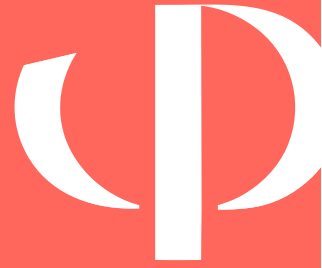
NEWSLETTER | The American Philosophical Association

Teaching Philosophy



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FROM THE EDITORS

Tziporah Kasachkoff and Eugene Kelly

ARTICLES

Regina A. Rini

Student Resistance to Thought-Experiments

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Concrete Examples and Thick Ethical Concepts in Applied Ethics

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CONTRIBUTORS

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APA NEWSLETTER ON

Teaching Philosophy

TZIPORAH KASACHKOFF AND EUGENE KELLY, CO-EDITORS | VOLUME 15 | NUMBER 2 | SPRING 2016

FROM THE EDITORS

Tziporah Kasachkoff
THE GRADUATE CENTER, CUNY, TKASACHKOFF@YAHOO.COM

Eugene Kelly
NEW YORK INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY, EKELLY@NYIT.EDU

We welcome our readers to the spring 2016 edition of the *APA Newsletter on Teaching*. We offer this month two articles and a list of books for possible review.

Our first paper, "Student Resistance to Thought Experiments," by Regina A. Rini of the NYU Center for Bioethics, identifies a pedagogical difficulty in teaching ethics. Professor Rini finds that many students fail to understand the force and point of the thought experiments that many teachers are wont to use in their ethics courses. Most familiar among these thought experiments is the cable-car scenario designed as a strategy, as the author says, to "test the limits of application of our [moral] concepts . . . by [generating] a counterexample to some particular theory." The author then distinguishes between "good" and "bad" student challenges to these strategies and suggests ways of addressing such challenges and overcoming resistance to them. The author is sensitive to the fact that some instructors may themselves doubt the value of these scenarios—one may be an anti-intuitionist in ethics, for example, or be skeptical about the effort to establish "exceptionless general principles" in ethics—and yet one may be required to teach them as part of the curriculum or may think they have to be taught just because they play a significant role in contemporary debates. Professor Rini offers some useful suggestions to those of us who sense ourselves guilty of what may be viewed as pedagogical bad faith.

Our second paper, "Concrete Examples and Thick Ethical Concepts in Applied Ethics," by Yotam Lurie of Ben Gurion University of the Negev, reports on the author's experiences and techniques in teaching ethics to business students and reflects upon how his discoveries may be useful in teaching applied ethics in general. Students in business and in other "practical" fields expect that professors are experts in their fields and that they will therefore learn from a professor of ethics what is right and wrong in specific cases of moral conflict in those fields. They are unused to an open exploration of such conflicts. What students should therefore be taught are *methodologies* of such explorations that impose constraints upon their reflections, and paradigms of moral conflicts drawn from their own experience in which "thick" ethical concepts may be identified and analyzed. Along with such concrete materials, students are encouraged to be cautious and circumspect in their reflections on the issues that they are dealing with rather than rush to decision-making concerning what should be done regarding those issues—virtues that may, at least initially, appear inimical to those of an effective business manager. The paper concludes with a table that lists typical issues in marketing and thick moral concepts related to each, as, for example, selling practices may manifest bluffing and manipulation. The table, the author claims, "can be utilized to provide an edifying understanding of the rich social relations inherent in a particular marketing practice," for our "decision-making is based on how we understand the situation at hand."

We always encourage our readers to suggest themselves as reviewers of books and other material (including technological innovations) that they think may be especially good for classroom use. Though the names of books and other materials that we have recently received from publishers for possible review are listed in the Books Received section in each edition of the newsletter, reviewers are welcome to suggest material for review that they themselves have used in the classroom and found useful. However, please remember that our publication is devoted to pedagogy and not to theoretical discussions of philosophical issues. This should be borne in mind not only when writing articles for our publication, but also when reviewing material for our publication.

