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The Practice of Ethics

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The practice of ethics



The point of this talk is not to school you in the practice of ethics, but to raise questions about the practice of ethics. There is a standard picture of the practice of ethics that goes like this:

Ethical theory is done in a classroom. It is divided into normative theory, meta-ethics, and descriptive ethics. Students learn to see how the ethics in their society and community works; they learn how to discover true ethical beliefs and sometimes discover them during class. Through meta-ethics, they understand what it is to have an ethical belief. Then –and here comes the practice part- they go out and *practice* ethics.

In this picture, the domain of ethics is the domain of everyday life, and academic life has the role of providing the theory of everyday life, in this case, the theory of ethics. The point, then, is to *apply* what you learn in the classroom. The school is the think-tank for your world.

Of course, the expression “ethics” is equivocal, and can be a field of study, rather than the domain of what we should do and how we should live. In the first picture, we focused on a meaning of the word¹ “ethics” that comes up when we speak of someone

¹ I do not think there is a substantial difference in this context between calling “ethics” a “word” and calling it an “expression”. I believe all words –provided they are in use in a community- are expressions, but not all expressions are words. Words which are not expressions are dead, or meaningless, words. My thinking on this matter has been shaped by my reading of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*.

being *ethical* or *unethical*. When we do speak of someone being ethical, we mean that her ethics are solid: she is, for instance, a good person, does the right thing, and so on. Here, ethics are not primary theoretical, but are already practical. That is why, in fact, the theory of ethics in the academy could be seen as brushing up and polishing our ethics so that we can return to everyday life to *practice* it better, that is, to be more *ethical*.

However, “ethics” also means a field of study, what we are engaged in here, and where a professor of ethics has her academic home. In this light, “the practice of ethics” refers to what we do when we study being ethical. It refers to the academic practice of a field of knowledge. To ask, here, about the practice of ethics is to ask how we study ethics as a field of knowledge, our methods, the assumptions of our investigations, what we do in the classroom –that is, our pedagogy. For this sense of the word “ethics”, there is also a standard picture. It looks like this:

The practice of ethics *just is* ethical theory, whether descriptive, normative or meta-ethical. There are various ways to practice ethical theory, but all of them must be responsible to the demands of good theory. For instance, all of them must attempt to be objective, clear, and attentive to the problems of life. Moreover, all of them should involve close and analytical reading and analytical writing of some sort.

Here, we have the practice of Ethics, the field of study, rather than the practice of being ethical. And, indeed, this is what my talk is about –the field of study- or I would have titled it “the practice of being ethical”.

How should we practice the field of study called “Ethics”? That is, how should we study being ethical? In particular, should we *study* being ethical? Is the verb “to study” the right verb to express the relation we want to have between being ethical and our work to understand it? Should it even be “understanding” that schooling in ethics puts to the fore? What does it mean to “study”?

This group of questions around the infinitive “to study” is not arbitrary. As it turns out the idea of *studying* ethics is assumed in *both* standard pictures I have presented. That is, whether you understood the title of this talk to speak to the practice of *being* ethical or understood it to mean the practice of the field of study Ethics, the standard picture of either in modern universities assumes that, in school, you study being ethical. And I want to question whether that assumption should be held. Should we *study* being ethical?

Now this question struck me as odd when I raised it. Schools are places of study. What else would one do with any object of interest in education? You study it. Scholarship is vast, multi-generational, and has led to undeniable progress in our human condition. There must be good reasons why we study what we want to understand, rather than say, dance about it. Or, to be more precise, the institution “school” is set up to study objects of learning. If you want to learn about an object differently, say, by dancing about it, you don’t go to school, but to a community gathering. It’s not so much that the *only* way to learn is to study but that schools are one of many ways to learn, and *they* are set up for studying. To question whether we should study being ethical is to question the institution of the school.



Socrates, though, showed us that just because a belief is common sense does not entail that it is justified. Just because we –of course- study being ethical in school does not entail that we should. Moreover, Socrates showed us that, even if a common sense belief is justified, we seldom appreciate it fully until we question it. I interpret his claim –reported by Plato- that “the unexamined life is not worth living”² as almost a tautology. Worth is given to things by weighing them. They may matter in themselves, but until we weigh them, they are not worth anything. Now to weigh something is to consider its importance. And the way we consider something’s importance is to *examine* its significance. So a life that is unexamined is not a worthwhile life. It may matter in itself, but without examination it is not worthwhile. That is, while its significance may strike us, the relative importance of the significance will escape us. Similarly, even if we should study being ethical in school, we cannot expect going to school for that purpose to be worthwhile until we question it.

