

“Teaching Philosophical Ethics and The New Campus Climate or: How I Learned To Stop Worrying and Love Teaching Theory”

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Faculty in Higher Education are feeling increasing pressure to explain how their courses have practical significance (e.g. how a course either connects to “real world problems” or prepares one for a career). One might think it quite easy to show how an ethics course has practical significance. However, many ethics courses are taught by faculty in Philosophy departments who are often trained to approach ethics from an abstract and theoretical perspective. How does learning, for example, Moore’s “Open Question Argument” help one approach complex, “real world problems”?

Critics of higher education ask questions like this. There are a number of good responses that have not been clearly articulated in the literature on teaching ethics. I use my own research on Moral Luck and Institutional Racism as a case study to develop one, compelling answer. I think that embedding theoretical questions into a specific discussions of real life cases offers an effective way to harmonize theory and practice.

I study the complex development of Ethnography in the United States from 1890-1930. This history shows us that there are a number of ways racism has been deeply embedded in scientific practice. I use the case of Ethnography and Institutional Racism to better understand the Problem of Moral Luck. Moral Luck occurs when someone can be correctly treated as an object of moral assessment, despite the fact that a significant aspect of what she is assessed for depends on factors beyond her control. Outside of a specific, real life case, the topic of moral luck seems to be one of the most abstract and detached topics in Philosophy. However, when one asks the very same questions about an actual case, students, faculty and administrators see it as of immediate practical importance.

I will show how the topic of moral luck appears different when discussed in the abstract rather than in an “embedded context.” I then develop the notion of an “embedded context” and how to implement it in the classroom. Finally, I argue that this reveals just how crucial the liberal arts are to anyone who cares about making good practical decisions.