As always, we encourage our readers to write of their experience as teachers for our publication. We also welcome articles that respond, comment on, or take issue with any of the material that appears within our pages.

These guidelines for submissions should be followed:

All papers should be sent to the editors electronically. The author's name, full mailing address, and the title of the paper should appear on a separate page. *Nothing that identifies the author or his or her institution should appear in the body or the endnotes of the paper.* The title of the paper should appear on the top of the paper itself.

Authors should adhere to the production guidelines that are available from the APA. For example, in writing your paper to disk, *please do not use your word processor's footnote or endnote function; all notes must be added manually at the end of the paper.* This rule is extremely important, for it makes formatting the papers for publication much easier.

All articles submitted to the newsletter should be prepared for anonymous review by the members of the editorial committee. They are:

Tziporah Kasachkoff, The Graduate Center, CUNY (tkasachkoff@yahoo.com), co-editor

Eugene Kelly, New York Institute of Technology (ekelly@nyit.edu), co-editor

Robert Talisse, Vanderbilt University (robert.talisse@vanderbilt.edu)

Andrew Wengraf (andrew@welch-wengraf.fsnet.uk)

Contributions should be sent to

Tziporah Kasachkoff, Philosophy Department, CUNY Graduate Center, 365 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10016, tkasachkoff@yahoo.com

and/or to

Eugene Kelly, Department of Social Science, New York Institute of Technology, Old Westbury, NY 11568, ekelly@nyit.edu

ARTICLES

Student Resistance to Thought Experiments

Regina A. Rini
NYU CENTER FOR BIOETHICS

INTRODUCTION

From Swampmen to runaway trolleys, philosophers make routine use of thought experiments. But our students are not always so enthusiastic. Most teachers of introductory philosophy will be familiar with the problem: students push back against the use of thought experiments, and not for the reasons that philosophers are likely to accept. Rather than challenge whether the thought experiments actually support particular conclusions, students instead challenge their *realism* or their *relevance*.

In this article I will look at these sorts of challenges, with two goals in mind. First, there is a practical pedagogical goal: How do we guide students to overcome their resistance to a useful method? Second, there is something I will call "pedagogical bad faith." Many of us actually do have sincere doubts, as professional philosophers, about the value of thought experiment methodology. Some of these doubts in fact correspond to our students' naïve resistance. But we often decide, for pedagogical reasons, to avoid mentioning our own doubts to students. Is this practice defensible?

I'll proceed in three parts. First, I provide a typology of student resistance to thought experiments. Then I consider some practical pedagogical techniques aimed at overcoming this resistance. Finally, I consider the pedagogical bad faith problem, and whether the practice can be defended.

1. A TYPOLOGY OF STUDENT RESISTANCE TO THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS

First, let me get clear on the sort of thing I am talking about. Philosophers appeal to thought experiments often in order to test and refine philosophical theories.[1] When someone proposes a general philosophical principle, we immediately look for *counterexamples*. Sometimes counterexamples are mundane and involve only common sense. For instance, if someone claims that we are only morally accountable for what we consciously choose, I can point out that we commonly hold people morally accountable for *forgetting* to do things (like celebrate a partner's birthday). More distinctively, philosophers will often construct scenarios that are far from mundane, involving stipulated perfect knowledge, or violations of physics, or improbable coincidences. These are what I am calling *thought experiments*. They are claimed to test the limits of application of our concepts by showing that a logically possible (but perhaps not probable or even physically possible) scenario generates a counterexample to some particular theory.

Thought experiments trigger *intuitions*. An intuition is a mental state of judging whether and how a concept applies to a particular case. There is extraordinarily active debate within philosophy about the nature of intuitions. Are they beliefs? Belief-like states? Inclinations to believe? Something else?[2] I'll leave that debate to the side. But we should note that the diversity and intractability of this philosophical debate is reflected in students' initial reaction to "intuition" as a philosophical term. Most introductory students have not heard the term used in this way before. Often they hear it as suggesting a quasi-mystical form of knowledge, or they think it just means "opinion." It takes time and effort for students to get a grip on how philosophers use the term. At the same time, they have other problems with thought experiment methodology.

