Example Course Framework

How to get your students excited about ethical reasoning using

**Contemporary Moral and Social Issues**
An Introduction Through Original Fiction, Discussion, and Readings

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(For the full List of Topics and Structure ‘at a glance’ see page 4)

Example Course Topic: Moral Theory

- TO DISCUSS MORAL THEORY BEGIN WITH A PARABLE:

"LONG LIVE THE KING"

The land was ruled by a great King whose castle overlooked the town from a high hill. The townspeople told their children that the King was watching them from the castle, that if they were bad, the King would send His men down to punish them. It was a story for children, but not only that; even the townspeople had the feeling of being watched from on high.

The King was feared, but He was loved as well. The elders told stories of the magnificent processions they had once witnessed: How flower petals would be strewn over the main road; how grand lords and ladies in their finery would ride past in beautiful carriages; how at last the King would arrive in the most beautiful carriage of all. The lords and ladies would throw silver coins to the crowd; the coins the King threw were always of gold.

Sometimes the King’s carriage would stop, and, to the obvious displeasure of His fierce guards, the King would descend and walk among the people. The King was so magnificent that people hardly dared look at Him, but it was said that those who did look witnessed the kindliest of smiles. Stories were told of the generous favors the King had bestowed, even on the lowliest of his subjects. Some of the stories seemed fantastical: Not everyone believed that the King had healed a crippled boy with His touch. But even the skeptics loved these accounts, for the stories spoke, however naively, of the King’s goodness and the people’s love for Him.
The King’s visits have since ceased, though a messenger still comes to deliver his commands. Then one day two messengers appear with different sets of commands, edicts that differ not only from each other, but from the older edicts. Divisions begin to form among those who favor the old edicts or one of the two new sets of reform edicts. These factions take the names, “The Traditionals,” the “First Reformers,” and the “Second Reformers.”

Some townspeople try to resolve the confusion by adopting the King’s point of view, to decide what the King would want for them. Some decide the King would want them to be happy. These people form a faction called the “Wealers.” They believe laws should be based on what would lead to the happiness of the town as a whole. A group splinters off from the Wealers, complaining that the laws should focus on the happiness of each individual, not just the group as a whole. This faction is called the “Individuals.”

Each faction feels it should govern the town; the arguments between them become increasingly heated. Then an act of violence frightens everyone and leads people to seek a compromise. The proposed compromise is that the five factions must come to an agreement on some minimal set of laws that will govern the town.

Fear of violence, the sense that no faction was strong enough to overpower the others, and the need for the town to function in some manner kept the negotiations going. But there were few who did not daily glance with longing toward the Castle, dreaming of the day when the King would return and once again tell the townspeople what was true and good. Each faction continued to believe that it was right, and that the King, when he returned, would set the other factions on the one true path. How wonderful that day would be!

THE PARABLE LEADS NATURALLY TO A DISCUSSION OF:
* Religious Ethics, * Ideal Observer Theory,
* Utilitarianism, * Rights * Social Contract Theory

Breaking down the story
If we take the King as symbolizing (a belief in) God, the parable gives us a familiar picture of religion. The moral law is seen as issuing from the commands of God. Many religions imagine an earlier time when God revealed himself to a group of people, leaving them no doubt about His existence and His commands. Later, God is no longer so obviously manifest, and major religious divisions appear, with different groups following different commandments or interpreting some of the same commandments different ways. Some hold fast to the beliefs of their group. However, there is an increasing inclination among others to look for God behind all the religious divisions, to speculate as to what such a God might want. There is also an inclination—whether
from disbelief in God or from frustration with religious disagreement—to construct morality on human terms, focusing on what people want. The Wealers decide that morality should be based on human happiness. But even with this premise, there is disagreement as to how much emphasis to put on the individual versus the common welfare.

The view of the Wealers bears some relation to the philosophy of utilitarianism, which says that an act or social system is right which leads to the greatest happiness of the greatest number. The Individuals sound like some of the critics of utilitarianism: these critics claim that utilitarianism puts too much emphasis on the general good and doesn’t look out for the individual. Often critics of utilitarianism push for a human rights view of morality, either using rights to modify utilitarianism or as a substitute for it.

At the end of the parable, the townspeople reluctantly decide that, in the face of so much disagreement and the threat of violence, they had better compromise on some minimal agreement that will allow the town to function and the factions to coexist. As we shall see, this is analogous to a social contract view of morality, a view that became prominent in the 17th and 18th centuries, in part as a reaction to the European wars of religion.

- BROADEN THE DISCUSSION TO INCLUDE:
  * Aristotle and Virtue Ethics
  * Kant and Universalizability
  * Rawls and the Ideal Agent
  * Evolutionary Ethics
  * Moral Libertarianism
  * Moral Relativism

- FOLLOW THE DISCUSSION WITH A RICH SET OF READINGS:

  JEREMY BENTHAM presents a classic statement of the principle of utility.
  JOHN STUART MILL argues that there are higher and lower forms of happiness.
  PETER SINGER discusses what ethics is and offers a justification for a utilitarian ethic.
  IMMANUEL KANT argues that ethics is based on “the categorical imperative.”
  JOHN RAWLS argues that from an original position of equality we would reject utilitarianism in favor of his two principles of justice.
  ROBERT NOZICK discusses the moral principles behind his political libertarianism.
  JEREMY WALDRON discusses the concept of human rights and gives an argument for “welfare rights.”
  ARISTOTLE analyzes happiness as a life lived according to virtue.
  JONATHAN HAIDT discusses virtue ethics in the context of positive psychology.
JEAN GRIMSHAW discusses the idea of a female ethic, reviewing some contemporary writers on the subject.

SIMON BLACKBURN warns against confusions we should avoid if we read popular literature on ethics and evolution.

GEORGE LAKOFF, a cognitive scientist, describes two forms of Christianity that parallel two different models of the family.

JAMES RACHELS discusses “the challenge of cultural relativism.”

FOLLOW THE SAME PATTERN WITH ALL 8 TOPICS IN CONTEMPORARY MORAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES

THE 8 TOPICS ARE:
- VALUE THEORY
- MORAL THEORY
- MORALITY AND POLITICS
- WORLD POVERTY
- ABORTION
- THE TREATMENT OF ANIMALS
- THE ENVIRONMENT
- GENETIC ENGINEERING.

THE STRUCTURE FOR EACH IS:
- 1. AN ORIGINAL STORY that will entertain and intrigue students while raising the issues a philosophy instructor will want to discuss.
- 2. A LIVELY DISCUSSION of the issues raised by the stories and of related issues in that topic area.
- 3. READINGS selected and edited for their relevance, importance and readability. The readings include non-philosophers as well as philosophers, e.g.:

Claudia Wallis on the “new science of happiness”;
Jonathan Haidt on virtue ethics in positive psychology;
Paul Starr on liberalism; Fareed Zakaria on liberal democracy;
Nicholas Kristof, Abhijit V. Banerjee & Esther Duflo on foreign aid;
Gabrielle Walker, Sir David King & Bjorn Lomborg on global warming;
Francis Fukuyama & Bill McKibben on genetic engineering.

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