

Moral Reasoning, Moral Pluralism, and the Classroom

Martin Benjamin
Michigan State University

In this essay I focus on a fundamental aspect of moral reasoning — the application and revision of a comprehensive moral framework. This is not the only type of moral reasoning nor, perhaps, the most important. It is, however, the most general and pervasive, marking the broad contours within which other types of moral reasoning are employed. After characterizing this kind of reasoning, I turn to moral pluralism. So long as individuals and groups enjoy a certain amount of freedom to think and act for themselves, there will be conflicts between good and important moral values and principles that cannot be resolved by reason. This is a *fact*, the fact of reasonable moral pluralism, that must be incorporated into the application and revision of our comprehensive moral frameworks. I conclude by discussing the implications of my accounts of moral reasoning and moral pluralism for the classroom.

MORAL REASONING¹

THE SHIP OF KNOWLEDGE

If I were asked to rank metaphors in epistemology, I would put Neurath's ship at the top — ahead even of Plato's cave. In the early 1930s, Otto Neurath compared humans as knowers to "sailors who must rebuild their ship on the open sea, never able to dismantle it in dry-dock and to reconstruct it there out of the best materials."² Philosophers have long sought a privileged foundation from which to reconstruct an accurate, comprehensive picture of the world. For Descartes the foundation was the *cogito*; for the classical empiricists sense experience. But neither they nor those who followed in their footsteps have met with success. It does not follow, however, that we cannot improve our knowledge of the world. We may, as Neurath suggests, rebuild the "ship" of knowledge even if we cannot "dismantle it in dry-dock and...reconstruct it there out of the best materials."

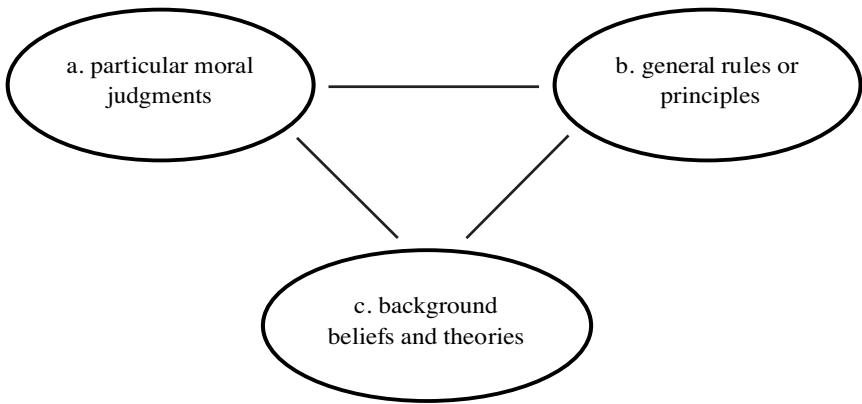
THE SHIP OF MORALITY

Neurath's metaphor applies to ethics as well as to epistemology. Our initial understanding of right and wrong, good and bad, is acquired from our parents, our society, and our own limited observation. Before long, however, further experience and critical reflection reveal that the "ship of morality" is not perfectly seaworthy. Some aspects of our inherited morality, we come to realize, are worn out. Others no longer serve any purpose. Still others are, in the light of new knowledge or circumstances, positively harmful. Finally, we face unprecedented and rapidly changing choices and conditions for which our inherited framework is ill-equipped. Our "ship" needs repair and rebuilding, but we cannot do it all at once and from the bottom up, for we are on the open sea where an imperfect, but serviceable, ship is better than none at all.³

WIDE REFLECTIVE EQUILIBRIUM

A working moral framework — what I have characterized as the "ship of morality" — is enormously complex; more complex, in fact, than anyone currently

understands. A useful, though *highly simplified*, diagram identifies three main elements. In no particular order, they are: (a) particular moral judgments, (b) general rules or principles, and (c) background beliefs and theories.



Each element consists of a set of presumptively true beliefs. *Judgments about particular cases* include beliefs like “slavery is wrong” or “Huck Finn acted rightly in helping Jim escape.” *General rules and principles* include beliefs like “Keep your promises” and “Treat people as ends-in-themselves, not merely as means.” *Background beliefs and theories* include beliefs about: the nature of the world and of persons; the nature of morality, moral theories, and moral knowledge; and whether there is a God and, if so, God’s role in human affairs.

