## The Moral Lives of Ethicists, or How Often Do Ethics Professors Call Their Mothers?

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None of the classic questions of philosophy are beyond a seven-year-old's understanding. If God exists, why do bad things happen? How do you know there's still a world on the other side of that closed door? Are we just made of material stuff that will turn into mud when we die? If you could get away with killing and robbing people just for fun, would you? The questions are natural. It's the answers that are hard.

Eight years ago, I'd just begun a series of empirical studies on the moral behaviour of professional ethicists. My son Davy, then seven years old, was in his booster seat in the back of my car. 'What do you think, Davy?' I asked. 'People who think a lot about what's fair and about being nice – do they behave any better than other people? Are they more likely to be fair? Are they more likely to be nice?'

Davy didn't respond right away. I caught his eye in the rearview mirror.

'The kids who always talk about being fair and sharing,' I recall him saying, 'mostly just want you to be fair to them and share with them.'

When I meet an ethicist for the first time – by 'ethicist', I mean a professor of philosophy who specialises in teaching and researching ethics – it's my habit to ask whether ethicists behave any differently to other types of professor. Most say no.

I'll probe further: why not? Shouldn't regularly thinking about ethics have some sort of influence on one's own behaviour? Doesn't it seem that it would?

To my surprise, few professional ethicists seem to have given the question much thought. They'll toss out responses that strike me as flip or are easily rebutted, and then they'll have little to add when asked to clarify. They'll say that academic ethics is all about abstract problems and bizarre puzzle cases, with no bearing on day-to-day life – a claim easily shown to be false by a few examples: Aristotle on virtue, Kant on lying, Singer on charitable donation. They'll say: 'What, do you expect epistemologists to have more knowledge? Do you expect doctors to be less likely to smoke?' I'll reply that the empirical evidence does suggest that doctors are less likely to smoke than non-doctors of similar social and economic background. Maybe epistemologists don't have more knowledge, but I'd hope that specialists in feminism would exhibit less sexist behaviour – and if they didn't, that would be an interesting finding. I'll suggest that relationships between professional specialisation and personal life might play out differently for different cases.

It seems odd to me that our profession has so little to say about this matter. We criticise Martin Heidegger for his Nazism, and we wonder how deeply connected his Nazism was to his other philosophical views. But we don't feel the need to turn the mirror on ourselves.

The same issues arise with clergy. In 2010, I was presenting some of my work at the Confucius Institute for Scotland. Afterward, I was approached by not one but two bishops. I asked them whether they thought that clergy, on average, behaved better, the same or worse than laypeople.

'About the same,' said one.

'Worse!' said the other.

No clergyperson has ever expressed to me the view that clergy behave on average morally better than laypeople, despite all their immersion in religious teaching and ethical conversation. Maybe in part this is modesty on behalf of their profession. But in most of their voices, I also hear something that sounds like genuine disappointment, some remnant of the young adult who had headed off to seminary hoping it would be otherwise.

In a series of empirical studies – mostly in collaboration with the philosopher Joshua Rust of Stetson University – I have empirically explored the moral behaviour of ethics professors. As far as I'm aware, Josh and I are the only people ever to have done so in a systematic way.

Here are the measures we looked at: voting in public elections, calling one's mother, eating the meat of mammals, donating to charity, littering, disruptive chatting and door-slamming during philosophy presentations, responding to student emails, attending conferences without paying registration fees, organ donation, blood donation, theft of library books, overall moral evaluation by one's departmental peers based on personal impressions, honesty in responding to survey questions, and joining the Nazi party in 1930s Germany.

Obviously some of these measures are more significant than others. They range from comparative trivialities (littering) to substantial life decisions (joining the Nazis), and from contributions to strangers (blood donation) to personal interactions (calling Mom). Some of our measures rely on self-report (we didn't ask ethicists' mothers how long it had *really* been).

The majority, however, were directly observational or involved peer testimony or archival data. In several cases we had both self-reports and more objective data. For example, we were able to compare philosophers' self-reported voting rates with state records showing whether and how often they had actually voted. We found no evidence that ethicists' self-reports of their behaviour were either more or less accurate than other groups' self-reports.

Ethicists do not appear to behave better. Never once have we found ethicists as a whole behaving better than our comparison groups of other professors, by any of our main planned measures. But neither, overall, do they seem to behave worse. (There are some mixed results for secondary measures.) For the most part, ethicists behave no differently from professors of any other sort – logicians, chemists, historians, foreign-language instructors.

