings

The class should begin with a discussion of the homework on active euthanasia. Following that, the teacher would lay out the religious ethics arguments. For that Shafer-Landau has a good summary in chapter 5 of *The Fundamentals of Ethics*. They are as follows: 1) “Religious belief is needed for moral motivation”; 2) “God is the creator of morality”; and 3) “Religion is an essential source of Moral Guidance”.^{xi} He also follows each assumption with counter arguments. A strong rebuttal of the arguments for religious morality is also contained in Chapter 6 of Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion*. After this, students will give the religious arguments for the case they read about for homework.

The Debate

The debate for the day is on the Oregon Assisted Suicide law. Selected students will participate and the format of the debate will be similar to the one conducted on Day 2. The organization will be as follows: Opening presentation by the side in favor of the law, rebuttal by their opponents, opening presentation by the con side, questioning by the pro side followed by the con side and a summary presentation by both sides. The remainder of the class will be taking notes and will give their opinion on who won the debate.

Homework

Students will watch Episode 6 of Michael Sandel’s “Justice” series online. They should be prepared to discuss the questions on the Advanced Discussion section. The class will be divided into 4 groups representing the 4 categories of questions (Freedom, Law, Humanity, and Duty). Students should also be prepared to discuss their decision regarding the “What would you do?” scenario.

Day 4 – Kantian Ethics

“If you want to know the foulness of lying for yourself, consider the lying of someone else and how you shun it and despise the man who lies and regard his communication as foul.” Al Ghazali^{xii}

Introduction

One of the most important contributions to ethical philosophy was made Immanuel Kant. It was Kant’s belief that reason can and should be used in ethical theory. In arguing that all moral duties are absolute, he stated that individuals must not use subjective reasoning to justify their own individual ethical decisions. He employed duty ethics to state that all individual moral decisions must be made with the idea that we apply our actions to their effect on society if everyone made the same decision. If I say that lying is OK for me, then I have to acknowledge that everyone can lie. Obviously, that would create chaos in a world where nothing could be true.

The Readings

Michael Sandel’s lecture series on “Justice” are excellent and are accompanied by a book which summarizes his key points. Kant’s concept of the categorical imperative is central to his argument and an excellent excerpt from his writing in his Shafer-Landau’s *The Ethical Life* (70-83). I think that if students see Sandel’s lecture and do the questions they will not need to read the excerpt. However, it is incumbent on the teacher to be aware of Kant’s explanation of the categorical imperative and his view of duty ethics.

The Class

The class will be divided into the 4 groups depending on which questions they answered for homework. After discussing their answers to the questions, they will share their findings (based on consensus in the group) with the class. To conclude the class, a discussion should be conducted on the “What would you do?” scenario.

Homework

Students should watch the You Tube cartoon “John Rawls Shares Some Thoughts.” They should come to class prepared to discuss the 2 the principal of the “veil of ignorance.” Following this they must answer the question on Michael Sandel’s “Justice” online lectures regarding the inequality of David Letterman’s and a teacher’s salary. For a more thorough discussion of Rawls’ theories you can consult Chapter 6 in Rawls’ book *Justice* or watch his lecture (Episode 8) online. Interested students may also like to see that lecture.

Day 5 – The Contract Theory and Ethical Egoism

“Hereby it is manifest that during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war: and such a war as is of every man against every man.” Thomas Hobbes^{xiii}

“Inequalities are arbitrary unless it is reasonable to expect that they will work out to everyone’s advantage and provided that the positions to which they attach are open to all.” John Rawls^{xiv}

“I swear, by my life and my love of it, that I will never live for the sake of another man, nor ask another man to live for mine.” Ayn Rand^{xv}

Introduction – A discussion of the contract theory is a nice bridge between Kantian ethics and ethical egoism. Both social contract theorists and Kant recognized the need for a rational approach to ethical theory and they both associated with modern liberal notions of equality and fairness. The greatest modern proponent of this theory is John Rawls. In his book *Theory of Justice* he lays out the ideal of the “veil of ignorance.” Briefly, this concept asks persons in society to pretend that “an imaginary device [has eliminated] all knowledge of [ones] distinctive traits”.^{xvi} For example, one’s race, religion, gender or even socio-economic place in society must be forgotten. Once this is done, it is assumed that individuals would make decisions about morality and justice that would be more fair and rational. This theory is in stark contrast with the philosophy of Ayn Rand. In her 2 1950 novels *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*, Rand attracted thousands of fiercely devoted followers who embraced her idea of “the virtue of selfishness.” She believed that “acting in one’s own interest, in an enlightened way, will result in the mutual benefit of us all”^{xvii}. A reasonably brief if biased description of Rand’s idea can be found in Solomon’s *The Big Questions*.