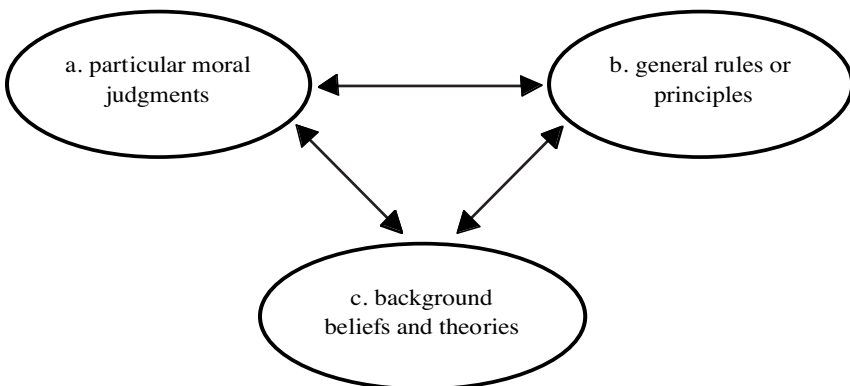
The three elements of a moral framework are, as represented by the connecting lines in the diagram, interdependent and mutually supporting. If challenged, particular moral judgments are defended by showing they are supported by (or cohere with) secure general rules or principles and background beliefs and theories. For example, (a) slavery is wrong because it violates (b) the principle prohibiting treating people merely as means and it conflicts with (c) our knowledge of the generally equal capacities of human beings for self-determination, pain, and suffering, regardless of race, sex, ethnicity, and so on. Similarly, general rules or principles, when challenged, are supported by showing they cohere with highly secure particular moral judgments and background beliefs and theories; and background beliefs and theories are supported by showing they cohere with highly secure particular judgments and general rules and principles.⁴ Insofar as the three main elements of a moral framework are mutually supportive they are said to be in *equilibrium*.

As we grow up, each of us is socialized by some combination of our parents, our religion, our socioeconomic group, and the larger society into a particular moral framework — a set of interrelated (a) particular moral judgments, (b) general rules and principles, and (c) background beliefs and theories. At some point, however, as we experience the world and acquire a capacity to think for ourselves, we become aware of various shortcomings of our inherited framework (our “ship of morality”). For example, some particular judgments seem wrong. You may have been raised to believe that it is *always* morally wrong for a physician to assist a patient in ending

his or her life, but then you learn the details of a particular case of a physician's doing just that, and you are not so sure.⁵ Some moral rules or principles seem wrong. You may have been raised to believe that human life is sacred and should be prolonged *no matter what*, but then you learn about anencephalic infants — infants born without a cerebral cortex and hence totally and permanently unconscious — and you are not so sure. Some background beliefs seem wrong. You may have been raised to believe that black people, white people, red people, yellow people, gay people, poor people, or rich people do not have the same *basic* hopes, fears, wishes, and values as you do or that people cannot act morally if they do not believe in God, but what you read and experience for yourself makes these seem doubtful.

New knowledge can also generate conflict among elements of a person's initial moral framework. For example, I grew up believing both: (a') that it is perfectly okay to eat meat purchased from the typical supermarket; and (b') that we should not contribute to gratuitous pain and suffering. Then in 1975 I read Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* and learned about (c') the nature and prevalence of factory farming and the extent to which it and the way animals are transported and slaughtered cause gratuitous pain and suffering.⁶ Singer also pointed out that most of the shrink-wrapped animal parts in large supermarkets comes from factory farms and that consumers who purchase them are supporting factory farming. In the light of this new set of background beliefs (c'), a conflict emerged between my general principle that we should not contribute to gratuitous pain and suffering (b') and my particular judgment that it is perfectly okay to eat meat from the typical supermarket (a'). My ship was leaking. What should I have done? How could I make repairs?

I will answer these questions shortly. In the meantime, I adapt the term wide reflective equilibrium (WRE) to characterize the state of a moral framework when its elements cohere.⁷ The elements are in *equilibrium* if they are mutually supporting. The equilibrium is *reflective* if it is based on a continuous dialectical interplay among the elements. The equilibrium is *wide* rather than narrow if it includes background beliefs and theories as well as particular moral judgments and general rules and principles. In the light of the reflective aspect of a moral framework, we should now modify our diagram by changing the straight connecting lines into bi-directional lines to indicate the dynamic relations among the three main elements:



Once we have obtained WRE among the elements of our moral framework, we apply it to new or previously unconsidered cases or to cases in which we are unsure what are particular judgments ought to be.⁸ In some instances, our newly secured rules or principles will provide straightforward guidance. In other instances, we can, with a little work, find close analogies between the new situation and cases in which our judgments are secure or we can modify our rules or principles to handle the new situation so long as WRE is preserved. If, however, the new or previously unconsidered case or situation cannot be accommodated by our framework — if, indeed, it reveals flaws or limitations of the framework — we may have to reweave the fabric of our beliefs. This may require modifying or replacing one or more of our particular judgments, one or more of our general rules or principles, or one or more of our background beliefs and theories.

