This is Ethics?: An Idiosyncratic Guide — J. Peter Euben

Enough of what goes on when teaching is intuitive, serendipitous, idiosyncratic, and distinctive to a subject matter that I am uneasy about elaborating a pedagogy as if what I teach is necessarily what is learned. My unease is compounded by a recognition that we teach ourselves as much as a subject matter as illustrated by a colleague of mine who taught radical democracy in an authoritarian way. It is compounded further by the fact that ethics is often a matter of questions that do not yield answers or solutions but further questions, like the riddles that confronted Oedipus. So my first task, or rather attempt, is to get the question right and get the right questions while avoiding a self-righteous moralism or a flippant moral cynicism.

All this speaks to the importance of establishing a dialogue among the students and between them and me even in a class of 75. Of course, dialogue has become a cliché: who is against dialogue? But too many dialogues are covert monologues. My idea and practice of dialogue is more substantial in intent (if not in execution). It entails becoming a student of my students in order to become a better teacher of them and, just as important, having them see me do that. I know Plato’s *Republic* in Greek and have taught it some 35 times. Yet invariably an often first-year student will ask a “naïve” question that draws me back to the basic questions of the text, reminds me what is at stake in it, and forces me to recognize how ossified my reading of it has become. Again, it matters that I say that to the students when it occurs. Dialogue also entails listening with a third ear, responding not just to what is explicitly said but to the subtext of the saying, to the unstated context which gives a point depth and significance. It also entails inviting students to bring what really matters to them into the classroom (and my office) and to bring the classroom into their everyday lives and for me to do the same.

A student once asked, “If there is a God why do we need to study ethics at all? The answers are there.” Having taught for 34 years in one of the most secular areas of the country (Northern California) it never occurred to me to take religion that seriously in an ethics class. But as long as I didn’t I could not speak to nor really hear what a number of my students were saying, what drove their moral lives and, often, what brought them to the class. I am still religiously unmusical but their concerns have become mine. Thus, I begin the course with the Book of Job and, beginning last year (because of what students in my previous classes suggested), I include Dostoevski’s *The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor*.

The choice of Job was also the product of a different conversation, one that led to...
This spring marks the end of a remarkable run for Peter Euben, the Kenan Distinguished Faculty Fellow. As Peter steps down after ten years at the Institute, he leaves a lasting mark on many students, especially those who have passed through his singular class, “The Challenges of Living an Ethical Life.” The Gateway Course for the Institute’s Ethics Certificate Program, this course’s readings range from works by Plato to Herman Melville, James Baldwin to Samantha Power.

In this issue of Ethics in Action you’ll read about what Peter teaches and how he does it as well as the ways in which the conversations he generates depend on a distinct form of ethical engagement. Peter introduces students to a wide variety of challenging texts both on their own terms and in relation to the students’ preoccupations. In other words, he deftly manages to be both traditional and relevant.

Students consistently report that Peter has engaged and challenged them, and in not a few cases induced genuinely lasting changes. One indication of Peter’s success is the extent to which he has encouraged students to grapple with core questions: What is a good life and how should it be lived? How does our identity shape our morality? What does ethics mean in the face of violence and cruelty?

Another more prosaic indication of his success in the classroom—and in the many hours he devotes to students outside of class—is the steadily climbing enrollment for the Gateway Course and of those students who elect to pursue the entire Ethics Certificate.

Peter’s departure will be felt across the campus. As a result, we are focused on securing the funding needed to support another distinguished ethics teacher who can engage students in thinking about their lives with what Peter calls “depth and passion.”

In this issue you’ll also read about the burgeoning community of graduate students who are finding a home in the Kenan Institute for Ethics: a historian who is studying altruism, charity, and solidarity in the context of disaster relief; a sociologist who is analyzing the implications of the different approaches to health care in Japan and the United States; a political theorist who is exploring where value judgments come from; and another sociologist who is working with Institute Senior Fellow Dan Ariely on dishonesty both in and outside of the classroom.