The Class

We will begin the lecture by looking at their definitions of the “veil of ignorance.” Additionally, the teacher should introduce the concept of the “difference principle.” According to this principle “only those social and economic inequalities are permitted that work to the benefit of the least advantaged members of society”.^{xviii} After that, the class will be divided into small groups and discuss their opinions on the salary inequality issue. The discussion must focus on both their opinions but also on how Rawls would have felt about this inequity. Following the groups’ reports to the whole class, the subject of affirmative action will be discussed. To focus this discussion the case of *Hopwood v. Texas* should be presented. Briefly, the issue was the rejection of Cheryl Hopwood from the University of Texas Law School and her contention that that decision was unfair as African American and Latino with lower grades and test scores were admitted before to satisfy the school’s affirmative action policy. In each group, students will discuss the arguments for and against the Texas Law School’s opinion. The last

exercise of the day focuses on the philosophy of Ayn Rand. After watching Mike Wallace's interview with Ayn Rand on YouTube, students will be required to respond briefly to the following question: Is it possible to be completely selfless when performing an act of kindness or charity?

Homework

Students will read Kurt Vonnegut's short story "Harrison Bergeron." They must be prepared to defend their opinion of the society created by Vonnegut and state how they think Rawls and Rand would view it.

Day 6 – Moral Absolutism and Moral Relativism

"These are my principles and if you don't like them – I have others." Groucho Marx ^{xix}

"I never did, or countenanced, in public life, a single act inconsistent with the strictest good faith; having never believed there was one code of morality for a public, and another for a private man." Thomas Jefferson ^{xx}

Introduction

Any discussion of ethical theories must address the issue of moral absolutism and relativism. This is particularly true for young adults. They are moving away from the influence of their parents and are developing an ethical framework that is in many ways both similar to and different from their parents'. The influence of peers is very important in developing that ethical framework. The theories that we have been discussing are examples of ethical monism. In other words, they are based on the idea that there is "one supreme rule that serves as the basis of all morality".^{xxi} In the last class of the ethical unit I think it is important to explore the contrast between this idea and the belief that there is no absolute ethical principal. The textbook I use in the ToK class, *Theory of Knowledge for the IB Diploma*, has an excellent and brief discussion of moral relativism on pages 367-371). Those who want a more thorough discussion of the topic can look in Shafer-Landau's book mentioned above in chapters 15 and 16. A more concise argument for moral relativism can be found in an article written by J.L. Mackie in Shafer-Landau's *The Ethical Life* (152-160).

The Class

At the beginning of the class we will finish our discussion of the social contract theory and ethical egoism by getting their opinion on the perfectly equal society created by Kurt Vonnegut, being sure to note the hypothetical positions that Rawls and Rand would take on this. Following that, we will have a brief discussion on the issue of income inequality that exists in the US. This issue, brought to the forefront recently by the Occupy Wall

Street movement, has become a key issue in the run-up to the 2012 presidential campaign and promises to be a pressing one for many years. The discussion should center on the following question: “Is it right for 1% of the population to own 40% of the nation’s wealth?”

The remainder of the class should focus on the arguments around ethical relativism. First, we would define the term and then list on the board the arguments for and against ethical relativism. Finally, the students will be broken into smaller groups and discuss the validity of the seven “prima facie duties” developed by philosopher W.D. Ross. These duties are non-absolute; however, they are of “fundamental importance” because they cannot “be derived from one another, or from any more basic principle”.^{xxii} These duties are fidelity, reparations, gratitude, justice, beneficence, self-improvement, and non-maleficence. A brief definition of each of these in on page 221 of *The Fundamental of Ethics*.

Homework

Students will read a report from the *Daily Mail* on an investigation by *BusinessInsider.com* that focuses on the allegations against Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook, that are a central part of the film *The Social Network*. Their task is to identify the accusations leveled at Zuckerberg and the validity of those accusations.