For example, I resolved the disequilibrium caused by what I learned about factory farming from Peter Singer (c') by rejecting the judgment (acquired as a child) that it was morally okay to eat meat from a typical supermarket (a') and replacing it with the judgment that it was not okay to do so (a'') in order to preserve the more secure, wide-ranging, and important principle that one should not contribute to gratuitous pain or suffering (b'). This was made easier by further beliefs provided by Singer to the effect that a person can enjoy a perfectly tasty and nutritious diet without eating meat.⁹

It may be more difficult to imagine a case where a disequilibrium is resolved by modifying a background belief or theory, but contemporary bioethics provides a useful example. In the late 1960s, advances in medical knowledge and technology were beginning to allow physicians to maintain patients whose brains had been completely and irreversibly destroyed. In the past, such patients' hearts would have stopped within minutes and they would have been declared dead. However, modern respirators and other technology were now enabling doctors to prolong breathing and heartbeat. A rule directing doctors and nurses to preserve and prolong life, at (b) in our diagram, seemed to require that treatment be continued. But to many this seemed wrong because it needlessly prolonged uncertainty for the patient's friends and family, added to the cost of care without benefiting the patient, and reduced the number of ICU beds available to patients with much better prognoses. In response, an interdisciplinary committee at Harvard Medical School identified criteria for determining whether brain function had been wholly and irreversibly lost in a respirator-dependent unconscious patient.¹⁰ It then proposed that we modify our beliefs about what constituted a living human person. Respirator dependent patients whose brain function had been totally and irreversibly lost should no longer be considered *living* persons. They should be pronounced dead. And the duty to preserve and protect life does not apply to those who are already dead. Thus a new problem generated by new circumstances creating a conflict between an entrenched moral rule at (b) and a strong particular judgment at (a) was resolved by a relevant modification of a background belief at (c). Equilibrium was restored without abandoning an important rule or accepting what seemed, in new circumstances, to be an unacceptable application of it.

PERSONAL AND INTERPERSONAL COHERENCE

Our aim as we employ WRE in critically discussing and debating moral questions like assisted suicide, stem cell research, capital punishment, affirmative action, and so on is personal and interpersonal coherence. By personal coherence I mean that we seek answers to moral questions that, from our own point of view, satisfy the conditions of WRE better than any alternative. By interpersonal coherence, I mean that we hope to achieve as much agreement or overlap as we can obtain between our own moral framework and the frameworks of others. Insofar as the method of WRE leads to personal and interpersonal coherence, we may preserve personal integrity and obtain reasonable agreement with others.

MORAL PLURALISM

THE DOCTRINE OF MORAL HARMONY

Is it likely that the method of WRE will eventually lead to agreement on all ethical questions? Is interpersonal moral harmony a realistic possibility? Or is a certain amount of ethical conflict and disagreement a permanent feature of human life? Many people believe all good things and all right actions must ultimately fit together in a single harmonious scheme of morality. As we acquire more knowledge and improve our reasoning, we will eventually agree on a single set of rules and principles that will provide a single right answer to all moral questions. Even if prejudice, ignorance, or bad reasoning keep us from achieving this goal, it is, in principle, reachable. Stuart Hampshire calls this the “doctrine of moral harmony.”¹¹

REASONABLE MORAL PLURALISM

In recent years, however, a number of philosophers have come to reject this doctrine.¹² So long as individuals and groups enjoy a certain amount of freedom to think and act for themselves there will be conflicts between good and important moral values and principles that cannot be resolved by reason. This is a *fact* about morality — the fact of *moral pluralism* — that must be included among our background beliefs and theories in WRE.

Moral pluralism holds that a number of good and important values and principles are inherently incompatible. They cannot be combined into a single harmonious scheme of morality for all. I emphasize “good and important” to distinguish what John Rawls, following Joshua Cohen, calls pluralism *as such* from “reasonable pluralism.”¹³ Pluralism as such includes (1) plural and conflicting values resulting from selfishness, prejudice, ignorance, bad reasoning, and so on together with (2) plural and conflicting values that remain even when selfishness, prejudice, ignorance, bad reasoning, and so on are overcome. Reasonable pluralism is restricted to (2). Pluralism is reasonable when plural and conflicting values and principles are not the result of selfishness, prejudice, ignorance, bad reasoning, bias, or other deficiencies. All reasonable moral frameworks will prohibit murder, rape, genocide, and the like.¹⁴ But, even when we exclude obvious “bad guys” like Nazis and hit men, there will be a certain amount of moral conflict between informed, clear-thinking, well-meaning “good guys” like you and me.