Graduate and undergraduate students are also a part of a major new Institute initiative that you’ll read about in these pages: “Rethinking Regulation.” Led by Senior Fellow Ed Balleisen, this project will bring faculty and students together with regulators, policymakers, and private sector representatives to rethink both the pros and cons of different instruments of market regulation and the balance between economic efficiency and distributational outcomes. This initiative reflects our dual role in focusing faculty and students’ attention on major questions of public life while simultaneously bringing actors from the world of practice into those conversations as a way to improve scholarship, education, and public policy.

—Noah Pickus

This is Ethics? continued from cover

an intense exchange of views. I began with a portrait of a homeless person—seemingly deranged, smellly, dressed in rags, living in a cardboard hut with scabs all over his body, talking in tongues. The portrait was meant to describe Job, and my argument was that ethical life begins with being able to acknowledge, “There but for the grace of God go I.” But a number of students felt they earned what they had achieved and they could not envisage a world where they could be Job. The dialogue was memorable not because it was between me and my students as much as something between my students that I initiated. Many walked out shaken and angry. I consider that healthy.

Such a dialogue encourages as it presumes a context of trust, playfulness, and passion. Trust because an honest discussion of race, for example, requires it; playfulness to take the edge off intense disagreements that are essential to the development of moral imagination, by which I mean that ability to see the world from another’s point of view; passion because the issues matter and because texts like Job or Dostoyevsky’s cannot be understood without it. Based on casual remarks by “my” students, I think they are curious and perhaps occasionally inspired by a 70-year-old man who finds the life of the mind and what the mind can bring to the world a wonder.

The dialogue I try to generate mirrors and builds upon the juxtaposition of a substantial variety of texts: Job and Nietzsche, Plato and Machiavelli, James Baldwin and Herman Melville, Sophocles and Sartre, Max Weber on ethics and politics, Hannah Arendt on the banality of evil, Samantha Power on genocide, Zimbardo and Haney on the meaning of the Stanford Prison Experiment.

The ultimate aim, of course, is to have students think about their lives with depth and passion. What does it mean to live an ethical life? How can one do it and who among us gets it right? What sort of attentiveness and sensibility does it involve? This entails de-parochializing their experiences while also honoring those experiences as the basis of their identity and the grounds of their contributions to the class-wide debate. It means rejecting clichés and political correctness, or preset answers, and having them remove the “corrective” lenses they didn’t know they were wearing. And it means being alert to the way the ethical dimensions of life and action are denied by “naturalizing” them, as was done with women and blacks, as well as making them
alert to the ways ethical questions and issues are obscured by partisanship, power, self-absorption, and indifference. What cereal you choose is hardly an ethical matter, until you discover who makes it under what conditions with how misleading the information on the package may be.

Finally, the dialogue entails students learning how to make ethical arguments. What, if anything, is distinctive to an ethical versus some other kind of argument? Is it a matter of making a case or finding an answer? And if there are no “final” answers available to ethical questions, does that mean anything goes, that all ethical views are primarily emotive?

The point is, firstly, to make the class an illustration of the issue: How do you want to be treated in an argument? Secondly, to ask what canons of mutuality and reciprocity are especially necessary in a moral argument. Or is a good argument a good argument and putting “moral” in front of it doesn’t get us very far? Thirdly, math problems have solutions; do moral questions? If not, are moral arguments more like making a case than finding an answer? Fourthly, is Socrates paradigmatic here, i.e., dying for ideas he knew might be proved incorrect in his next dialogic encounter?

But even more important than this is the relationship between moral arguments and stories. What we remember about Socrates is less his arguments than the kind of life he led. How important are moral arguments against telling the story of, for example, Socrates or Job or Billy Budd?

If there is anything at all distinctive about the way I teach it is the “use” of the classroom to enact the texts we read and the issues we study. Insofar as ethical relations demand reciprocity, a radical attentiveness to the views of others, and the development of what I called moral imagination, then what goes on in the class becomes an example of what the authors we consider are arguing about. I also “use” the classroom when I take the last two-hour class and invite them to reverse roles with me: How would they teach the class, who would they include in the syllabus, what issues would they emphasize, how would they change the format? Would they continue giving papers and no exams?