I'll describe now two broad categories of challenge that students raise to thought experiments. In the first category are the "good" challenges—the sort of challenge that is *constitutive* of philosophical practice. A "good" challenge aims to show that some particular thought experiment doesn't accomplish what its creator alleges it accomplishes: the thought experiment doesn't actually challenge or support the theory it has been addressed to. This sort of challenge is "good" because it doesn't necessarily express any broader skepticism about the thought experiment method or about philosophy in general.

By contrast, a "bad" challenge is one that shows the challenger has misunderstood the rules and purpose of philosophical discourse, or perhaps intends to challenge not simply the particular thought experiment, but rather the methodology itself. I call this category of challenge "bad"

because philosophy teachers tend to treat its manifestation as student *error*. The teacher's task, on confronting a "bad" challenge, is often to dissuade the student from offering this sort of challenge, instead trying to redirect the student to make a "good" challenge. It is this response to "bad" challenges that will be the focus of the later sections of this article. But, first, it will be helpful to have a typology of both "good" and "bad" challenges.

1.1. "GOOD" CHALLENGE: DIALECTIC-ORIENTING

Sometimes philosophers challenge a thought experiment by arguing that it isn't actually a counterexample to the theory against which it has been offered. For instance, consider the case of the "innocent accused," sometimes given as a counterexample to consequentialism. A small town sheriff faces an imminent riot over unsolved murders; an innocent drifter can be convincingly framed and punished; many people will be harmed if the innocent is not sacrificed for the mob's satisfaction.[3] Given certain empirical assumptions, a consequentialist seems to be committed to saying that it is permissible to frame and execute the innocent. But, intuitively, that's wrong.

This thought experiment can be challenged in a dialectic-orienting way. That is, the thought experiment can be challenged in a way that tries to change its location and significance in the broader debate. It might be pointed out that the framer of the thought experiment hasn't really considered *all* the consequences. What if the mob finds out about the framing? Then they will still rampage, and now distrust the law to boot. Or (if we interpret consequentialism as focused on generalized rules, rather than particular acts) one might point out that really bad things will happen if law enforcement agents get in the habit of framing innocent people whenever this is thought expedient. When we think it through, this challenge claims, we see that a proper tabulation of the consequences agrees with the intuitive verdict. The case of the innocent suspect is not a counterexample to consequentialism because a consequentialist can accept the intuition.

A dialectic-orienting challenge is a "good" challenge because it takes the thought experiment at face value, accepting its suitability to influence theoretical debate. This sort of challenge operates *within* the rules of thought experiment methodology; it only claims that the particular argument on offer can be disqualified by those very rules. When students frame a challenge like this, we often encourage them to continue—it is a sign of thoughtful engagement with features of the dialectical situation.

1.2. "GOOD" CHALLENGE: EXPLAINING AWAY

Sometimes philosophers challenge a thought experiment by claiming that we should not trust the intuition it gives rise to. They claim that something about the thought experiment is biasing, or psychologically misleading, such that we should not allow the alleged counterexample to count against any theory. Consider the famous Trolley Problem, in which (a) it seems permissible to reroute an out-of-control trolley to strike one rather than five innocents, but (b) it seems impermissible to physically shove one innocent into the path of the trolley in order to save five.[4] The relationship between these two cases is often taken to count against consequentialism and to point to the need for some deontological principle.

The philosopher-neuroscientist Joshua Greene has challenged this set of thought experiments by *explaining away* our intuition about the second case.[5] According to Greene, we only think it seems wrong to shove an innocent in front of the trolley because an inflexible, primitive, emotional circuit in our brain triggers in response to cases like this one. But, Greene thinks, this circuit is not trustworthy (I omit the details of his argument here). So we should discount our intuition that shoving the one innocent is impermissible and, with it, the purported support for deontology over consequentialism.