Days 7 and 8 – *The Social Network*

"I don't hate anybody. The Winklevi aren't suing me for intellectual property theft. They're suing me because for the first time in their lives, the world didn't work the way it was supposed to for them." Jesse Eisenberg playing Mark Zuckerberg in the film *The Social Network*^{xxiii}

The Movie

David Fincher’s film is based on the book *The Accidental Billionaires* by Ben Mezrich. Nominated for 8 Academy Awards (and winner of 3), the film looks at the controversial CEO of Facebook through the deposition of Zuckerberg at a civil hearing where he is being sued by both his best friend Eduardo Saverin and the Winklevoss twins. The film goes back and forth from the deposition to the past highlighting the key moments in the development of the idea of Facebook through its early growth as the leading social networking site in the world. This film fits nicely after a study of ethics and the next unit on the good life. In addition, the film talks about something virtually every student uses.

The Classes

Most of both classes will be taken up with watching the film. On the seventh day, we will introduce the film by talking first about the article they read the night before, identifying the key accusations against Zuckerberg and their reactions to it. I will talk briefly about some aspects of film that they should pay attention to, focusing on the areas where the film was nominated for Academy Awards (editing, soundtrack, cinematography, and acting). We will then watch the 120 minute film finishing in the last third of the eighth day. After the film, the class will get into small groups and discuss the following questions. First, was Zuckerberg acting in an unethical way towards both the Winkelvosses and Savarin? They should consider their own opinions and in their arguments they should bring in the ethical theories we have discussed over the past 5 days. Second, was the life led by both Zuckerberg and Sean Parker (played by Justin Timberlake) a “good life”?

Homework

Students will be divided into 2 groups. One will find a song that discusses the connection between happiness and the good life and bring in the lyrics. The other group will find a cartoon that discusses this connection as well. Finally, all students will read the article “Against Happiness” in van de Lagemaat on pages 401-402.

Day 9 – Happiness

“In view of the fact that all knowledge and every pursuit aims at some good, what is the highest of all goods achievable by action? Verbally there is very general agreement; for both the general run of men and people of superior refinement it is happiness; they identify living well and doing well with being happy.” Aristotle^{xxiv}

“Happiness, n. An agreeable sensation arising from contemplating the misery of another.” Ambrose Bierce^{xxv}

“Happiness is good health and a bad memory.” Ingrid Bergman^{xxvi}

"Pleasure is not happiness. It has no more importance than a shadow following a man."
Muhammad Ali^{xxvii}

"To love is to suffer. To avoid suffering one must not love. But then one suffers from not loving. Therefore, to love is to suffer; not to love is to suffer; to suffer is to suffer. To be happy is to love. To be happy, then, is to suffer, but suffering makes one unhappy. Therefore, to be happy one must love or love to suffer or suffer from too much happiness." Woody Allen^{xxviii}

Introduction

Any discussion of the Good Life has to begin with a look at the connection between it and happiness. This has been done from the ancient Greek philosophers to Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism of the 19th century. What happiness is connected to has brought about some serious disagreements between these same philosophers. The results of that disagreement will be the subject of the 2 days that follow this general discussion of what happiness means and how one goes about achieving it.

The Class

Students will be divided into small groups with those who have brought in a song and those who have brought in a cartoon in the same groups. After sharing their songs or cartoons they will pick one of each to report to the class. Discussion of each of these presentations will follow. Then each group will discuss the following questions: What is happiness? Can one have happiness with sadness? What are the ingredients for one to be happy? After arriving at the answers to these questions through consensus, each group will present their answers to the class. The concluding activity of the class will be a whole class discussion of the following question: Can happiness be measured? Prior to that we will look at a brief explanation of the concept of Gross National Happiness as it was applied in the nation of Bhutan on You Tube ([What is "Gross National Happiness" ? Explained by Morten Sondergaard](#)).

Homework

Students will read either Epicurus' "Letter to Menoecus" or the excerpt from John Stuart Mill's *Utilitarianism* from Shafer-Landau's *The Ethical Life* (10-14 or 15-23). They should answer the questions that are at the end of both readings.