Moral pluralism — understood now as *reasonable* pluralism — is a general *fact* that (like well-grounded facts about biology and psychology) must be included

among our background beliefs and theories in WRE. It is, as Rawls puts it, “A permanent feature of the public culture of a democracy.”¹⁵ So long as people enjoy free association and the capacity to think and act for themselves, there will be conflicts between good and important values and principles that are not due to selfishness, prejudice, ignorance, poor reasoning, and so on. Every one’s adhering to a single, unified conception of right and wrong, good and bad, can be maintained, as Rawls adds, “only by the oppressive use of state power.”¹⁶

SOURCES OF REASONABLE DISAGREEMENT

Isaiah Berlin points out that many good and important moral values are logically incompatible.

Justice, rigorous justice, is for some people an absolute value, but it is not compatible with what may be equally ultimate values for them — mercy, compassion, as arises in concrete cases. Both liberty and equality are among the primary goals pursued by human beings: but total liberty for wolves is death to the lambs, total liberty of the powerful, the gifted, is not compatible with the rights to a decent existence of the weak and less gifted.¹⁷

This and other rationally irreconcilable conflicts between good and important values and principles, Berlin argues, are unavoidable.

Rawls identifies additional sources of reasonable disagreement.¹⁸ First, in considering difficult issues like affirmative action, economic justice, animal welfare, and global warming, the relevant empirical and scientific evidence is complex and hard to evaluate. Different informed, thoughtful individuals will, in some cases, draw different, yet nonetheless reasonable, conclusions from the same evidence. Second, even when we agree about relevant factors, we may reasonably disagree about their weight, and thus arrive at different conclusions. On abortion, for example, you may place more weight on the sanctity of human biological life than I do. Third, in many cases our concepts will be vague and subject to different interpretations. Think here of concepts like “nature,” “justice,” “welfare,” “life,” “torture,” and so on. Fourth, the way we assess evidence and weigh moral and political values is often shaped by what Rawls calls “our total experience, our whole course of life up to now; and our total experiences must always differ.” Sociologist Kristin Luker’s illuminating description of the differing backgrounds and experiences of pro-life and pro-choice activists on the abortion question provides an excellent illustration.¹⁹ The upshot is that informed, thoughtful individuals will not always agree about complex moral issues. A number of divisive conflicts will have no clear resolution.

PLURALISM AND INTEGRITY

How, then, do we contend with the actual multiplicity of good and important conflicting values and principles? To simultaneously embrace them all is to invite a kind of madness, a moral schizophrenia that undermines integrity and cripples agency. To embrace a *single* dominant value or principle from which a small number of others may be derived is to invite a different kind of madness, a narrowness bordering on fanaticism that is blind to the richness and complexity of human life. Think here of both Creon and Antigone in Sophocles’s great drama. A more plausible possibility is to embrace a reasonably coherent, but occasionally conflicting,

subset of good values and principles while acknowledging the reasonableness of certain alternative subsets.

Different cultures, Berlin points out, are organized and identified in terms of different clusters or subsets of values.²⁰ The values, virtues and ideals unifying the Roman Republic — emphasizing aggression, worldliness, domination, opportunism, and so on — were quite different from those unifying the early Christians — humility, acceptance of suffering, unworldliness, the hope of salvation in an afterlife, and so on. These clusters of more or less compatible values structured the internal identity and integrity of the cultures as well as most of the individuals comprising them. While the defining virtues and values of the Roman Republic are incompatible with those of Christianity, each by itself is reasonably coherent and sufficiently comprehensive to provide its members with a rich and distinctive *worldview* and corresponding *way of life*.

WORLDVIEWS AND WAYS OF LIFE

A worldview is a complex, often unarticulated (and perhaps not fully articulable) set of deeply held and highly cherished beliefs about the nature and organization of the universe and one's place in it. Normative as well as descriptive — comprising interlocking general beliefs about knowledge, reality, and values — a worldview so pervades and conditions our thinking that it is largely unnoticed. A way of life is a set of patterns of living, admired ideal types of men and women, ways of structuring marriage, family relationships, governance, educational and religious practices, and so on. Worldviews and ways of life are dynamically interrelated. A worldview helps to structure a way of life; a way of life presupposes and embodies a particular worldview. Deep changes in one are likely to occasion related corresponding changes in the other.

A distinctive and easily recognized contemporary worldview and way of life is that of the Amish. Many worldviews and ways of life are, however, more difficult to identify and delineate in rapidly changing, multi-cultural, secular societies like ours, which permit, if not encourage, the exercise of individual choice. A complex amalgam of a wide variety of reasonably coherent beliefs, attitudes, values, principles, ideals, and practices, an individual's worldview and way of life will, in contemporary liberal democracies, often be highly individualized. Think here of pro-choice or outwardly gay Catholics, pro-life feminists, Jews for Jesus, and so on. Think also of reasonably coherent combinations of beliefs, attitudes, values, ideals, and practices that, perhaps like your own, are too individualized to fit neatly into any single conventional category.