Explaining away an intuition is a "good" sort of challenge because it does not undermine the thought experiment method. The claim is only that *this* intuition is untrustworthy because of features of *this* case. One can explain away a particular intuition without becoming committed to skepticisms about intuition or thought experiments in general. Students, of course, are unlikely to have neuroscientific explanations ready to hand. But they will often appeal to speculative psychological theories (about, for instance, emotional effect) in order to explain away an intuition. Again, we tend to encourage this (within limits) because it shows sensitivity to the purpose and standards of philosophical evidence.

1.3. "BAD" CHALLENGE: UNREALITY

Many philosophical thought experiments involve imagining violations of known scientific laws. Students sometimes refuse to engage with these thought experiments because of their lack of realism. For example, in Judith Jarvis Thomson's celebrated "Defense of Abortion," she asks the reader to imagine very different principles of human reproduction. Imagine that there are "people spores" floating around on the wind, and if one leaves one's window open they might drift in, nestle in the carpet, and slowly grow into demanding occupants of the house.[6] (The point is to show that inadequate contraception does not imply consent to becoming pregnant.)

My students often hate this thought experiment. Some argue that it has no relevance to the debate over abortion. Because the scenario is entirely unrealistic, it is simply irrelevant to moral decision-making in the real world. They say similar things about Michael Tooley's "super kittens" thought experiment, in which we are meant to imagine that a serum could cause ordinary kittens to develop the cognitive capacities of healthy human adults.[7]

This sort of challenge is "bad" because it generalizes far beyond the particular thought experiment against which it is lodged. Many philosophy thought experiments are unrealistic in this way; if lack of realism is a sufficient basis for discarding a thought experiment, then large parts of contemporary metaphysics, philosophy of mind, and ethics will need to be rewritten. And the point here is not simply that "this is how we do things." Philosophers also can offer a rationale for employing unrealistic thought experiments: philosophical claims are meant to map the *logical* edges of our concepts, which can easily extend beyond what is,

in fact, the case. Students who complain about realism are therefore missing the point.

1.4. "BAD" CHALLENGE: LIMITED OPTION SET

Many thought experiments, especially in ethics, require evaluation of an agent whose choices are artificially constrained. For instance, in the second part of the Trolley Problem, the agent has exactly two choices: shove one large innocent into the path of the trolley, or allow the trolley to kill five innocents. Shoving the large innocent is the *only* way to stop the trolley; the agent cannot even choose to sacrifice herself as trolley-stopper because she is stipulated to be too small to make a difference. Nor, per stipulation, is there any way to remove the five innocents from the path of danger.

Many students struggle with these artificial limits on agential options. They insist on identifying other "solutions" to the problem. Is there a way to bend the track? Hop aboard and operate the emergency brake? Roll a boulder onto the track? As these options are stipulated away, students become frustrated. In part this is another form of the realism challenge; students simply don't *believe* that there are only two options in such a scenario. But many students also express a different sort of frustration: it feels to them as if the "rules" of the game are constantly being changed. Every time they invent a clever way out, the teacher just stipulates away the possibility of their solution.

This is a "bad" challenge because it seems to miss the point of the thought experiment. We are *trying* to force a conflict between particular moral values (of utility maximization and deontic respect, in this case). Finding a way out of the dilemma that avoids sacrificing either value might be an ideal outcome in the real world, but it doesn't allow the thought experiment to provide a test of the conflicting theories. It often seems as if students who press this challenge are trying to avoid acknowledging any conflict among their values—but it is valuable (and necessary for the work of philosophy) that they confront this conflict. Students need to be shown that *even if* it is sometimes possible to escape dilemmas, there are lessons to be learned by not trying to do so.

1.5. "BAD" CHALLENGE: EPISTEMIC OVEREN-DOWMENT

Even as agents in thought experiments are constrained in their available choices, these same agents often have an implausible endowment of knowledge about their situation. To continue with the Trolley Problem example: The agent in the story simply *knows* that the large innocent is large enough to stop the trolley, while she herself is not. She also simply *knows* that the innocents down on the track are indeed innocent (i.e., that they did not wind up on the track through their own negligence). She knows that there is exactly enough time to approach and shove the large innocent, but *not* to alert him of the crisis and ask him to voluntarily sacrifice himself. How she knows all these things is not explained—and students often base their evaluation of her decisions on assumptions about her epistemic state that go against the thought experiment. (For instance, they fault her for being "reckless" in assuming that there really isn't time to run over and free the five innocents.) This is, implicitly, a challenge to the stipulated epistemic endowment of the agent in the thought experiment.