Inevitably after I ask them, for instance, which authors to include in the course, someone will say, “get rid of Melville,” only to be met by the response, “Billy Budd was my favorite text,” and so the debate is on. But for either side to make headway rather than simply reiterate their preferences, students have to offer reasons in terms of the themes and purposes of the course which become explicit in the process of their debate, much as the purposes of political and moral life do in the Socratic dialogues.

Maybe the best reaction of all, though it surely did not seem so at the time: “Why are we reading Plato’s Republic? It is an old book by a foreign man and I find it boring. Why do we need to continue to accept the idea that this is a great work?” It drove me back down to the beginning, to what had attracted me to Plato and to my own initial response, which was to throw the book in the garbage. For a moment I became a student sharing my frustration about a “dialogue,” having so many “Yes, Socrates;” “Absolutely, Socrates;” “Whatever you say, Socrates.” There was an intimacy and forthrightness to the conversation that rarely happens in a class or out of it.

I do not always take the students’ advice. The final responsibility for the course is, after all, mine. But I sometimes do and the course has evolved over time because they have made good arguments and I have learned from them. Thus their voices are present each time I plan the syllabus, the sequence of lectures that frame the discussion, or imagine how the discussion of an issue or text is likely to go. That is what I mean when I talk about students co-authoring the course. Of course it matters that I tell them all this.

Notes from the Field

The Kenan Institute for Ethics acts as a gathering-place for graduate students across a range of disciplines, offering both research and teaching opportunities. In order to give Ethics in Action readers a better idea of the kind of research currently being undertaken by those involved with the Institute, we asked three graduate students to describe their work and to reflect on how it contributes to the larger ethical questions that we’re committed to exploring. Here’s what they shared:

Leslie Roth
Throughout my graduate school career, my interests in the racial and class structure of society have always pulled me back to questions of morality and ethics. Sociology focuses on the logical reasons for inequality in society and offers rationally-based solutions to these problems. At the same time, inequality in society is also a profoundly moral issue that taps into strong emotions and deep-seated notions of right and wrong. As moral issues, questions of racial and class boundaries have the power to resist logical arguments and appeals, making change difficult. I am interested in identifying the different ways morality is interwoven into discussions of race and class. My dissertation involves archival research into how minorities have been constructed as risks to society. In particular, I am examining the panic over so-called “crack-babies” in the 1980s and the more recent panic over illegal immigration in the mid-00s.

In the 80s and early 90s, a large number of news outlets reported on the effects of crack-cocaine on infants whose mothers ingested the drug during pregnancy. Media coverage surrounding this panic portrayed low-income African American mothers as irresponsible and their infants as burdens to the welfare state. Separately, in the middle of the past decade, news articles and television “talking heads” helped frame illegal immigrants from Mexico as threats to American culture and the purity of the nation-state. I hope to show that, in both cases, moralized discourse on purity, responsibility, and fairness had a material effect on legislation, creating public policies that maintain boundaries around race and class.

Questions of rationality, morality, and behavior also come into play in my work for the Institute, which involves helping Professor Dan Ariely conduct and analyze experiments on the likelihood of student cheating in particular circumstances. Ariely’s previous experiments have shown that small things can have big effects on individuals’ likelihood of engaging in ethical behavior. Now we are interested in learning what makes students more or less likely to cheat and whether honesty in one domain—say, the classroom—correlates with...
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In Japan, the most visible protection against 
winter illness by far is the flu mask, worn both 
by individuals who are sick but must still go out 
in public and by individuals particularly hoping 
to avoid getting sick. Though they themselves 
question its efficacy, many doctors suggest that 
patients wear such masks. They may also suggest 
that patients gargle regularly to avoid illness— 
advice that would sound odd in North America. 

The differences in standard flu prevention 
advice are not restricted to personal interac-
tions between individuals and their doctors; 
they extend to the public health system as well. 