Nonetheless, ethicists do embrace more stringent moral norms on some issues, especially vegetarianism and charitable donation. Our results on vegetarianism were particularly striking. In a survey of professors from five US states, we found that 60 per cent of ethicist respondents rated 'regularly eating the meat of mammals, such as beef or pork' somewhere on the 'morally bad' side of a nine-point scale ranging from 'very morally bad' to 'very morally good'. By contrast, only 19 per cent of non-philosophy professors rated it as bad. That's a pretty big difference of opinion! Non-ethicist philosophers were intermediate, at 45 per cent. But when asked later in the survey whether they had eaten the meat of a mammal at their last evening meal, we found no statistically significant difference in the groups' responses – about 38 per cent of professors from all groups reported having done so (including 37 per cent of ethicists).

Similarly for charitable donation. In the same survey, we asked respondents what percentage of income, if any, the typical professor should donate to charity, and then later we asked what percentage of income they personally had given in the previous calendar year. Ethicists espoused the most stringent norms: their average recommendation was 7 per cent, compared with 5 per cent for the other two groups. However, ethicists did not report having given a greater percentage of income to charity than the non-philosophers (4 per cent for both groups). Nor did adding a charitable incentive to half of our surveys (a promise of a \$10 donation to their selected charity from a list) increase ethicists' likelihood of completing the survey. Interestingly, the non-ethicist philosophers, though they reported having given the least to charity (3 per cent), were the only group that responded to our survey at detectably higher rates when given the charitable incentive.

Should we expect ethicists to behave especially morally well as a result of their training – or at least more in accord with the moral norms that they themselves espouse?

Perhaps we can defend a 'no'. Consider this thought experiment:

An ethics professor teaches Peter Singer's arguments for vegetarianism to her undergraduates. She says she finds those arguments sound and that in her view it is morally wrong to eat meat. Class ends, and she goes to the cafeteria for a cheeseburger. A student approaches her and expresses surprise at her eating meat. (If you don't like vegetarianism as an issue, another example could serve: marital fidelity, charitable donation, fiscal honesty, courage in defence of the weak.)

'Why are you surprised?' asks our ethicist. 'Yes, it is morally wrong for me to enjoy this delicious cheeseburger. However, I don't aspire to be a saint. I aspire only to be about as morally good as others around me. Look around this cafeteria. Almost everyone else is eating meat. Why should I sacrifice this pleasure, wrong though it is, while others do not? Indeed, it would be unfair to hold me to higher standards just because I'm an ethicist. I am paid to teach, research and write, like every other professor. I am paid to apply my scholarly talents to evaluating intellectual arguments about the good and bad, the right and wrong. If you want me also to live as a role model, you ought to pay me extra!

'Furthermore,' she continues, 'if we demand that ethicists live according to the norms they espouse, that will put major distortive pressures on the field. An ethicist who feels obligated to live as she teaches will be motivated to avoid highly self-sacrificial conclusions, such as that the

wealthy should give most of their money to charity or that we should eat only a restricted subset of foods. Disconnecting professional ethicists' academic enquiries from their personal choices allows them to consider the arguments in a more even-handed way. If no one expects us to act in accord with our scholarly opinions, we are more likely to arrive at the moral truth.'

'In that case,' replies the student, 'is it morally okay for me to order a cheeseburger too?'

'No! Weren't you listening? It would be wrong. It's wrong for me, also, as I just admitted. I recommend the avocado and sprouts. I hope that Singer's and my arguments help create a culture permanently free of the harms to animals and the environment that are caused by meat-eating.'

'This reminds me of Thomas Jefferson's attitude toward slave ownership,' I imagine the student replying. Maybe the student is black.

'Perhaps so. Jefferson was a great man. He had the courage to recognise that his own lifestyle was morally odious. He acknowledged his mediocrity and resisted the temptation to try to paper over things with shoddy arguments. Here, have a fry.'

Let's call this view *cheeseburger ethics*.

Any of us could easily become much morally better than we are, if we chose to. For those of us who are affluent by global standards, the path is straightforward: spend less on luxuries and give the savings to a good cause. Even if you are not affluent by global standards, unless you are on the precipice of ruin, you could give more of your time to helping others. It's not difficult to see multiple ways, every day, in which one could be kinder to those who would especially benefit from kindness.