There is a variant on this challenge, in which students object not to the epistemic state of the agent in the story, but rather to *our* third-party knowledge about the agent's epistemic state and motivations. For instance, James Rachels's famous "bathtub" cases contrast one agent who drowns his nephew to gain an inheritance against another agent stipulated to have exactly the same motivations and goal, but who is spared the trouble by the child's convenient accidental self-drowning.[8] Students sometimes complain that we can't be *sure* that the latter agent really would have gone ahead with the act. Perhaps he would have had an attack of conscience when push came to drown. Students refuse to accept Rachels's stipulation that we simply *know* the content of that counterfactual, and on this basis they resist Rachels's claim that the two cases deserve equivalent moral evaluation.

This is a "bad" challenge because philosophers often need to be able to stipulate epistemic states in and about thought experiments. Epistemic state is an *independent factor* in evaluative judgment: we usually think that foreseen harm is worse than negligent harm. Stipulating an epistemic state allows us to hold it fixed and focus on the significance of other features of evaluation situations (such as the "killing" versus "letting die" distinction, in Rachels's cases). We can then, later, hold these other features constant while stipulatively varying epistemic features. Students who resist this method are failing to appreciate the importance of clearly separating epistemic from non-epistemic features of evaluation.

2. PEDAGOGICAL TECHNIQUES FOR ADDRESSING RESISTANCE TO THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS

In this section I will describe a few techniques I use to steer students away from the "bad" challenges to thought experiments. Part of my aim is to provide some practical pedagogical suggestions for other teachers. But I also need to clarify the type of teaching *response* to student resistance that I will critically evaluate in the next section.

The technique I have found most successful is to draw parallels to non-philosophical methodology. This works especially well when students have a background in another field. So, with my medical ethics students, I will draw a parallel to clinical drug testing. The conditions of a drug trial are not fully realistic, in that trial drugs are distributed under precisely controlled conditions, initially only given to especially suitable participants, and are matched by a placebo condition. The treatment options available in a clinical trial are deliberately limited, and we have an artificially high degree of knowledge about participants' medical condition, due to extended monitoring during the trial. Real world use of the drug (if approved) will differ from the trial conditions in a number of important ways. But we recognize that it is useful to first test the drug under rigorous, systematic conditions that allow us to isolate the drug's causal properties.

With engineering or technology ethics students, I make a similar point regarding the use of a wind tunnel to examine prototype auto bodies. A wind tunnel is an artificial environment, different from real road conditions in a number of ways. But this artificiality is a good idea in early design phases. We can think about the development of philosophical principles in the same way: unrealistic thought experiments are a kind of logical wind tunnel, where we control the environmental variables and get a sense of how the principle performs before fashioning a complete prototype and starting road tests.

Students usually respond well to these comparisons, at least in overcoming an initial skepticism about philosophical thought experiments. They are helpful to students who perceive philosophical practice as ungrounded or pointless. The comparisons show that there is a reason both for constructing artificial cases *and* for systematically readjusting stipulated features of these cases. But this method only goes so far; it may help students get over a general skepticism, but it does not necessarily help them learn how to employ thought experiments effectively in their own philosophical reasoning.

For this, I will ask students to think about unrealistic scenarios in popular movies or television. Sometimes, like many teachers, I will show brief clips from science fiction movies to set up improbable ideas, especially in the philosophy of mind. This has the obvious benefit of making the topic engaging but also the more subtle benefit of helping students see that they *already* think evaluatively about unrealistic cases. It is not incoherent to ask whether Neo makes the right choice, vis-à-vis red pill and blue pill, in "The Matrix." Students will readily argue about the ethics of killing replicants in "Blade Runner." Pointing to these examples helps students appreciate that the unreal features of philosophical scenarios are nothing new. What is new is the precision with which thought experiments are targeted at particular questions. Film scenarios create a "what if" and explore it open-endedly. Thought experiments construct a "what if" for the highly specific purpose of investigating a tailored philosophical question. So students do not need to learn to work with unrealistic scenarios; they just need to learn to work with them in a particular *way*.