The point is that, like Homeric Greece, classical Athens, the Roman Republic, and the early Christians, individuals in contemporary liberal democracies organize their lives around different, occasionally conflicting, reasonably coherent subsets of values and principles correlated with certain worldviews and ways of life. While pluralism *within* these pre-modern, pre-liberal, pre-democratic societies may have been limited, this is not so in modern liberal democratic societies like ours.

These considerations and others support the *fact* of moral pluralism. As we continue to apply and refine our moral outlooks in WRE, we must therefore

incorporate this fact into our background beliefs and theories as a provisional fixed point.

COMPROMISE AND ACCOMMODATION

The fact of moral pluralism means that some ethical conflicts cannot be tidily and uncontroversially be resolved by reason. But if reason cannot resolve a particular conflict, it does not follow that it cannot, through compromise, sometimes help to contain it. Historically, philosophers have had little to say about moral compromise. One reason is the understandably high regard they have for personal or moral integrity. Moral compromise and moral integrity are, on the face of it, incompatible. If you and I are parties to a disagreement rooted in moral pluralism, how can we endorse a compromise position — one that more or less splits the difference between us — without compromising — or betraying — our integrity? Though I cannot show it here, I have argued elsewhere that there are circumstances in which compromise on matters of morality may be integrity-preserving for parties on both sides.²¹

Compromise, however, is only one way of responding to those with whom we reasonably disagree. David Wong identifies a family of concepts falling under the head of *accommodation* that are usually neglected by moral philosophers, but which play a role in ameliorating rationally irreconcilable moral conflict.²² They include arbitration, negotiation, synthesis, and reconciliation. He emphasizes, too, virtues such as resourcefulness and creativity in acting on one's own position while minimizing damage to those with conflicting positions. To this I would add the importance of moral imagination and its cultivation through literature, theater, and film.

THE CLASSROOM

What are the implications of WRE and moral pluralism for formal education? Can they be taught? *Should* they be? If so, by whom, at what levels, in what settings, and in what ways? These are large and difficult questions that cannot be fully addressed here. I will, however, venture partial responses and suggest lines of research that may contribute to fuller answers.

CAN WE CULTIVATE MORAL REASONING IN THE CLASSROOM?

Can a student's capacity for and skill in WRE reasoning be cultivated in the classroom? I say "cultivated" rather than "taught" because in my experience this sort of reasoning is a kind of know-how, albeit inchoate, that students bring to the open-minded discussion of difficult moral questions. I discuss WRE in my bioethics courses, but not at the outset because it would not, at that point, be meaningful. Students taking a bioethics course or any other course in practical ethics are, at least initially, more concerned about medical paternalism, patients' rights, and physician-assisted suicide than the structure of moral reasoning. So, after brief explanations and illustrations of critical thinking skills,²³ the categorical imperative (second formulation), and the principle of utility, we turn directly to questions raised by real-life case studies in the light of relevant articles from medical, legal, and philosophical journals.²⁴

Before long students are intuitively employing WRE in class discussion — criticizing and revising background beliefs, identifying and tracing the implications of rules or principles, and revising particular judgments. I stand on the sidelines actively monitoring their critical thinking — insisting on arguments, questioning assumptions, requesting clarification, eliciting distinctions, asking for principles, tracing implications, finding inconsistencies, and playing devil’s advocate. Over the next six weeks students gradually improve in these respects, both in their papers and in class discussion. Then we take a week to reflect on what we have been doing. This is where I introduce WRE and moral pluralism.

I put the diagram linking (a) particular judgments, (b) general rules and principles, and (c) background beliefs and theories on the board and illustrate it with clear, memorable examples from the previous six weeks of class discussion and from selected passages from students’ papers. Understanding comes quickly, as it does in other contexts in which we become explicitly aware of pre-reflective know-how. Students acquire a heightened appreciation of the nature and cognitive status of moral reasoning. Science majors, who have been dubious of the cognitive status of ethics from the beginning, are especially taken by WRE. A number of them approach me after class or in my office to discuss similarities and differences between ethical and scientific reasoning.²⁵

Students also become aware of why the course has been making them a bit apprehensive. To engage in WRE is in part to engage in a process of self-discovery and self-revision. Our moral framework reflects our moral identity. To encounter disequilibrium in the course of one’s reading or class discussion is to be forced to reconsider and possibly revise that identity. This is disturbing, sometimes wrenching. Our emotions, especially our moral emotions, do not turn on a dime. We often need time to make and adjust to making the changes needed to restore equilibrium.²⁶ Pre-medical students who come to the course believing that physicians must always do everything possible to preserve and prolong human life are often thrown for a loop when they encounter the variety and messy complexities of real-life cases. The same is true of students whose moral identity with respect to bioethics is based on simple slogans like “right to life,” “quality of life,” or “death with dignity.” On the positive side, understanding the connection between WRE and moral identity also makes the course more personally meaningful. WRE narrows the gap between formal education and the self.