Day 10 – Hedonism and Selflessness

"The pleasant life is not the product of one drinking party after another ... or of the seafood and other delicacies afforded by a luxurious table. On the contrary, it is the result of sober thinking." Epicurus^{xxix}

"The exclusive worship of the bitch-goddess Success is our national disease."
William James^{xxx}

"We are formed and molded by our thoughts. Those whose minds are shaped by selfless thoughts give joy when they speak or act. Joy follows them like a shadow that never leaves them." Buddha^{xxxi}

Introduction

Most people live a life somewhere between the two extremes of complete hedonism and selflessness, shading perhaps closer to the former rather than the latter. Some would even argue that complete selflessness is impossible as we discussed on day five when looking at the philosophy of Ayn Rand. I think it is important that we look at the differences between the hedonism proposed by Epicurus (and, to a certain extent, John Stuart Mill) and the hedonism practiced by many today. That is why we begin the day looking at the reading by Epicurus and Mill, looking carefully at the claim made by Mill that it is “better to be Socrates dissatisfied, than a fool satisfied”.^{xxxii} However, we live in a world today where the notion of hedonism is centered around the high value we place on the acquisition of material objects and the satisfaction of sensual pleasures. So, what better way to get at a discussion started on that subject than to show the “Greed” speech in Oliver Stone’s movie *Wall Street*. In this speech Gordon Gekko is making a strong case for Ayn Rand’s “virtue of selfishness.” Students will also read an excerpt from Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*. In this dystopian world “People are happy; they get what they want, and they never want what they can’t get.”^{xxxiii} Even better, the citizens of Western Europe have access to the best drugs, which have the effect of reducing their life options. Finally, we will look at what most in the West would see as a radical case for selflessness in an article in the *New York Times* by Peter Singer. What better way to lead into our discussion of happiness, virtue, and freedom than to discuss his argument for a significant divestment of the material goods we have to help solve world poverty.

The Class

We will begin the class by looking at the song “Once in a Lifetime” performed by the Talking Heads and written by David Byrne. Many interpreted this song as a critique of the excesses of the 1980’s; however, Byrne said that was not his intent but instead it was about how we don’t think much about what we are doing in life and often act as if we were on “autopilot”.^{xxxiv} Following a brief student discussion of the lyrics, students will briefly summarize the articles by Epicurus and Mill, stating their responses to the questions at the end of the readings. Next we will list the beliefs of hedonism according to these 2 philosophers and add modern day aspects that both Epicurus and Mill would probably not agree with. Following that discussion, we will look at the excerpt from *Wall Street* and discuss the argument made by Gordon Gekko that greed is good, adding any additional parts to the definition of hedonism. At this point the class will be divided up into 2 groups. One group will read the excerpt from Huxley’s *Brave New World* and the other will read an excerpt from Singer’s *Times* article mentioned above. Both can be found in Shafer-Landau’s *The Ethical Life* pages 25-30 and 200-207. For those that read Huxley, they must give the arguments for and against hedonism given by the Savage and Mustapha Mond. They should also notice how language plays into the argument. The other group, using the questions at the end of the section as a guide, should give Singer’s argument for the middle class in the West giving substantial financial aid to agencies that address world poverty. I’m sure this will lead to some vigorous discussion as Singer’s argument will most certainly challenge their thinking.

Homework

Students will read the excerpt from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* in Shafer-Landau's *The Ethical Life* (105-116) and answer the questions at the end of the reading.

Day Eleven – Virtue

“One isn't necessarily born with courage, but one is born with potential. Without courage we cannot practice any other virtue with consistency. We cannot be kind, true, merciful, generous or honest.” Maya Angelou ^{xxxv}

“To be able to practice five things everywhere under heaven constitutes perfect virtue. They are gravity, generosity of soul, sincerity, earnestness and kindness.”
Confucius ^{xxxvi}

“Consider your origins: you were not made to live as brutes, but to follow virtue and knowledge.” Dante Alighieri ^{xxxvii}

Introduction

Students and teachers in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school system are asked to look at one character trait a month. The degree to which each teacher and school looks at these traits varies widely. Most high schools spend very little time discussing these while a lot more attention is paid to inculcating students in elementary and middle schools with these character traits. Any discussion of worthwhile character traits must start with a look at what the citizens of Ancient Greece thought were admirable traits or virtue. That is why the class will start with Aristotle. However, I think it would be a good time to bring in different cultural perspectives on both virtue and freedom. So, we will look at both Native American and Eastern views of right living and the nature of freedom. To this end, Christopher Phillips has an excellent discussion of these contrasting views in Chapter 1 of his book *Six Questions of Socrates*.