Japanese public health authorities recommend 
a combination of strategies to avoid contract-
ing influenza, including annual vaccination, 
frequent washing of hands, the use of masks, 
and gargling regularly. These recommenda-
tions stand in contrast to the American Centers 
for Disease Control recommendations on flu 
prevention, which are limited to frequent hand 
washing and immunization. My research seeks 
to address how is it that the basic recommen-
dations made by cosmopolitan, scientifically 
trained medical and public health profes-
sionals in two of the most advanced medical 
systems in the world can remain so different.

In the aftermath of disasters, civil society is 
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You study labor history with a focus on urban 

disasters. How did you make this leap? 

Clubs and organizations have interested me for 
a long time, maybe because I’ve never really 
belonged to one. Labor historians traditionally 
study unions, but I’m also interested in the way 
that other working-class organizations have 
worked—things like fraternal orders, churches, 
and even, imagining “organization” more 
broadly, families and neighborhoods.

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and material. One of the things I wanted to 

look at was what was lost when the state took 

over what had been informal and unofficial.

What got you interested in studying 

disasters in the first place? 

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So which disasters have you studied? 

My project is on the Salem Fire of 1914 and the 

Halifax Explosion of 1917. The Salem Fire 

started in a patent leather factory, and it spread 

throughout the city. No one was killed, but 

about 18,000 people were left homeless or 

jobless. The Halifax Explosion killed about 

2,000; injured about 9,000; and left about 

25,000 homeless. These were both cities of 

about 50,000 residents.

Is there a common pattern to rescue efforts 

and the broader disaster response? Do we 

respond to disasters differently now than we 

did 100 years ago? 

Historians are trained to be cautious in drawing 

parallels from one era to another. But one thing is 

that contrary to our image of people becoming 

crazy, wild animals after a disaster—falling prey to 

looting, savagery, and chaos—people are in fact 

decent, altruistic, and cooperative. Samuel Prince, 
a sociologist who studied the explosion in Halifax, 
called it a “city of comrades” after the disaster.

In my work, I argue that this altruism isn’t 

just random. While strangers sometimes help 

strangers, what’s more noticeable is the way 

friends help friends, neighbors help neighbors, 

families turn to families. In Halifax, people 

went to the places they were accustomed to 

going for succor: the convent, doctors’ houses,
local hospitals, drug stores, even barber shops. In Salem and Halifax, people enacted what I call their “daily patterns of solidarity”—helping people whom they were used to helping in daily life. This behavior looked disorganized and chaotic to officials, but it was really quite purposeful. I really like how one young woman in Halifax who volunteered at a hospital for a day or two after the explosion put it—she called it “organization without any organization.”

As you mentioned, one of the things we often hear in the wake of a disaster—Katrina being an example—is that disaster areas are plagued by looting or lawlessness. What does your research tell us about this trend? The short answer is that it doesn’t happen or it happens very rarely. People absolutely take what isn’t theirs. But they do so because they need it; they take food, drugs, supplies. You occasionally see what we might call “real” looting—that is, people stealing consumer goods that they don’t need. But this is really rare. And while we shouldn’t minimize the violence—especially against women—that sometimes comes after a disaster, it’s important to keep it in perspective.

Overall, the vast, vast majority of people are orderly after a disaster and organize to help themselves and others, and it does a real disservice when reporters repeat sensational stories of violence and looting.

Beyond survivors being portrayed inaccurately, does this “looting and lawlessness” narrative affect how we view disasters? It does from the perspective of planning for disasters. For instance, should the state use its strained and disrupted resources to defend against some tiny number of predatory individuals, at the cost of disrupting the spontaneous organization and solidarity practiced by the vast majority of people? When we tell stories that emphasize looting and disorder, we encourage disaster plans that focus on mostly mythical bad behavior.

When people perceive post-disaster situations as spaces of disorder to be controlled, they naturally create and support institutions that are designed for controlling people—for instance, sending in the army or the National Guard to patrol the streets. But disaster survivors don’t need to be controlled. They need help, and most of all they need the space and resources to help themselves.