I emphasize in class that the process of WRE never comes to an end, that there is no point at which we can put it to rest and place our moral course on automatic pilot. I quote Kai Nielsen who characterizes the process of WRE as “[weaving and unweaving] the fabric of our beliefs until we get, for a time, *though only for a time*, the most consistent and coherent package which best squares with everything we reasonably believe we know and to which we, on reflection, are most committed.”²⁷ Moral reasoning, I emphasize, is a lifelong undertaking. I encourage students to actively test and extend their moral frameworks after the course is over, so as to make these frameworks more responsive to changes in the world and in our knowledge. I also remind them that they will have further practice in the remainder of the course.

The next week, when we return to difficult normative questions — those raised by research on human subjects — students seem more comfortable with the messy, occasionally inconclusive, nature of give-and-take moral reasoning. I like to think this is in part because they understand its role in WRE and have confidence in WRE as a disciplined, cognitive undertaking.

I am less explicit in this course about moral pluralism as a background belief in WRE, largely because of time constraints. Students are asked to read something about it, but I do not have time to discuss it with care it deserves. This is a problem. Students have a rough and ready understanding of moral pluralism, but it is often confused with “anything goes” or subjective relativism. The problem would be mitigated if the nature and sources of moral pluralism were well taught in the K-12 curriculum or in college social science courses. I worry, though, about teachers confusing it with vulgar forms of relativism — drawing the distinction is not easy.²⁸ In the near future, explanations of the nature and sources of reasonable moral disagreement would probably have to await a college-level philosophy course. Yet, we do not have to wait until the college years to begin teaching WRE.

From 1975 to 1983, I taught parts of Matthew Lipman’s Philosophy for Children curriculum to fifth graders as a parent volunteer in my children’s school. I used Lipman’s philosophical children’s novel *Harry Stottlemeier’s Discovery* and part of his children’s novel *Lisa*.²⁹ I learned that, on moral issues they could understand and that mattered to them, my fifth-graders were as capable of engaging in WRE as Michigan State undergraduates in my practical ethics courses.

One of the virtues of Lipman’s novels is that the children in the books model philosophical inquiry for the children reading (or in my case, listening to) them. In the first chapter of *Lisa*, Lisa’s moral framework is thrown into disequilibrium. On the one hand, Lisa loves animals. On the other hand, she loves her mother’s roast chicken. The disequilibrium emerges when she can no longer compartmentalize these two loves. As I discussed Lisa’s problem with the class, I was struck by the similarity between the fifth-graders’ reasoning and that of college students when discussing the same issue.

With some trepidation, I brought Peter Singer’s *Animal Liberation* to my fifth-graders. I explained factory farming and passed the book around so they could see the photos of animals on factory farms. (I was afraid that some of the kids would sit down to dinner that night, fold their arms, and refuse to eat their chicken, roast beef, or pork chops because of what they learned from Mr. Benjamin in school that day. I imagined all sorts of complaints from parents that would mean the end of our weekly one-hour philosophy class. But, I am happy to report, if there were any such complaints, they never reached me or Jean Medick, the fine teacher who for eight years allowed me to meet with her class on Wednesday afternoons). In any case, the fifth-graders were no less capable of engaging in WRE-based reasoning than college students so long as the ethical issues were meaningful to them and they could understand the relevant background beliefs. Indeed, one of the things that made the animal rights/vegetarianism question a good one for these students was the extent

to which they were capable, at 10-years-old, of understanding the relevant background beliefs.

On the basis of my experience, I am inclined to believe that children as young as 10 (and perhaps younger) have a capacity for WRE-related moral reasoning that can be cultivated in the classroom.³⁰ My experience is, however, no substitute for well-conducted research on the cognitive capacities of children of various ages to engage in WRE. I hope that such research will soon be conducted.

OUGHT WE TO CULTIVATE MORAL REASONING IN THE CLASSROOM?

Suppose students at certain levels in fact have the capacity for WRE-related reasoning, including a capacity to understand and appreciate moral pluralism. Suppose, too, we know how to cultivate and improve such reasoning in the classroom. The question now is whether we should explicitly do so. It seems too obvious that we should. First, as mentioned earlier, it would help to bridge the gap between the content of certain academic subjects and the student's own life and convictions. Second, it would afford all children, not just children of academics and other highly educated individuals, to "get the hang" of disciplined, give-and-take, identity-shaping moral discussion. Third, the sooner students understand moral pluralism — its sources and how it differs from "anything goes" relativism — the better. And fourth, it may eventually contribute to raising the level of moral and political discussion and deliberation in the larger society.