The Class

Although this may be coming a bit late, students should be reminded briefly of what they learned about ancient Greece in their World History class. This brief lecture needs to stress the concepts of both the golden mean and the polis, along with a look at the evolution of democracy in Athens through the 5th century BCE to the end of that century and the Peloponnesian War. After this we will discuss the questions students were to have done after they read the excerpt from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Following this discussion I will write on the board a list of virtues that he believed were necessary for the good life. They are courage, temperance, liberality, magnificence, good temper,

friendliness, truthfulness, wittiness, shame, and justice (for a brief discussion of each of these see Solomon, 265). Next to them I will write the 9 character traits that the school system believes are most important (they are caring, citizenship, honesty, hope, justice/fairness, perseverance, respect, and responsibility). The class will then discuss the similarities and differences between the two lists, examining possible reasons and suggesting any other necessary character traits for the good life. After that discussion, we should discuss the vehicle through which we should teach these virtues (i.e. in either the public or private setting). The class will finish with a brief lecture and discussion comparing these virtues with the Native American concept of *hozho* and the Taoist concepts of Yin and Yang. The first term can mean either beauty or harmony. The second terms refer to the Taoist idea that there exist in all things opposites which work to bring harmony in life. The emphasis on harmony in life seems to stand in stark contrast to Western emphasis on individuality and freedom. Thus, this discussion is a good transition into our discussion of freedom in the next class.

Homework

Students should answer briefly the following questions: What is freedom? Why is freedom so important in our society? They are not allowed to use dictionary definitions, but must come up with a definition of freedom in their own words.

Day Twelve – Freedom

“When people are free to do as they please, they usually imitate each other.”
Eric Hoffer^{xxxviii}

“It is by the goodness of God that in our country we have those three unspeakably precious things: freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, and the prudence never to practice either of them.” Mark Twain^{xxxix}

“Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.” Jean-Jacques Rousseau^{xl}

Introduction

One of the most revered and well known parts of the US Constitution is amendment one’s list of freedoms all Americans are guaranteed. Apart from the enormous amount of court decisions that have defined the limits of those freedoms, every person has their own interpretation of what these entail. Frequently, these opinions are in stark contrast to each other. However, there is little disagreement that Americans consider their freedom to be a key reason as to why our nation is the best in the world. Defense of freedom is always brought out to justify our participation in wars or military action. This ideal is also involved in issues as diverse as gun control, abortion, drug decriminalization and same-sex marriage. As a nation, our concept of freedom is intertwined with our notion of the

good life. We decry those nations that have imposed severe restrictions on people's rights (whether economic or political) and even look with disdain at nations that allow plenty of political freedom but, for reasons of the social compact, have agreed to provide their people with a much larger social safety net in return for some limits on their economic activity. In preparation for our discussion in the next class on the ideal education and job, it is important to arrive at a clear understanding of the value each student places on individual choice. We will not look at the philosophical issue of free will v. determinism but focus on the role of free choice in making decisions about colleges, jobs, life partners and other big decisions in their lives.

The Class

We will begin the class by discussing their answers to the questions given for homework. Students will write on the board their definitions of freedom and we will discuss them. Robert Solomon, in his book *The Big Questions*, has an excellent chapter on freedom. His definition will also be on the board. It is "the idea that a human decision or action is a person's own responsibility and that praise and blame may be appropriately ascribed".^{xli} We will then break into small groups and discuss the other question they were assigned for homework as well the following prompt. "It is one of the main themes of our literature and folklore that freedom (or liberty) is one of the few things worth fighting for, even dying for. What does this mean? Describe a set of circumstances in which you would accept this as true. Describe a set of circumstances in which you would accept this as true. What are the important differences between the two cases?"^{xlii}. Each group will report to the class on their discussion. This will be followed by the showing of a scene from the film *Waking Life*. In this scene, a man is driving through the city talking through a microphone complaining about the lack of freedom in our society created by the "brainwashing" that occurs when we watch TV and use the internet. He urges people to "embrace the creativity and the dynamic human spirit that refuses to submit" (*Waking Life*). In their groups students should discuss the following questions. Are we brainwashed to accept limits to our freedom? To what extent is this brainwashing done in regards to our choice of college and jobs? Should we give up some of our freedom for the benefit of society? If time permits, each group should report to the class about their discussion.

Homework

Students will answer the following questions. Why are you going to college? Do you need to go to college right after high school? Why? Why not? OR If you are not going to college, why not? What will you do instead?