It’s been said that there’s no such thing as a natural disaster. What does that mean, exactly? Disasters can come from “natural” events like hurricanes or earthquakes, or, like Salem and Halifax, they can come from human activity. But their effects—what makes them disasters—are always social. If a hurricane blows over a desert island, that’s not much of a disaster; what makes it a disaster is what happens to people.

We can see this in the fact that disasters are always experienced on what is called a social gradient. That is, poor people always suffer more from disasters than rich people. Their neighborhoods flood more often; their houses fall down more often; and when either of those things happen, they have fewer material resources to fall back on. There’s often a story that disasters are “flattening”—that everyone, rich and poor, black and white, man and woman, experiences them the same way, but in fact the opposite is true.

After Katrina, there was an outpouring of financial donations from across the world. But your research indicates that not all means of providing aid are equally effective. Why is that? It’s useful to think about aid as falling, roughly, into two categories: charity and solidarity. Charity is offered by people and institutions that have more—more money, more prestige, more status, more power—to people who have less of these things. Solidarity is given by equals, in a spirit of sharing and mutuality: I help you, you help me.

Politically—and here’s where my background as a labor historian and labor activist is apparent—I’m uncomfortable with charity. I don’t like the power relationships that are built into it. You can’t build real, equal relationships when one person is giving charity and the other person is receiving it. In contrast, solidarity encourages real relationships, fosters equality, and makes people see commonalities that aren’t immediately apparent.

But more important to your question is about what works. In disaster after disaster, charity is less effective, because it’s temporary, it’s often resented, and it’s less efficient. The outsiders who offer charity may have experience in other disasters, but they don’t have experience in the local community where they’re working. Solidarity, on the other hand, offers not only a way for local people to help each other, but to rebuild a stronger, better, and more ethical community.

The way you describe solidarity stresses being local. How can people unaffected directly by the disaster best respond? It’s really heartwarming to see the outpouring of generosity after major disasters. The question is how can relatively rich people, not directly affected by the disaster, offer solidarity, not charity. I don’t have a perfect answer, and every time there’s a disaster, I struggle with it. My policy is to try to give to groups that existed in the community before the disaster, that are run by and employ local people, and that don’t create the power dynamics of charity.

After Katrina, for instance, local organizers formed the People’s Hurricane Relief Fund, which was controlled by working-class New Orleans residents who wanted to build and retain power in their neighborhoods. When the disaster is relatively nearby, that’s easier, because you’re more likely to know more about the situation and the players.

What about when the disaster is in a distant area, such as the recent earthquakes in Haiti and Chile? It’s certainly harder when the disaster is on the other side of the world. Happily, there are international groups that identify and work with local groups. Madre, for instance, is an international women’s rights group that has a special disaster relief fund that it spends through local partners around the world. After Cyclone Nargis and the recent Haitian earthquake, the global online activist group Avaaz did something similar. I think that’s a model that should be replicated and expanded.

Finally, it’s important to think long-term. The slums of New Orleans and Port-au-Prince were disasters even before the hurricane and earthquake. They were disasters of national and global inequality, of chronic misgovernment and corruption, of perpetual failures of democracy. When we rebuild, we need to do so in a way that fosters democracy and development and that makes sure that poor people have power. In New Orleans that should have meant—but didn’t—a protection of voting rights for people displaced and a concerted effort to make sure that people who were evacuated could return to their neighborhoods.

Jacob Remes studies the working-class and labor history of North America with a focus on urban disasters, working-class organizations, and migration. His dissertation is tentatively titled “Relief and Resistance: Urban Disasters and the Formation of the North American Progressive State.” Remes earned his B.A. from Yale University and his M.A. from Duke.

WEB EXTRA: Watch Jacob Remes discuss the ethics of disaster relief as part of the Institute’s “Conversation in Ethics” video series at dukeethics.org.
Rethinking Regulation

“Regulation” has a bad name. Although Americans have often strongly supported particular regulatory efforts that protect the public from the excesses of the market, in more recent decades numerous regulatory agencies developed a reputation for bureaucratic inefficiency and a tendency to cater to the demands of the businesses that they were supposed to oversee.