PROBLEMS AND OBSTACLES

Still, there are a number of problems and obstacles that must be overcome if WRE and moral pluralism are to be incorporated into the classroom. As mentioned earlier, we must learn at what stage of psychological development students are capable of this sort of reasoning. My hunch is that it will be surprisingly early. We must also decide whether WRE should initially be taught by a specialist trained in philosophy or whether we should follow the "Ethics Across the Curriculum" model and have it taught wherever and whenever ethical questions naturally arise in the course of teaching other subjects. My preference would be for the latter because ethical reasoning is something everyone, not just specialists, should be doing. Moreover, ethical questions arise in many subject areas, not just on the day or hour when the specialist is teaching. This, however, raises questions about teacher training. What should it consist of? Who should conduct it? And, as always, where will the money come from?

There are also questions about evaluation. How will we know if the teaching is effective? How can we tell whether the students are improving? There are ways of answering these questions with respect to college or university ethics courses.³¹ It is an open question whether they can be adapted to the relevant levels of the K-12 curriculum.

Finally, there will be many political obstacles to explicitly introducing WRE and moral pluralism into the K-12 curriculum. Many people still believe moral reasoning is simply a matter of combining foundational principles — the ten commandments, the categorical imperative, or the principle of utility — with empirical

facts and more or less mechanically deducing a conclusion. If this were the case, moral reasoning would be pretty simple and there would be no need to teach or cultivate it in the schools. Others, in the grip of subjective or “anything goes” relativism may think there is no such thing as moral reasoning. Morality for them is, at bottom, nothing but a combination of subjective preference and power. Still others — many of them academic philosophers — remain wedded to the doctrine of moral harmony and would resist the idea of moral pluralism. Finally, people who believe ethics is inseparable from religion will contend that moral reasoning cannot be introduced into the schools without religion and if the Constitution forbids teaching religion (though not, perhaps, teaching *about* religions) it also forbids teaching ethics.

These are formidable barriers. Incorporating WRE into the classroom, especially the K-12 classroom, is at best an uphill struggle. More likely, perhaps it’s hopeless. Still, adapting a distinction from Rawls,³² we might distinguish the timeline horizons of: (1) teachers and principals; (2) school board members; and (3) philosophers of education. Teachers and principals generally look to the end of the school year. School board members generally look to the next election. Philosophers of education, however, must also look to the needs of the next generation and beyond. If, therefore, WRE can be cultivated in the classroom and if moral pluralism can be taught, the reasons for incorporating them into the curriculum are very strong and philosophers of education should do what they can to help bring it about.

1. This section and the section that follows borrow liberally from chapters 5 and 6 of my book *Philosophy and This Actual World: An Introduction to Practical Philosophical Inquiry* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003).

2. Otto Neurath, “Protocol Sentences,” in *Logical Positivism*, ed. A.J. Ayer, trans. George Schick (Chicago: Free Press, 1959), 210.

3. Radical utilitarianism is an example in ethics of an attempt to reconstruct our “ship” from the finest materials all at once and from the bottom up. This is ethical foundationalism.

4. Granted, the reasoning here looks circular, but note that circular reasoning is not always *vicious*. When the circle is big, as Burton Dreben points out, it “makes it very good philosophy.” Burton Dreben, “On Rawls and Political Liberalism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Rawls*, ed. Samuel Freeman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 338. Indeed, this sort of reasoning is not unique to ethics. Nelson Goodman has shown that the principles of deductive and inductive inference are in fact justified in exactly the same way. If this kind of reasoning is good enough for justifying basic principles of logic, it ought to be good enough for ethics. See Nelson Goodman, *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1955), 65–68.

5. See, for example, E. Timothy Quill, “Death and Dignity: A Case of Individualized Decision Making,” *New England Journal of Medicine* 324, no. 10 (1991): 691–94.

6. Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: New York Review of Books, 1975).

7. The term “wide reflective equilibrium” may be attributed to both John Rawls and Norman Daniels. See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1999), 18–19; and Norman Daniels, “Wide Reflective Equilibrium and Theory Acceptance in Ethics,” in *Justice and Justification: Reflective Equilibrium in Theory and Practice*, ed. Norman Daniels (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 21–46. My account differs in certain respects from each of theirs. Rawls centers on the justification of a theory of justice and Daniels centers on theory acceptance. I am concerned with the most general form of moral reasoning.

8. As with knowledge, we ought to be actively testing our framework by extending it to new or previously considered cases and then revising and improving it as needed. Contrast this with individuals

of extremely conservative temperaments who try to preserve their received frameworks at all costs by “circling the wagons” against any intrusions by new knowledge or changes in the world. Consider, in this connection, religious fundamentalists of various stripes.