Day Thirteen – The "Right" College and Job

"College isn't the place to go for ideas." Helen Keller^{xliii}

“A whale ship was my Yale College and my Harvard.” Herman Melville ^{xliv}

“Education is an admirable thing, but it is well to remember from time to time that nothing worth knowing can be taught.” Oscar Wilde ^{xlv}

“Live as you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever.”
Mahatma Gandhi ^{xlvi}

“I see many people die because they judge that life is not worth living. I see others paradoxically getting killed for the ideas or illusions that give them a reason for living (what is called a reason for living is also an excellent reason for dying). I therefore conclude that the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions.” Albert Camus ^{xlvii}

Introduction

Virtually every one of my students is college bound. They will be making decisions about applying to colleges either during this unit or slightly after it. It is for this reason that I am spending the last day of the unit on these 2 subjects. If their thought process is anything like the haphazard way I chose a college, then they should spend more time thinking about what they want to do after high school graduation. Although I recognize that financial considerations often limit choice as to what colleges are available, I want them to consider all the options they have. Additionally, I hope they will also consider that, for some, college right after high school may not be the best course. Finally, I want them to begin thinking about the qualities in a lifetime profession that would give them the most satisfaction in life. I also hope that they will consider the relationship between ethics and living the “good life.” Although we will begin the discussion looking at an ancient myth and the general ideal of the meaning of life, we will get back to their concepts of the ideal college and job in the hopes that this can give more meaning to their present search for the right direction after graduation.

The Class

We will begin the class looking at the ancient myth of Sisyphus. We will show the “Myth of Sisyphus – the real struggle.” This 4 minute presentation on You Tube is a humorous look at the Greek myth of the “sinner” Sisyphus who, because of his defiance of the gods is forced into an eternity of rolling a rock up a hill and watching it fall down time after time. We will follow this with a discussion of an article by Richard Taylor in Shafer-Landau’s *The Ethical Life* that adds one important idea. He says that “if Sisyphus had a keen and unappeasable desire to be doing just what he found himself doing, then, although his life would in no way be changed, it would nevertheless have a meaning for him”^{xlviii}. From this broad philosophical discussion on how we can get meaning in a life that appears to have no purpose, we will move to a discussion to their answers to the

questions they were given for homework. Again, we will be in small groups so that everyone can express their opinion and each group will identify at least 3 reasons for attending college and one argument for going to college right after high school and one argument for postponing that decision. These will be placed on the board for a whole class discussion. To finish the class, each group will come up with the three things they see as necessary for any job to give them satisfaction in life. Students will also write these on the board and we will begin to prioritize them according to their discussion.

Homework

Students will read an excerpt from Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* and a brief biography of Jack London.

Days Fourteen and Fifteen – Showing and Discussion of *Into the Wild*

“I’m going to paraphrase Thoreau...rather than love, than money, than faith, than fame, than fairness...give me truth.” Christopher McCandless in *Into the Wild*^{xlix}

“I will miss you too, but you are wrong if you think that the joy of life comes principally from the joy of human relationships.” Christopher McCandless in *Into the Wild*^l

“There is a pleasure in the pathless woods; / There is a rapture on the lonely shore; / There is society, where none intrudes, / By the deep sea, and music in its roar; / I love not man the less, but Nature more... /” Lord Byron from Title Card *Into the Wild*^{li}

“Go confidently in the direction of your dreams! Live the life you've imagined. As you simplify your life, the laws of the universe will be simpler.” Henry David Thoreau^{lii}

“Deep in the forest a call was sounding, and as often as he heard this call, mysteriously thrilling and luring, he felt compelled to turn his back upon the fire and the beaten earth around it, and to plunge into the forest, and on and on, he knew not where or why; nor did he wonder where or why, the call sounding imperiously, deep in the forest.” Jack London from *Call of the Wild*^{liii}

Introduction

We conclude our unit on the good life with the showing of the film *Into the Wild*. The 2007 film, directed by Sean Penn, was based on the book by John Krakauer. The book is a recounting of the journey taken by Christopher McCandless after his graduation from college until his death (probably from starvation) in a remote part of Alaska. Krakauer's uses McCandless' journals and his interviews with the people he met to tell the story of

this young man's rejection of what most would see as the good life and his pursuit of a lifestyle that embraced the idea that truth can best be learned in the natural world apart from human contact. The movie is Penn's more romanticized version of this same story with several differences from the book, including a more accessible main character. Given the decision McCandless made, the total rejection of what most anybody would say was a "bright future" for the uncertainty of his new life, it acts as an appropriate back drop to any discussion of the qualities of the good life.