Should we study ethics in school? Should we go to school to study being ethical? What is the difference between going to school to study being ethical and going to school to *be* more ethical? And, if what we want is to *be* more ethical, should we go to school for it? Before I take my best shot at these questions, which involve questioning both what school and studying are, I want to show a third picture of ethics. This picture once was standard, certainly in antiquity, but some say up until the modern age and the rise of the modern university. It looks like this:

² Plato, *Apology*, 38a.

Ethics is a practice, whether you are stopping to think, or are being ethical. In fact, the division between being ethical and thinking about being ethical is specious if one understands what it is to think about being ethical properly. That is, properly conceived, reflection just is part of the practice of being ethical, and there is no other way to think about ethics properly than in a practice. The conclusion flows from the purpose of ethics, its *point*.

I attribute this view to Aristotle, the first great ethical theorist in the Western tradition, and the philosopher who seems to have initiated the disciplines of our universities more than any other philosopher, including Plato. In his *Nicomachean ethics*, Aristotle reminds his listeners (his book is a transcription by Nicomachus of his lectures):

The purpose of our examination is not to know what virtue is but to become good. [*Nicomachean ethics*, 1103b-28-9]

Aristotle can throw out such a succinct and simple reminder, because his audience understood the nature of ethics. The Greek word *ethos* meant character or way of life³, and when people reflected on ethics, they intended to *act* a certain way. This kind of reflection can be contrasted with people reflecting on what Aristotle called “origins”⁴ and which are sometimes referred to as “principles”. These were the basis for scientific knowledge in Aristotle’s time. When reflecting on them, the point is not to act but to *know*.

The distinction here in philosophy of mind between thought whose point is to know and thought whose point is to act was carried forward and explained most lucidly by Aristotle’s greatest medieval commentator, Thomas Aquinas –St. Thomas to Catholics. Aquinas distinguished the activity we know as *theory* from the activity we know as *practice* in terms of their *points*. For Aquinas, what it is to engage in something depends on the point of doing it. On the one hand, the point of science –and what we call “theory”- is to know something. But on the other hand, the point of practical life is a *deed, done*. And ethics is a part of practical life, whether you’re thinking about it or acting out of habit. The way Aquinas firmed up this distinction was through his philosophy of mind. *Theoretical* reason aims at knowledge. *Practical* reason aims at an actual, finished deed. This was Aristotle’s distinction, polished up.⁵ When we do ethics, we use practical reason.

Now if we step back a moment and look at the common, contemporary division of the academic study of ethics in at least Anglophone universities, we find a distinction between descriptive ethics, normative ethics, and meta-ethics. Descriptive ethics aims at describing how people take themselves to act ethically. It is sociological and anthropological. Psychology also studies it, and history can, too. Even literature can be said to be doing, at times, descriptive ethics, as when we meet the Parisian poor in Émile Zola’s *L’assommoir* [sp.]. Descriptive ethics does *theory* in Aquinas’s sense.

³ Thanks to Irene Liu for clarifying the Greek.

⁴ *Nicomachean ethics*, 1139b19-36

⁵ My reading of Aquinas is indebted to Candace Vogler, *Reasonably Vicious* (Harvard, 2002) and to Anthony Lisska’s work on Aquinas, e.g., his *Aquinas’s Theory of Natural Law* (Oxford, 1998).

Similarly, meta-ethics aims to understand the nature of ethical concepts. For instance, in contemporary ethics, much attention is lavished on understanding what a reason is, then a reason for action, and even what normativity itself is, that property by which some belief strikes us as a reason to follow it. Meta-ethics does theory, too, because it simply wants to know what this thing ethics is, as a scientist would want to understand what nature is, albeit using the empirical method. Some meta-ethicists even use science to learn what ethical concepts are in their nature. For instance, empiricists like Jesse Prinz draw on neuroscience to explain our “gut perceptions”.⁶

Normative ethics, however, does not do theory in Aquinas’s sense. It falls under practical reason. The reason why is that the point of normative theory is to figure out what we should actually do. What is right, for real? What *is* true human goodness? How should we live? In other words, normative theory wants to determine our actions, not just to reflect on truths about the world. It’s action-focused. Looking at the practice of Ethics from the standpoint of Aquinas’s distinction, then, it would seem that the question of what it is to learn ethics depends on whether we are engaged in, on the one hand, descriptive or meta-ethics, or, on the other hand, normative ethics. The first two can rest content with knowing that people think something is ethical or with knowing *that*, for instance, a reason is normative because of its place in intentional action. The first two are after truths. But the third, normative ethics, can rest content only with *living* ethically. It’s after deeds.

