

**COMMON MORALITY IN THE CLASSROOM?  
IT'S A QUESTION ABOUT THE BOOK, NOT WHAT  
THE STUDENTS ARE DOING.**

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**THE QUESTION**

The question is whether Bernie Gert's little book, *Common Morality*,<sup>1</sup> is a good choice for non-philosophers engaged in the project of integrating ethics across the curriculum at their college or university. This question might be put another way: would I recommend this book to a colleague in engineering, history, business, biology or graphic communication? Although I think my remarks are responsive to the first question, in preparing them I have been answering the second one. This has made my task easier and allowed me to speak from experience, which is both a time-honored place to begin, and a starting place my friends who aren't philosophers much prefer to any other.

There are at least two ways to interpret the question (either the first one or the second one above). In both cases, the aim of integrating ethics into non-philosophy courses is assumed. In one case the query is whether the book would be a good one to assign in a course, say, chemical engineering or graphic communication. In the other, the question is whether it would be a good book for faculty who are preparing themselves to integrate ethics into their courses. My answer to the former is no. My answer to the latter is a qualified yes.

**SOME KEY CONSIDERATIONS**

I frequently visit classes (e.g., mechanical or chemical engineering, architecture, or health care management) in which I have to "cut to the chase," not only because time is short, but because students in these classes are even less responsive to philosophical questions/moves than students in their first philosophy course. While there is less of what these students would find uncongenial in the first half of the book than there is

in the second half (where, among other things, the relationship between rationality and morality is discussed in detail), in my judgment the first half of the book presupposes a level of philosophical sophistication or interest that students who have not “signed up” for philosophy will lack. This is one reason that I would not recommend the book for use in a non-philosophy class.

The faculty who teach such courses did not study ethics in graduate school; if they took a philosophy course as an undergraduate it was most likely taken to fulfill a humanities requirement in their freshman or sophomore year. In fact, in several respects, for instance in being inclined to think that ethics is relative to culture or inextricably bound up with religion, they are rather like undergraduates who enroll in an introductory ethics or moral problems class. They don't know who Kant is, Mill either, nor do they particularly care to know. They are not familiar with the intramural disputes among moral theorists (e.g., about the nature of rationality and its relation to moral action) and are unlikely to be easily persuaded that they should be. In my judgment, these are critical facts. In any case, I think most non-philosophy faculty would be ill equipped to use this book as a text in one of their courses. Perhaps it would not be a case of the blind leading the blind, but it seems likely these teachers would have some difficulty dealing with questions their students might have. Suppose, for example, that a student who couldn't understand this passage (page 5) asked her engineering professor to explain it.

The most persuasive argument in favor of ethical relativism, the view that equally informed rational persons need not agree on the answer to *any* moral question, is the falsity of the view that all equally informed rational persons must agree on the answer to *every* moral question. Similarly, the most persuasive argument in favor of the view that all equally informed rational people must agree on the answer to every moral question is the falsity of the view that such people need not agree on the answer to any moral question. Although both of these views are correct in their appraisal of the other, this does not count in their favor.

These are additional reasons for me to answer negatively the question whether *Common Morality* would be a good book to assign as a text in a non-philosophy course.

## EQUIPPING FACULTY TO INTEGRATE ETHICS INTO THEIR COURSES

My Rutland Center colleagues and I work closely with non-philosophy faculty to prepare them to integrate ethics into their regular classes. Our approach is necessarily user-friendly and practical. Where we want to be at the end of the day is similar to the place that Bernie Gert's new description of common morality is supposed to take us to. The routes we take are, however, importantly different. The key difference is the role the critical facts mentioned earlier played in the design of our approach.

## THE SYSTEM OF COMMON MORALITY

What Gert calls common morality is the system used by thoughtful people when they work their way through a moral problem. It is grounded in human nature (4); its features and its justification are based on certain undeniable characteristics of the creatures it governs, in particular, fallibility, vulnerability, and rationality (8). As Gert has it, "all philosophical theories of morality" (viii), for example the well known but mistaken and misleading theories of Kant and Mill, are based on it. Corrective action, in the form of a new description of common morality, is necessary because these theories distort our "natural understanding" of morality (vii). It appears that this distortion is the result of focusing too narrowly on a feature of common morality such as impartiality (Kant), concern with consequences (Mill), the moral paramountcy of "lessening harm" (negative consequentialists), the necessity of its being acceptable to all who will be governed by it (social contract theorists) or the requirement that it be known by "all normal adult human beings" (natural law theorists) (ix). A correct description of common morality comprises all of these features; it also avoids the mistake of inviting the inference or asserting that there is "a unique correct answer to every moral question" (viii, 4).

There is much to recommend this set of ideas, and Gert makes many good and important points while presenting them. For example, speaking of moral virtues Gert writes,

Having a moral virtue does not entail never violating the associated moral rule. A truthful person does not always tell the truth. When deception is strongly justified, a truthful person deceives. Someone who always tells the truth is tactless, not truthful. A truthful person does not unjustifiably violate the

rule prohibiting deception. The same is true for all of the other moral virtues. (77)

This is an important point; like the point about unique answers to moral questions, altogether too many people fail to recognize it. In my experience, more often than not, people make both mistakes. (This observation about the frequency of the mistakes does not comport well, at least *prima facie*, with Gert's claim to be providing a *description* of common morality, but I won't press the point now.)

Other points are good in the sense that a philosopher will likely think, or write in the margin, "nicely done." Gert's deft handling of the doubts raised by philosophical skeptics is a case in point (90). One wonders, however, whether that is how a chemical engineer or professor of graphic communication would respond. There are many references to philosophers — Kant and Mill, for example, or Rawls — and discussions that refer to aspects of their work, often including quick and sharp criticism (e.g., of Rawls' veil of ignorance at p. 119). Insiders won't have any trouble with them, of course, but what of our friend the chemical engineer? Such things give me pause about recommending *Common Morality* (I mean the book, of course) to a chemical engineering professor, for example. Much depends on who this person is and, in particular, whether, unlike most of the engineers I know, she is familiar with the humanities, inclined to read slowly and be pleased to find an author anticipating objections, which are then met in the course of an explanation or argument. Thus, as I indicated earlier, my answer to the question about recommending the book to a faculty member for the purpose of preparing to integrate ethics into her classes is a qualified yes.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> All citations: Bernard Gert, *Common Morality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).