Over the past 30 years, the conventional wisdom that regulation is inherently negative led Congress to deregulate such pivotal industries as air transport, trucking, energy, and banking. Advocates of such policies predicted that minimizing burdensome regulations would enhance economic activity, benefitting business owners, consumers, and ultimately, American competitiveness in the global marketplace.

And then came the Enron bankruptcy, a slew of corporate accounting scandals, the still unfolding global financial crisis, and a growing sense of urgency about climate change. Together, these events have prompted widespread reconsideration of regulation as an indispensable means of facilitating a vibrant capitalist economy consistent with the general welfare. Observers from most points on the political spectrum now expect a move away from privatization and deregulation. But what should “new” regulation look like? If the pervasive and exclusive trust in market-based incentive structures has proved excessive, what are the alternatives?

“During the past two generations, we have lost sight of some crucial aspects of regulatory governance,” says Ed Balleisen, a senior fellow at the Kenan Institute for Ethics. “Our faith in financial innovation has led us to forget about the dependence of complex markets on public confidence, and our focus on growth has crowded out concerns about the fairness of economic institutions.”

“We have not paid nearly enough attention to the ways in which a professional ethos can temper narrow self-interest within regulatory agencies and corporations alike,” he says.

Balleisen, an associate professor of history at Duke University and co-editor of the recently published Government and Markets: Toward a New Theory of Regulation, is working with the Institute on a multi-year project, Rethinking Regulation, that will explore new approaches to effective regulatory policy. To begin, Balleisen will chair an interdisciplinary faculty seminar that will bring academics together with regulators and policymakers and encourage path-breaking research on regulation and new regulatory strategies.

“The overarching goal of the seminar is to facilitate new research on effective regulatory governance that doesn’t begin with the premise that government is a failure,” he says.

One of the key strengths of the seminar will be its interdisciplinary composition, with participants drawn from across the social sciences. “Scholars from different disciplines not only identify different questions about the modern regulatory state, but they seek to answer those questions with varying research methodologies,” Balleisen says. “Our aspiration is to foster a collaborative spirit in which we share ideas and collectively explore big questions.”

In this model, he adds, the historian’s insights into how the demand for more or less regulation fluctuates with the degree of popular faith in government, the sociologist’s focus on local regulatory cultures and professional networks, and the behavioralist’s interest in individual motivations and their connection to regulatory incentives “can all inform one another.”

Another key component of the project will be engagement with local, national, and international policymakers, with the aim of producing work that solves problems and yields policy recommendations. “We need to understand how individual lawmakers and regulators make decisions—what motivates them, where do they get their information, how do they process it, and how do they decide which problems most require regulatory action,” Balleisen says.

In addition to thinking about the pros and cons of various instruments of regulation—statutes and administrative rule-making, inspection systems, methods of self-regulation, certification systems, etc.—and how institutions successfully implement them, or fall short in their missions, seminar participants will consider the broader question of the moral and ethical purpose of regulatory policy.

Concern for economic efficiency has dominated regulatory design in the recent past, but this should not be the only legitimate goal for regulatory initiatives, Balleisen says. Distributional outcomes, fairness, and attention to the health of democratic political institutions should also have a place in shaping regulatory policy. Rethinking Regulation will reconsider not only the economics of regulation, but also how regulatory institutions nurture or impede people’s ability to lead more ethical lives and how regulatory policies can serve the common good rather than narrow but influential special interests. This effort, Balleisen notes, requires “stepping back and rethinking what a conception of the common good entails, and what the role of government should be.”

“We need to think deeply and engage discussion across the disciplines about the various and sometimes conflicting purposes of government,” says Balleisen. “And then we need to apply our findings to new research and new teaching strategies to prepare the next generation of policymakers.”

— Rebecca Dunning
sort of scientific failure of doctors. On the contrary, they are evidence that truly effective doctors practice culture as much as they practice medicine. It is precisely this ‘practice of culture’ that allows them to effectively communicate, build trust, and empathize with their patients.

Mari Armstrong-Hough is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Sociology at Duke University and a research assistant at the Kenan Institute for Ethics.