This conclusion in itself is surprising and should be considered. But before we do, we should note that the distinction Aquinas allows us to introduce into the field of Ethics reveals an ambiguity in the idea of *studying* ethics. For we commonly say we are studying all three: descriptive, meta-, and normative ethics. But something imprecise is afoot when the activity with which we’re engaged -“studying”- has *two* incompatible ends! To study *for the sake of* knowing some true claim about the nature of things is not compatible with studying *for the sake of* accomplishing an actual deed. Think of it this way: if I think my point is to know some true claim about the nature of things (in this case, what kind of thing goodness is), but you think the point of what we’re doing is to actually do something good, we will be disappointed with each other. For I will stop doing what I’m doing when I have the truth, but you will expect me to go on and *act* truly. Thinking about the point of what we’re doing when we do mainstream Anglo-American Ethics shows us that “studying” is ambiguous. Something is not right here.

Now, I’ve laid out a lot of questions, and I want to thank you for your patience with this investigation as I have. I want to come back and start answering some of them, but it is the nature of investigations like this one to take a long time to even lay out the field of questions. So I will ask you for a little more patience as I lay out one more consideration that strikes me as important.

I don’t know any better way to go into it than by bluntly quoting a passage from an ancient author who, in the passage, expresses a vision of ethics different than Aristotle’s, yet coherent with its assumptions about the point of ethics. The text is from the third century Roman philosopher Plotinus, who began his philosophical journey in Alexandria in what is today Egypt. In his collection of writings compiled as the *Enneads*, Plotinus writes:

⁶ Jesse Prinz, *Gut Reactions: A Perceptual Theory of Emotion* (Oxford, 2004).

Go back inside yourself and look: if you do not yet see yourself as beautiful, then do as the sculptor does with a statue he wants to make beautiful; he chisels away one part, and levels off another, makes one spot smooth and another clear, until he shows forth a beautiful face on the statue. Like him, remove what is superfluous, straighten what is crooked, clean up what is dark and make it bright, and never stop sculpting your own statue, until the godlike splendor of virtue shines forth to you. ... If you have become this, and seen it, and become pure and alone with yourself, with nothing now preventing you from becoming one in this way, and have nothing extraneous mixed within yourself, ... if you see that this is what you have become, then you have become vision. [Enneads, I 6, 9, 7-23, my emphasis]⁷

What Plotinus so beautifully describes is nothing other than an ethical practice as Aristotle and his Greek contemporaries understood it, that is, a practice of habituation into a truer, better nature (the tradition even called this “*second* nature”). The image of sculpting a statue, so common among ancient philosophers, expresses the point well: you begin rough at the edges, but mindfulness can smooth you out until you become truer to the form of what is good. The first century Platonist and major essayist of the ancient world, Plutarch, uses this image even when describing how a true friend calls you out on your faults. A friend smooths out the rough edges on you as a good sculptor would.⁸ For Plotinus as for Plutarch, the sculpting aims to make you a better person; it aims to make you act well. Its point is not to know what the nature of ethics is, but “to become good”.

The commentator on Plotinus who led me to this passage, the French historian of philosophy Pierre Hadot, had an expression for this method of doing ethics, which, interestingly, was also his expression for the method by which the ancients did philosophy. He said Plotinus was commending a *spiritual exercise*, an *askesis*, the root of our word “ascetics”.⁹ Hadot, an emeritus professor at the Collège de France in Paris, pointed out –again and again (it was his life’s work)- that, for the ancients, philosophy *was* ethics, in the precise sense of a practical work on our habits to become a better person and to live a more ideal life. He pointed out that philosophy was first and foremost *a way of life*.¹⁰ The very idea of reflecting on ethics was just a focused part of a wider ethics, the ethics of doing philosophy itself, wherein one habituated oneself slowly and over time to a way of life. Ethics, the topic, was a focused space in the middle of a wider ethical practice: a kind of group conscience sorting through how to make ourselves better when it comes to things like our character, practical judgment and so on. The whole thing, though –philosophy- was an ethics.