And yet, most of us choose moral mediocrity instead. It's not that we try but fail, or that we have good excuses. We – most of us – actually aim at mediocrity. The cheeseburger ethicist is perhaps only unusually honest with herself about this. We aspire to be about as morally good as our peers. If others cheat and get away with it, we want to do the same. We don't want to suffer for goodness while others laughingly gather the benefits of vice. If the morally good life is uncomfortable and unpleasant, if it involves repeated painful sacrifices that are not compensated in some way, sacrifices that others are not also making, then we don't want it.

Recent empirical work in moral psychology, especially by Robert B Cialdini, professor emeritus at Arizona State University, seems to confirm this general tendency. People are more likely to comply with norms that they see others following, less likely to comply with norms when they see others violating them. Also, empirical research on 'moral self-licensing' suggests that people who act well on one occasion use that as an excuse to act less well on a subsequent one. We gaze around us, then aim for so-so.

What, in that case, is moral reflection good for? Here's one thought. Perhaps it gives us the power to calibrate more precisely toward our chosen level of moral mediocrity. I sit on the couch, resting while my wife cleans up from dinner. I know that it would be morally better to help than to continue relaxing. But how bad, exactly, would it be for me not to help? Pretty bad?

Only a little bad? Not at all bad, but also not as good as I would like to be if I weren't feeling so lazy? These are the questions that occupy my mind. In most cases, we already know what is good. No special effort or skill is required to figure that out. Much more interesting and practical is the question of how far short of the ideal we are comfortable being.

Suppose it's generally true that we aim for goodness only by relative, rather than absolute, standards. What, then, should we expect to be the effect of discovering, say, that it is morally bad to eat meat, as the majority of US ethicists seem to think? If you're trying to be only about as good as others, and no better, then you can keep enjoying the cheeseburgers. Your behaviour might not change much at all. What would change is this: you would acquire a lower opinion of (almost) everyone's behaviour, your own included.

You might hope that others will change. You might advocate general societal change – but you'll have no desire to go first. Like Jefferson maybe.

I was enjoying dinner in an expensive restaurant with an eminent ethicist, at the end of an ethics conference. I tried these ideas out on him.

'B+,' he said. 'That's what I'm aiming for.'

I thought, but did not say, B+ sounds good. Maybe that's what I'm aiming for, too. B+ on the great moral curve of white middle-class college-educated North Americans. Let others get the As.

Then I thought, most of us who are aiming for B+ will probably fall well short of that. You know, because we fool ourselves. Here I am, away from my children again, at a well-funded conference in a beautiful \$200-a-night hotel, mainly, I suspect, so that I can nurture and enjoy my rising prestige as a philosopher. What kind of person am I? What kind of father? B+?

(Oh, it's excusable! – I hear myself saying. I'm a model of career success for the kids, and of independence. And morality isn't so demanding. And my philosophical work is a contribution to the general social good. And I give, um, well, a little to charity, so that makes up for it. And I'd be too disheartened if I couldn't do this kind of thing, which would make me worse as a father and as a teacher of ethics. Plus, I owe it to myself. And... Wow, how neatly what I want to do fits with what's ethically best, once I think about it!)

Most of the ancient philosophers and the great moral visionaries of the religious wisdom traditions, East and West, would find the cheeseburger ethicist strange. Most of them assumed that the main purpose of studying ethics was self-improvement. Most of them also accepted that philosophers were to be judged by their actions as much as by their words. A great philosopher was, or should be, a role model: a breathing example of a life well-lived. Socrates taught as much by drinking the hemlock as by any of his dialogues, Confucius by his personal correctness, Siddhartha Gautama by his renunciation of wealth, Jesus by washing his disciples' feet. Socrates does not say: ethically, the right thing for me to do would be to drink this hemlock, but I will flee instead! (Maybe he could have said this, but then he would have been a different sort of model.)

I'd be suspicious of any 21st-century philosopher who offered up her- or himself as a model of wise living. This is no longer what it is to be a philosopher – and those who regard themselves as wise are in any case almost always mistaken. Still, I think, the ancient philosophers got something right that the cheeseburger ethicist gets wrong.