Bill English
As someone whose training has spanned both the social sciences and moral philosophy, I'm interested in how personal ethical convictions relate to social institutions such as judicial systems, legislative bodies, and business corporations. These institutions generally rely on certain ethical principles in order to function successfully—such as standards of honesty, merit, or fairness—although these principles are seldom explicitly stated. Often they are simply taken for granted.

However, when these background assumptions change, or when we try to transplant institutions to new contexts, the importance of these ethical commitments becomes clear. In cases where people do not share the value judgments that enable institutions to function, I would like to understand how those individuals can be rationally persuaded to adopt and endorse the ethical principles that make institutions work as they should.

Traveling in the Third World, I've seen firsthand how certain convictions can undermine important institutions and, by extension, harm society at large. For example, in many countries personal attitudes devaluing women lead to their being treated inequitably within the legal system or barred from valuable economic opportunities. Not only do individual women suffer, but so does the larger society, which is deprived of the legal participation and economic contributions of women. If we can better understand how these sorts of convictions can be changed through rational persuasion, then we can better address larger social problems in various societies.

Changing people’s convictions is no easy task, however. Institutions can, of course, employ threats and incentives to help shape people’s behavior, but these are costly and sometimes insufficient. Ethical persuasion is often an important, additional component that helps establish and sustain institutions. This sort of persuasion aims to convince people of the goodness and desirability of the ethical principles that enable complex social institutions to flourish.

That people’s ethical convictions are important for how they behave is, at first glance, obvious. But where do people’s preferences, particularly judgments of value, come from? And how can we hope to change those judgments when they are socially harmful? This question applies not only to grave issues like someone’s willingness to murder, but also to a host of informal customs and expectations about honesty, trust, generosity, reciprocity, shame, and so on.

Unfortunately, social scientists generally lack a detailed understanding of the sources of our convictions and they disagree about the methods appropriate for persuasively engaging those convictions. One reason for this is that the origins of value judgments are genuinely difficult to understand with many of our standard methodological tools. For instance, statistical techniques might only offer a “snapshot” of people’s past ethical convictions. However, I’m more interested in how persuasion happens from a “first person” point of view.

In addition, value judgments are often controversial. They are things we argue about and which are not easily settled by scientific knowledge. Does this mean that value judgments are fundamentally irrational, rooted in subjective tastes, or simply hardwired into our biological nature? Can we distinguish between legitimate persuasion and manipulation, coercion, or brainwashing? I believe we can, and my work suggests a number of conditions and processes that help rational ethical persuasion take place. These include forums that encourage public debate, procedures that elicit conscious consent, and various educational practices.

Ultimately, I hope my work will draw attention to the important role that ethical persuasion must play in the resolution of certain social problems, while also providing new tools that can help enable this sort of persuasion.

Bill English is a Ph.D. candidate in the Political Science Department at Duke University and a member of the 2009-2010 Kenan Institute for Ethics Graduate Colloquium.
Syllabus: “The Challenges of Living an Ethical Life”

This course is framed by a number of familiar but fundamental ethical questions: What is a good, just and worthy life? How is it to be lived and among whom? By engaging in what sorts of activities? What is the relationship between politics and morality or ethics and power? What is the difference between morality and moralism, ethical responsibility and irresponsibility? In what ways and to what degree are human beings independent actors and to what degree are they shaped by forces outside their control and consciousness? Are violence and war, lying and deception ever justified? When and how? To what extent are we captured by the particular circumstances of our lives and to what extent can we develop more capacious understandings of citizenship and community? How do issues of race, class, and gender shape what we mean by a moral life, and who can or should live it?

—J. Peter Euben

The Book of Job, I & II
Sophocles, Oedipus the King, Antigone
Plato, The Apology of Socrates, The Crito
Hannah Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem
Stanley Milgram, Obedience to Authority (selections)
Craig Haney et al., “Interpersonal Dynamics in a Simulated Prison”
Thucydides, Pericles’ Funeral Oration, The Corcyra, Revolution and the Median Dialogue
Niccolo Machiavelli, The Prince
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