⁷ I take this passage and its translation from Pierre Hadot’s *Plotinus, or the simplicity of vision* (Chicago, 1993). The translation of the passage is by Michael Chase, who consulted both the French edition Hadot used in his book and the original Greek.

⁸ Plutarch, “How to distinguish a flatterer from a friend”, in *Essays*, R. Waterfield, trans. (Penguin, 1992), 74e.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁰ See his *Philosophy as a way of life* (Blackwell, 1995), *passim*.

My point in bringing up this ancient picture of philosophy is to point out that, from its perspective, *even* the distinction between theory and practice might not help us clarify what it is to study ethics philosophically. The reason why is that in this ancient perspective, even seeking to know the nature of things should be done as *part* of a wider ethics, an ethics known as “Philosophy”. From such a perspective, *if* you understand philosophy as an ethics, even theoretical reflection on meta- or descriptive ethics must be placed *within* the larger aim of living virtuously, as Plotinus says. Thus, if you do look inside the ancient classroom de-contextualized from the larger way of life of the philosophical school, you might be able to divide theoretical science from practical reflection. But if you zoom out and focus on the whole school, you see that it is from start to finish practical, that is, aimed at shaping people to *live* as good people. Theory, then, is only so good as its place in the human good.

Hadot implies this point when he explains what writing meant for the ancients. In one of his most helpful essays, called “Philosophy and philosophical discourse”, he explains how written and spoken philosophy –what he called “discourse”- was not primarily theoretical, but was at best secondarily theoretical. Rather,

Discourse [was] a privileged means by which the philosopher [could] act [on] himself and others. ... It [was] always intended to produce an effect, to create a *habitus* within the soul, or to provoke a transformation of the self.¹¹

So, you might be reading a papyrus scroll from Plato on the nature of language and talking about it with your schoolmates in an Epicurean common house in a modest quarter of your ancient city. Outside, the sounds and smells of daily commerce would pass by your windows. You might be seeking to understand *what is language?* What did Plato mean in this dialogue called the *Cratylus*? Yet at every and all times, you would be asking these questions only to make yourself a wiser person, a better person, more able to die a noble death as Socrates did, and to avoid the illusions of so much of human life. You would be steering yourself and others toward what truly makes life worth living.

¹¹ Pierre Hadot, “Philosophy and philosophical discourse”, in *What is ancient philosophy?*, M. Chase, trans. (Harvard, 2002), 176.



What strikes me about this last picture of both ethics and philosophy is that it also presents a different picture of what a *school* can be. Here, school appears not as a place of study for its own sake, but as preparation for living. This preparation is not pre-professional. It is ethical and civic. Study, here, opens up a deep appreciation of what life involves and helps us live less clogged by illusions. The classroom is a place of discourse and reflection, yet for the sake of developing wiser people. *The entire school* is a practice of ethics. But that does not mean it brainwashes people. Rather, the school as a whole habituates people to seek wisdom, in open, questioning ways. And wisdom? Wisdom is supposed to shine through a life well lived, in mature human beings slowly shaping a glorious world.

What in *this* school would the practice of the field of Ethics be? Since ethics –for this ancient picture- is reflective and searching habituation into wisdom, to reflect on ethics inside the school just would be to reflect on the nature of the entire school itself, on philosophy itself as the search to discover wisdom and to make ourselves become its “vision”. For this ancient picture, the practice of Ethics –the field of study- is like a conscience inside the entire institution reflecting on the entire institution’s path toward wisdom in all its dimensions –scientific, social, extra-curricular, financial, etc.- and, more importantly, it is a reflection on and awareness always of what the entire school should amount to: living life well. For this ancient picture of philosophy *as* ethics, the field of study Ethics would be Meta-philosophy or what we now call Philosophy of Education, and its ultimate aim would be to discover how school can lead us to grow wise all through our lives.

* * *

O.K. With these four pictures of the practice of ethics in place, I can now turn to sorting out some answers to the question, *what is the practice of ethics?* I want to underline that, although the ancient picture of ethics as a philosophical school is lovely, there is no reason to assume it is desirable for us, simply because it is ancient and in that sense original. We should avoid the error John Dewey pointed out in *Democracy and education*, the error of thinking that schooling for one kind of society fits schooling for another kind.¹² After all, we live in a highly complex society with a variegated and vast division of labor interconnecting almost the entire world. Within this social form – modern society embedded within globalization- it might seem odd for an entire school to do ethics in one form or another, and it might seem pretentious for the field Ethics to be the conscience of the school. We are no longer in a commune, much less a monastery, but in a research university.