The Classes

After discussing the quotes, we will begin the first day discussing briefly their reaction to the *Walden* reading. McCandless was a big admirer of Thoreau, so it is appropriate to see what inspiration he got from him. We will also look at the brief biography they read of Jack London and also discuss those parts of his life that impacted McCandless. We will then begin the film. Since the film is 2 hours and 20 minutes long, this opening discussion should be short. After showing the film, we will discuss the following. What did they think of McCandless' decision to completely separate from his family and what was his motivation? What was he looking for in his travels across the country? What aspects of his new lifestyle were attractive? Why did he go to Alaska? Did his attempt to leave his outpost at the end of the movie signal a change in his attitude towards the good life?

Concluding Activity Choices for Both Units

1. Students will develop original thought experiments (see trolley car dilemma on first day) for each of the ethical theories we discussed. They will then give these experiments to at least 10 students and write a concluding essay that will summarize their thoughts on the efficacy of these theories based, in part, on their findings. Careful scrutiny will need to be taken to assess the originality of student work as there are many "thought experiments" out there.
2. Make a CD compilation of 10 songs that express the ethical theories and notions of the good life discussed in class. The CD must be accompanied by a written discussion of each song that includes reference to specific lyrics and their relationship to ethics or the good life.
3. Make a short (no longer than 10 minutes) video that illustrates one or more of the ethical theories or concepts of the good life we discussed in class. The work must be a fictionalized account. This option can be assigned to a small group of students (no more than four.)

Annotated Bibliography

Essential Reading

Phillips, Christopher. *Six Questions of Socrates*. New York, W.W. Norton and Company, 2004. The first chapter (“What Is Virtue?”) has a great discussion on the differences between western and eastern concepts of the good life and right living.

Phillips, Christopher. *Socrates Café*. New York, W.W. Norton and Company, 2001. This book serves several purposes. First, in chapter 1, Phillips discusses the concept of the Socratic dialogue and his attempts at organizing these discussions across the country and with many different groups. He even includes in the back of the book a discussion entitled “How to start your own Socrates Café.” Second, he does a great job of examining Socrates’ contribution to philosophy in all areas, including his ideas regarding ethics and justice.

Sandel, Michael J. *Justice: What’s the Right Thing to Do?* New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009. This book is meant to accompany Sandel’s lectures on “Justice” as a part of the course he teaches at Harvard University. His discussion of Kantian ethics in chapter 5 is excellent. What makes the book very accessible is his use of current situations to highlight ethical dilemmas.

Shafer-Landau, Russ. *The Ethical Life: Fundamental Readings in Ethics and Moral Problems*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2010. There are 2 great things about this book. First, it has short excerpts from some of the greatest philosophers on ethical theory and the good life. Second, it has a wealth of short essays on contemporary ethical dilemmas from abortion and euthanasia to torture, terrorism and the war on drugs written by contemporary philosophers and ethical theorists. All of the readings are accompanied by 4 or 5 excellent discussion questions.

Shafer-Landau, Russ. *The Fundamentals of Ethics*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2010. This is an excellent resource for questions regarding ethical theories. Shafer-Landau’s organization is great for these 2 units. Part one deals with the good life, part two with “Doing the Right Thing” and in the third part he looks closely at the issue of ethical relativism and objectivity.

Solomon, Robert C. *The Big Questions: A Short Introduction to Philosophy* (Fifth Edition). Austin, TX: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1998. In chapter 8 (“Morality and the Good Life”) Solomon gives a concise overview of the key concepts of ethical theory and differing ideals of the good life as well as a brief discussion of the question of relative and absolute morality. He also has some excellent questions at the beginning and end of the unit.

Less Essential Reading

Blackburn, Simon. *Think*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999. Chapter 8 (“What to Do”) is a brief introduction to the basic questions of ethical theory.

Dawkins, Richard. *The God Delusion*. New York, Houghton Mifflin Co., 2006. Chapter 6 (“The Roots of Morality: Why are we Good?”) has an excellent discussion of the secular argument for morality.

Elder, Linda and Paul, Richard. *Understanding the Foundations of Ethical Reasoning*. Foundation for Critical Thinking, 2006. This is an excellent introduction on the role of critical thinking in ethical theory. It has an excellent glossary of key ethical terms and at the end of the pamphlet, the full text of the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Nagel, Thomas. *What Does It all Mean?* New York, Oxford University Press, 1987. Like Blackburn’s book Chapter 7 (“Right and Wrong”) is a good introduction to ethical theory.