Maybe it's this: I have available to me the best attempts of earlier generations to express their ethical understanding of the world. I even seem to have some advantages over ancient philosophers, in that there are now many more generations who have left written texts and several distinct cultures with long traditions of written philosophy that I can compare. And I am paid, quite handsomely by global standards, to devote a large portion of my time to thinking through this material. What shall I do with this amazing opportunity? Use it to get some publications and earn praise from my peers, as well as a higher salary? Sure. Use it – as my seven-year-old son observed – as a tool to badger others into treating me better? Okay, I guess so, sometimes. Use it to try to shape other people's behaviour in a way that will make the world a generally better place? Simply enjoy its power and beauty for its own sake? Yes, those things too.

But also, it seems a waste not to try to use it to make myself a little ethically better than I currently am. Part of what I find unnerving about the cheeseburger ethicist is that she seems so comfortable with her mediocrity, so uninterested in deploying her philosophical tools toward self-improvement. Presumably, if approached in the right way, the great traditions of moral philosophy have the potential to help us become morally better people. But in cheeseburger ethics, that potential is cast aside.

The cheeseburger ethicist risks intellectual failure as well. Real engagement with a philosophical doctrine probably requires taking some steps toward living it. The person who takes, or at least tries to take, personal steps toward Kantian scrupulous honesty, or Mozian impartiality, or Buddhist detachment, or Christian compassion, gains a kind of practical insight into those doctrines that is not easily achieved through intellectual reflection alone. A full-bodied understanding of ethics requires some living.

What's more, abstract doctrines lack specific content if they aren't tacked down in a range of concrete examples. Consider the doctrine 'treat everyone as moral equals who are worthy of respect'. What counts as adhering to this norm, and what constitutes a violation of it? Only when we understand how norms play out across examples do we really understand them. Living our norms, or trying to live them, forces a maximally concrete confrontation with examples. Does your ethical vision really require that you free the slaves on which your lifestyle crucially depends? Does it require giving away your salary and never again enjoying an expensive dessert? Does it require drinking the hemlock if your fellow citizens unjustly demand that you do so?

Few professional ethicists really are cheeseburger ethicists, I think, when they stop to consider it. We do want our ethical reflections to improve us morally, a little bit. But here's the catch: we aim only to become *a little* morally better. We cut ourselves slack when we look at others around us. We grade ourselves on a curve and aim for B+ rather than A. And at the same time, we excel at rationalisation and excuse-making – maybe more so, the more ethical theories we have ready

to hand. So we end, on average, about where we began, behaving more or less the same as others of our social group.

Should we aim for 'A+', then? Being frank with myself, I don't want the self-sacrifice I'm pretty sure would be involved in that. Should I aim at least a little higher than B+? Shall I resolutely aim to be morally far better than my peers – A or maybe A- – even if not quite a saint? I worry that needing to see myself as unusually morally excellent is as likely to increase self-deception, rationalisation, and licensing as to actually improve me.

Shall I redouble my efforts to be kinder and more generous, coupling them with reminders of humility about my likelihood of success? Yes, I will – today! But I already feel my resentment building, and I haven't done anything yet. Maybe I can escape that resentment by adjusting my sense of 'mediocrity' upward. I might try to recalibrate by surrounding myself with like-minded peers in virtue. But avoiding the company of those I deem morally inferior seems more characteristic of the moralising jerk than of the genuinely morally good person, and the history of efforts to establish ethically unified organisations is discouraging.

I can't quite see my way forward. But now I worry that this, too, is excuse-making. Nothing will assure success, so (phew!) I can comfortably stay in the same old mediocre place I'm accustomed to. Such defeatism also fits nicely with one natural way to read Josh Rust's and my data: since ethicists don't behave better or worse than others, philosophical reflection must be behaviourally inert, taking us only where we were already headed, its power mainly that of providing different words by which to decorate our pre-determined choices. So I'm not to be blamed if all my ethical philosophising has not improved me.

I reject that view. Instead, I favour this less comfortable idea: philosophical reflection does have the power to move us, but it is not a tame thing. It takes us where we don't intend or expect, sometimes one way, as often the other, sometimes amplifying our vices and illusions, sometimes giving real insight and inspiring substantial moral change. These tendencies cross-cut and cancel in complex ways that are difficult to detect empirically. If we could tell in advance which direction our reflection would carry us and how, we'd be implementing a set educational technique rather than challenging ourselves philosophically.

Genuine philosophical thinking critiques its prior strictures, including even the assumption that we ought to be morally good. It damages almost as often as it aids, is free, wild and unpredictable, always breaks its harness. It will take you somewhere, up, down, sideways – you can't know in advance. But you are responsible for trying to go in the right direction with it, and also for your failure when you don't get there.