I wish to put the ancient picture on hold and return to contemporary Ethics. One thing that seems indisputable to me is Aquinas's Aristotelian distinction between the point of science and the point of ethics. If you are trying to know, the act of knowing aims at truths. But if you are trying to be ethical, the act of ethical reflection aims at deeds. Knowing a truth is achieved when a belief is justified and true. But doing a deed is achieved when you finish the act, for instance, clearing off the counter. No one can change the belief's truth –it is not voluntary. But you can always change your action and not clear off the counter. This distinction, as we saw, drives a wedge between descriptive and meta-ethics –on the one hand- and normative ethics –on the other. Descriptive and meta-ethics may have a point as theoretical practices, but they are pointless as ethical practices, because they do not aim at deeds. By contrast, normative ethics can be an ethical practice, because it aims at right living.

So we have one clear distinction. I believe we should consequently relegate descriptive ethics to sociology, anthropology and psychology, where it is more properly situated, and meta-ethics to meta-physics –the study of the nature of reality- where it at least won't be confused with doing ethics. In saying this, I do not mean that ethicists should stop either kind of study, nor that Philosophy departments should necessarily lose ties to the social sciences. On the contrary, I would agree with the late Bernard Williams that those interested in ethics should learn from the social sciences, a point he made a decade ago in *Making sense of humanity*.¹³ And I would agree with many people writing today, but memorably Iris Murdoch, that metaphysics can be a guide to morals.¹⁴

I would disagree, though, that people studying meta-ethics or descriptive ethics are doing ethics. Rather, they are learning about the things that go on in ethics, but not in an ethical way. By this last qualification “not in an ethical way”, I do *not* mean that meta-ethicists are rogues and sociologists villains, but simply and precisely that their point is not a deed. It is rather a truth.

The *practice* of Ethics, then, belongs to normative ethics, and from now on when I speak of Ethics in the classroom, I will be referring to normative ethics. The question then is, does it make sense to say we should *study* Ethics? I am interested in our actual use of language; so I will not go into the etymology of “study” as if that would provide us

¹² John Dewey, *Democracy and education* (Macmillan, 1916).

¹³ Bernard Williams, *Making sense of humanity* (Cambridge, 1998)

¹⁴ Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a guide to morals* (Penguin, 1994)

with the key to its meaning. Rather, looking at contemporary language as the ordinary language philosophers of the 1950s did, we can see immediately that there is an ambiguity within the verb “to study”, one found especially in the noun form of it, “studies”. On the one hand, the overwhelming amount of English definitions of the verb point to studying being *the pursuit of knowledge*. Study, on this set of definitions, is a project of one sort or another aimed at obtaining knowledge. Here is the realm of investigation or analysis of some topic, of time taken to learn the truth about it. We can see already, then, that if Ethics demands practical reasoning, *studying* Ethics is not what we should do. On this first set of definitions, studying ethics would amount to seeking knowledge, which isn’t the point of Ethics. The point of Ethics is to become good.

But there is a second sense of the verb “study” which shows up in its noun form. This sense *is* practical, as when we say, she did a study of light and shadow so as to learn how to draw. Or, Chopin played his *Études* –his *Studies*– as a way to demonstrate the art of the piano. These studies are practical: the point is to do them, and –in doing them– the further point is to train for something further you will do. If studying Ethics meant doing studies in this sense, it might at least make sense to use the verb.¹⁵ We would then speak more naturally of studying Ethics –upper case “E”– by doing studies in ethics –lower case “e”– as when one does studies in drawing, music, or sculpture. *This* kind of ethics really would look like training, even if reflective and open-ended in all sorts of ways, as painting or dance are. In so being, though, it would come very close to the *askesis* that Hadot described among the ancients, to what he translated as *spiritual exercises*. In other words, if you studied Ethics in the sense that I am compelled to accept here, you would be going to class to exercise your capacity to do good. The classroom would, in its essence, be closer to a gym than a reading room. Its library would be a wealth of moves served by texts.