Van de Lagemaat, Richard. *Theory of Knowledge for the IB Diploma*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005. This is the textbook I use to teach the Theory of Knowledge course. Like many of the books in this non-essential reading list, it has a chapter (12) devoted to a cursory discussion of ethical theory. It also has a few excellent cartoons and in the “Reading Resources” section a conversation that does an exemplary job of putting forth the arguments for and against ethical relativism.

Essential Viewing

Into the Wild. 2007. DVD. Written and Directed by Sean Penn and based on the book *Into the Wild* by John Krakauer. Paramount Pictures. Although some disliked the movie because of its too sympathetic portrayal of the central character Christopher McCandless, it presents an excellent example of an alternative lifestyle that is guaranteed to get students to think about their own concepts of the good life.

The Social Network. 2010. DVD. Written by Aaron Sorkin, directed by David Fincher and based on the book *The Accidental Billionaires* by Ben Mezrich. Excellent acting, cinematography and editing make this highly acclaimed movie a great movie to discuss both ethics and notions of the good life.

Wall Street. 1987. DVD. Written by Stanley Weiser and Oliver Stone, directed by Oliver Stone. Gordon Gekko’s “Greed” speech is still one of the best expressions of ethical egoism in film.

Less Essential Viewing

Waking Life. 2001. DVD. Written and directed by Richard Linklater. Although the film focuses on the close relationship between the dream and real world, it also addresses important questions about the good life.

Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps. 2010. DVD. Written by Alan Loeb and Stephen Schiff and directed by Oliver Stone. Even after a stint in jail, Gordon Gekko is still Gordon Gekko. His speech on the causes of the 2008 economic disaster is an interesting back drop to his Greed speech.

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- ⁱ Richard Van de Lagemaat, *Theory of Knowledge for the IB Diploma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 363.
- ⁱⁱ Linda Elder and Richard Paul, *Understanding the Foundations of Ethical Reasoning* (Foundation for Critical Thinking, 2006), 4.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Van de Lagemaat, *Theory of Knowledge*, 363.
- ^{iv} Van de Lagemaat, *Theory of Knowledge*, 363.
- ^v Russ Shafer-Landau, *The Fundamentals of Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 6.
- ^{vi} Shafer-Landau, *The Fundamentals of Ethics*, 9-11.
- ^{vii} Michael J. Sandel, *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), 21-27.
- ^{viii} Sandel, *Justice*, 35.
- ^{ix} Sandel, *Justice*, 35.
- ^x Van de Lagemaat, *Theory of Knowledge*, 403.
- ^{xi} Shafer-Landau, *The Fundamentals of Ethics*, 58-69.
- ^{xii} Van de Lagemaat, *Theory of Knowledge*, 380.
- ^{xiii} Russ Shafer-Landau, *The Ethical Life: Fundamental Readings in Ethics and Moral Problems* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 85.
- ^{xiv} Robert C. Solomon, *The Big Questions: A Short Introduction to Philosophy* (Fifth Edition) (Austin, TX: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1998), 289.
- ^{xv} "Ayn Rand", BrainyQuote.com, Xplore Inc, 2011,
http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/a/ayn_rand.html.
- ^{xvi} Shafer-Landau, *The Fundamentals of Ethics*, 184.
- ^{xvii} Solomon, *The Big Questions*, 253-54.
- ^{xviii} Sandel, *Justice*, 151-152.
- ^{xix} Van de Lagemaat, *Theory of Knowledge*, 363.
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- ^{xxi} Shafer-Landau, *The Fundamentals of Ethics*, 202.
- ^{xxii} Shafer-Landau, *The Fundamentals of Ethics*, 220.

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- xxiv Solomon, *The Big Questions*, 249.
- xxv Van de Lagemaat, *Theory of Knowledge*, 402.
- xxvi Van de Lagemaat, *Theory of Knowledge*, 363.
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- xxviii “Happiness Quotes”.
- xxix Solomon, *The Big Questions*, 243.
- xxx Solomon, *The Big Questions*, 245.
- xxxi “Buddha Quotes”, ThinkExist.com Quotations, 2011,
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- xxxii Shafer-Landau, *The Ethical Life*, 15.
- xxxiii Shafer-Landau, *The Ethical Life*, 25.
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- xxxvii “Quotes about virtue”.
- xxxviii Solomon, *The Big Questions*, 220.
- xxxix Solomon, *The Big Questions* 221.
- xl Solomon, *The Big Questions*, 218.
- xli Solomon, *The Big Questions*, 376.
- xlii Solomon, *The Big Questions*, 214.
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