9. Singer, one of whose aims is to change the reader’s behavior, provides recipes for tasty vegetarian dishes. *Animal Liberation* is the only philosophy book I know of that includes recipes as an important part of the argument.

10. Ad Hoc Committee of the Harvard Medical School to Examine the Definition of Death, “A Definition of Irreversible Coma,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 205, no. 6 (1968): 337–40.

11. Stuart Hampshire, *Morality and Conflict* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 144.

12. See, for example, Thomas Nagel, “The Fragmentation of Value,” in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Charles Taylor, “The Diversity of Goods,” in *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, eds. Amartya Sen and Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Hampshire, *Morality and Conflict*; Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: 1985); Charles Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); and Isaiah Berlin, “The Pursuit of the Ideal,” in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 1–19.

13. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 36; and Joshua Cohen, “Moral Pluralism and Political Consensus,” in *The Idea of Democracy*, ed. David Copp, Jean Hampton, and John Roemer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 270–92.

14. I cannot argue this here, but there is a set of general threshold or baseline principles that a framework must satisfy if it is to qualify as reasonable. These would include prohibitions against murder, slavery, rape, human sacrifice, genocide, and so on. A framework is unreasonable if it permits or requires flagrant and systematic violation of these principles.

15. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 36.

16. *Ibid.*, 37.

17. Berlin, “The Pursuit of the Ideal,” 12.

18. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 55–57.

19. Kristin Luker, *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 158–191.

20. Berlin, “The Pursuit of the Ideal,” 7–10.

21. Martin Benjamin, *Splitting the Difference: Compromise and Integrity in Ethics and Politics* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990). See also Martin Benjamin, “Philosophical Integrity and Policy Development in Bioethics,” *Journal of Philosophy and Medicine* 15 (June 1990): 375–389.

22. David Wong, “Coping with Moral Conflict and Ambiguity,” *Ethics* 102, no. 4 (1992): 763–784.

23. These include identifying and distinguishing ethical issues from matters of biomedical expertise, identifying relevant facts, clarifying concepts and drawing relevant distinctions, constructing and evaluating arguments, being consistent, and anticipating and responding to possible objections to one’s major claims and arguments.

24. Explaining and illustrating these skills and principles takes about three class-hours.

25. To those with a background in philosophy of science or science studies, I recommend Thomas Kuhn, “Objectivity, Value Judgment, and Theory Choice,” in *The Essential Tension*, ed. Thomas S. Kuhn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 320–339.

26. William G. Perry, Jr., has written sensitively of the challenges a good liberal arts education poses to college students’ worldviews and ways of life. As students’ sometimes simple and doctrinaire worldviews are discredited by new information and ways of thinking, teachers are responsible “to hear and honor, by simple acknowledgment, the students’ losses.” Students must be allowed to grieve and mourn the loss of their former selves if they are to go on and, with reasonable confidence and hope, develop more complex and less doctrinaire ways of viewing the world. “It may be a great joy to discover a new and more complex way of thinking and seeing; but yesterday one thought in simpler ways, and hope and aspiration were embedded in those ways.” In allowing “a little time for the guts to catch up

with such leaps of the mind” by acknowledging the student’s loss, the responsible teacher makes it more likely that the transition will be stable. William G. Perry, Jr., “Cognitive and Ethical Growth: The Making of Meaning,” in *The Future American College*, ed. Arthur Chickering (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1981), 108.

27. Kai Nielsen, “Relativism and Wide Reflective Equilibrium,” *Monist* 76, no. 3 (1993): 318.

28. For a useful discussion, see Susan Wolf, “Two Levels of Pluralism,” *Ethics* 102, no. 4 (1992): 785–798.

29. Matthew Lipman, *Harry Stottlemeier’s Discovery* (Montclair, N.J.: First Mountain Foundation, 1982); and Matthew Lipman, *Lisa* (Montclair, N.J.: Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children, 1983).

30. Perhaps this should not be surprising. Recall Neurath’s ship of knowledge and its similarity to the ship of morality. If children can at a fairly early age replace beliefs about the tooth fairy and Santa Claus with beliefs about their parents because the new beliefs are a better overall fit with everything else they believe, it should be no surprise that they can employ the same sort of reasoning in ethics.

31. See, for example, Kenneth Howe, “Evaluating Philosophy Teaching: Student Mastery of Philosophical Objectives in Nursing Ethics,” *Teaching Philosophy* 5, no. 1 (1982): 11–22.

32. John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 97. Rawls distinguishes the politician, who looks to the next election, from the statesman, who looks to the next generation, from the student of philosophy whose task is “to articulate and express the permanent conditions and the real interests of a well-ordered society.”