The image is humorous, to stay the least –twenty to forty students and their teacher doing ethical push-ups. No, wait, the ethical treadmill. And finally, a bit of ethical stretching before showering –in separate locker rooms– and going home. But of course Hadot didn’t mean exercise in that sense, not as the genus. Rather, for the ancients, gymnasium was a species of exercise –physical exercise– under the genus of spiritual exercise –the overall philosophical attempt to become a better person. If we are committed to studying Ethics, it seems we are committed to some species of that training.

The analogy with plastic arts and music is also instructive. To do Ethics as a series of studies would really seem to be to try to “become vision”, or –in the case of music– to “follow the voice of conscience”. What would it be like if, in studying Ethics, we were searching for the complex and intricate human song that resonates in our hearts when we truly are right with the world? It sounds nice, and it is suggestive. Here, a different vision of the study of Ethics and a different vision of the classroom open up, one where service learning, community-based learning, and experiential learning are not simply nice additions to the curriculum, but are *essential* developments of what Ethics is, truer and better ways to do Ethics than to only read a book. After all, if you want to do a study in ethics, you’ll need to help out at times, be part of a community, and learn from

¹⁵ For this and the preceding paragraph, I was helped by my iBook *Oxford American Dictionary*, Version 1.0.2., 2005. I paraphrased the many definitions drawn on.

experience. You can't do a study by just reasoning. You have to try something in the world.

Once we learn what studying Ethics must mean, the vast proliferation of self-help manuals that clogs our bookstores doesn't look like ignorance as much as it looks like inchoate *reason*. The Philosophy section won't give us Ethics, actual practice in living better, at least typically. But self-help books try to. Whatever their simplifications, they at least have the *point* of Ethics right.

Also, once we grasp what an ethical study is, the return to church which some academics decry as a sign of American anti-intellectualism seems only encouraged by a vision of school that does not aim to make people better. Church is an option when school does not give people the chance to exercise their ethical needs. Schools that do not do ethical studies deny a basic developmental dimension of being human: the desire to become mature by becoming someone who has character. We have to remember that the idea of a study in ethics is leading us to see all this.

Once we see what Ethics is, and once we sort out the only kind of studying that fits Ethics, we face the philosophy of education. Here is a new vision of school, at least when it comes to Ethics classrooms. The ethical school is a new kind of school. It is a school in which there are certain spaces and certain times when you experiment with becoming a better person or with doing good. Books, writing, and all the media of the world rally around a task fitted to you, as you try to figure out what you will *do* in this world, and not in terms simply of your profession, but on your terms as a grown-up human being, living your whole human life with all its many dimensions and all its many relationships in communities and societies.

It should be no surprise, then, that the scholar of ancient philosophy Martha Nussbaum called this new school's goal *cultivating humanity*. She meant cultivating an all-around and life-long aptitude for taking in the human good.¹⁶ She correctly saw that, ironically, the new school is old school. Through her grounding in ancient philosophy where ethics is practical (as it *must* be) and school is ethical (aiming to help you live well, not simply to know a lot or to make a rich living), she advocated what the tradition originally saw as the point of the liberal arts –the making of active, reflective citizens. New school? Old school? It doesn't matter. Cultivating humanity is neither anachronistic, nor nostalgic, but intuitively grasps the point of ethics. If you practice ethics –the field or the school entire– you cultivate humanity. It is a whole lot more than reading books.

* * *

¹⁶ Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating humanity, a classical defense of liberal reform in education* (Harvard, 1997).



I want to end this talk by elaborating on one idea I have for doing Ethics. I had originally wanted to devote the entire talk to this idea, but I found myself wading through the preceding conceptual difficulties first, and they seemed both important and easily as fascinating as my idea is to me. I would also like to add that, although I earlier sketched the vision of school found among the ancients, where ethics subsumes the entire school in training for the philosophical life, and although I just now ended my last section with Martha Nussbaum's idea of liberal arts education, I have only committed myself at this point to what goes on in an Ethics classroom. I've given no argument for why we should see Ethics as the key to school. All I've reasoned out is what doing Ethics –capital “E”– should entail, and I've positioned my conclusions within the philosophical tradition and some of the larger ideas to which it *might*, but has not yet shown to be, related. I have no idea if it is. Right now, I'm still focused on a simple, old Ethics classroom.

What should go on in, or *through*, that classroom? **[Pause.]** What kind of studies, understanding them similar to musical or sculpting studies? Will reading and writing, for example, be diminished? My idea for studying Ethics implies a resounding “No”! On the contrary, I believe reading and writing will be improved, once their point

is in line with the nature of the subject matter to which they are subjected. Everything comes down to remembering the point of ethics. The ancients read and wrote –as Hadot showed us. Their writing was meant to “create a habit in the soul” or “a transformation of the self”. Similarly, you might say ethical reading and writing should be meant to make people better people or to help people become, or do, good. Happily, this is interesting to students, especially when the classroom is not shrouded in judgment as ethical life often seems, but is open and bright to exploring why really something is good, or not, and what alternatives might be. In such a climate, reading and writing –working on and from our interest in our own development- stand a good chance of being both motivated and useful in the eyes of the learner. This, at least, has been my experience. A writing assignment joining complex scholarly reflection with personal interest can be an amazing thing.

All this clears the ground for my main idea about doing Ethics, capital “E”. I believe that a new school for Ethics awaits in embedding Ethics within international exchange. There are many reasons for my view, which I will only be able to enumerate here without the kind of explanation I would like to give. First, however, let me explain my idea.

I do not claim that the idea is original. In fact, you can find it in book V of Rousseau’s *Émile*, when Émile is sent off by his tutor to travel the world and learn true, active citizenship as a citizen of the world.¹⁷ The idea is simply mine in the sense that I have been gravitating to it inside my soul and based on my experience. It is mine only in that I belong to it. In love, “you are mine”, means “I am yours”, and it is no different in philosophy.

The idea is to study ethics by studying abroad for at least six months and by weaving the study abroad into an equal flux of foreign exchange students invited back home. Certainly, studying abroad is not new at all. I did it twice as a high schooler, once in college, and decided I would just teach abroad for a good part of my 30s. But remember that we have arrived at a sense of “study” that departs from what is usually meant by the expression “study abroad”. Studying abroad does not usually imply practicing virtue and training to become good. But it could.

Now, I am not talking about all studies abroad, but simply about doing Ethics by studying abroad, a special and deliberate program. It is *ethics* that compels us to adopt the minoritarian sense of “study” and imagine practicing virtue and training to become good. I believe that studying ethics abroad in that sense has many advantages, which I will enumerate here as a way of closing my talk.

The first is that studying Ethics abroad will be conducive to open-mindedness. To study Ethics philosophically involves starting with questions: how do I become good? What is virtue? Questions like these. In the context of a foreign culture, these questions take on vivid and genuine interest. After all, you are surrounded by a living and often different interpretation not only of answers you expect to see but of the questions

¹⁷ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile* (Basic Books, 1978). Rousseau is hostile to cosmopolitans in Book I. However, his development of Émile’s common humanity in book IV and his advocacy of comparative politics through Émile’s travels strike me as forms of cosmopolitan citizenship. And, indeed, nationalism does not assert itself ever in *Émile*.

themselves. When, for instance, Arabic speakers discuss conscience, the question I asked as a college student at Yale in the 1990s in my Ethics classes takes on a surprisingly new focus. I asked “What does it mean to have a conscience?”, a question that took me all the way through graduate school at University of Chicago and issued in my dissertation. I was looking for an answer about how to follow an inner call, and which call to follow, and why it might matter at all, and where objectivity might lie. But in Arabic, conscience is *dhameer*, a word that implies immediately one’s relationships with other people –not simply as a duty that conscience relays, but as the voice of conscience itself. It is as if conscience is an opening through which the reality of other people impresses itself on the soul. If I had studied Ethics abroad as an undergraduate and gone to an Arabic speaking country, I would have been able to ask my question still, but the *object* of it would have been entirely different. A surprising and wonderful discovery.

Thus, when I say that studying Ethics abroad will be conducive to open-mindedness, I am taking seriously the point of philosophy’s involvement in Ethics, its way of asking questions first, of carefully considering ideas and positions. Training to become good abroad does not imply proselytizing, imperialistic condescension, or missionary zeal. It implies, rather, having one’s lessons immediately around one, and having to reconsider many of the things one considers good, thereby *examining* what really is good. The foreign culture acts as a Socratic fire, if only one lights a match by asking a simple question.

I see time is running out. So I will be able only to mention two more reasons. I believe studying Ethics abroad is advantageous in that it teaches mostly through know-how and knowing people. In other words, it does not center around what in epistemology we call “knowing-that”, propositional knowledge. There is a debate in epistemology about whether all knowledge is at bottom propositional knowledge, a set of beliefs. For reasons I can’t go into here, I believe that it is not. Rather, I believe that we know also by knowing how to do things. At the very least, brain science has shown this to be true, such that amnesiacs who can’t retain learned beliefs can still develop practical know-how.¹⁸ Further, I do not believe knowing people is a kind of knowing how to do things or a kind of propositional knowledge. At a conceptual level, Emmanuel Lévinas demonstrated this point well in his extensive phenomenology of human meeting, and in doing so he drew on an assertion made earlier by Martin Buber. Also, at the level of our brains, it would seem sociopaths show us that one can know that something is true and know how to do something but still not be able to know people in any soulful way. Their mirror neurons, the seat of compassion in our brains, do not work. (I am a novice at brain science; so correct me if I am wrong.) Finally, some languages make a distinction between knowing how to do things and knowing people –as the French language does between *savoir* and *connaître* (although blurring the distinction between knowing people and knowing truths in the latter verb). I believe, then, that if we want to be knowledgeable in the fullest sense, we need at least three kinds of knowledge.

¹⁸ I drew these conclusions from the unpublished work of David Bzdak, a finishing graduate student at Syracuse University, and in particular from his talk “On amnesia and knowing-how” (Le Moyne College, February 2009). The conclusion about knowing people is my own.

Now, it should be no surprise that being ethical involves know-how. After all, the point of ethics is to be doing something. Nor should it be a surprise that being ethical involves knowing people. Ethics is primarily a social phenomenon. Put bluntly, you can have all the true ethical beliefs in the world, but if you are a futz or a sociopath, you're not going to do much good, in the first case, or be ethical, in the second. Studying Ethics, then, should involve know-how and knowing people.

I believe study abroad would forefront both of these kinds of knowledge. A good part of most study abroad is human connection, surmounting the hurdles that loss of home, meeting of foreigners, and language and custom bring. Similarly, in the new places where one lives, living abroad challenges one to learn how to do things one had taken for granted –going to the store, being polite, figuring out bureaucracy. Much of this know-how also relies on knowing people. Certainly, one does not need to go abroad to learn how to do good things or to learn how to know people in solidarity and common humanity, but it certainly helps.

The final advantage of studying Ethics abroad for which I have time today is best relayed by a story. Last Spring, I took a group of students from American University of Sharjah's Department of International Studies to Dhaka, Bangladesh. We went to volunteer for ten days at The Dhaka Project, a combination school, family center, and job training program serving the poorest of Dhaka's children and their families. Children from shanties bordering the rivers where public land exists are taken from the foul waters where people bath, wash, and defecate, from crowded thatch and detritus rooms housing up to a dozen people, these children and their families are invited to exchange their living quarters for a solid brick hut that will not catch fire from cooking fires and will house four people in a room. In return, the parents contract to send their children to school clean every day in a clean uniform and to not make their children work the countless child labor jobs around Dhaka. Not surprisingly, there is more demand than supply, and the waiting list for the project is long. Not surprisingly, too, the children love to go to school, with their whole hearts and their whole minds and their whole, bright souls.

The students who went with me had for the most part grown up in the United Arab Emirates. There is more room in the bathrooms of the some of the restaurants they might frequent in one of Dubai's luxury malls than there was in three or four of the shanties put together. The students were overwhelmed, but, being Muslim, also immediately tuned into what Muslims take as their God-given duty to serve the poor, their fellow brothers and sisters on Earth.

I don't think those students will ever forget the trip, seriously, and certainly not the trip we made to visit a mother from the Project who had ended up in the burn ward, one of Dhaka's thousands of yearly victims of cooking fires. There in the city's best public hospital right next to the country's best university, literally hundreds of patients languished in hallways, overflowing the burn wards. An entire ward filled with hundreds of infants and young children filled the air with constant cries. Face after face was swollen and disfigured with blisters. Over half of the people there would die, due to absence of medication and unsanitary conditions.



The photo I have put up here is from one woman whose legs were burned. She was uncommonly positive. Her husband, from Dhaka's lower middle class, was with her. But he had lost his job due to tending her. The flowers in her hand came from some of the Muslim students I was with, and we sent back a fan and medication to help. She was lucky, but there were so many more around her suffering without hope and in all likelihood just days from dying.