To that end, I will often ask students to practice constructing new thought experiments. I will give them a candidate philosophical principle—say, that hedonic utility is all that matters. Then I ask them to provide a counterexample. Other students are invited to comment on whether the purported counterexample is actually responsive to the targeted question and to offer improvements. Can the case be more narrowly tailored? What objection might a proponent of the targeted theory make, and how adjustable is the case for purposes of containing the objection? Which features of the case are distractingly extraneous? These questions implicitly guide students to recognize some of the reasons, discussed in the previous section, for why certain challenges are "bad" ones. Once students are able to spontaneously construct their own thought experiments, appropriately fitted to the topic, it is clear that they are learning a skill.

Some philosophy teachers may insist on a more blunt form of correction: simply tell students that they are wrong when they dismiss thought experiments, perhaps by appealing to authority ("Einstein used thought experiments!"). Philosophy is, after all, a *discipline*, and sometimes the component skills of a discipline are acquired through repeated exposure to the corrective guidance of a skilled practitioner, even while the student herself does not understand or even resists the purpose of the practice. But I doubt this is the best way to think about student resistance to thought experiments. Few introductory students, especially in applied ethics, are likely to continue on in philosophy. Whatever sense of acquired discipline there might be for majors, a student taking only one philosophy class will not be practicing long enough to acquire the skill in this way. Hence, I think, better to confront student resistance head on via the sort of techniques just discussed.

3. PROBLEMS WITH THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS AND PEDAGOGICAL BAD FAITH

I've just reviewed several forms of student resistance to thought experiments and described a few practical strategies for addressing them. In the remaining section, I will now consider quite a different issue. Many philosophers, myself among them, have genuine substantive worries about thought-experiment methodology. Can we coherently engage these worries in our philosophical work while simultaneously teaching students the method as if it were unproblematic?

Here isn't the place to launch a substantive philosophical argument against thought-experiment methodology, but I will need at least to *describe* the view so that the pedagogical quandary becomes clear. In fact, there are at least three motivations for concern about thought experiments, which I'll now briefly describe.

First, there is a worry about the reliability of philosophical intuitions. A growing body of empirical literature suggests that our intuitive responses to thought experiments are sensitive to a range of things—the wording used to frame examples, the order in which cases are presented—that seem to be irrelevant to what we are meant to be evaluating.[9] This has led some to a form of intuition-skepticism, according to which philosophical intuitions cannot be trusted as a guide to the value of philosophical theories.

A second worry concerns the nature of philosophical projects, especially in the ethical domain, and brings into question the purposes for which thought experiments are intended. There is an *anti-theory* tradition in moral philosophy, associated with authors like Annette Baier and Bernard Williams, that challenges whether philosophy really should aim at constructing exceptionless general principles.[10] When philosophy is understood as a sentimental or humanistic project, rather than on a quasi-scientific model, the value of systematically varying the details of thought experiments becomes far less clear.[11]

Baier, in particular, noted the connection between how we conceive of the aim of (moral) philosophy and how we

teach it to students. In her essay "Theory and Reflective Practices," she argued against the "mere Kantian dogma" that ethical deliberation must always conclude in issuing general moral principles. She saw this orientation as leading to a dismissive attitude toward students' appropriate resistance:

> In moral philosophy courses we insist that students make their moral intuitions articulable, that they represent them and "defend" them by subsuming them under some rule that coheres in some system, and we make them feel that they must have been muddled if their moral intuitions are inarticulable or resist tidy codifications.[12]

Baier's sympathies were obviously with the "muddled" pre-theoretic intuitions of students. She worried that imposition of artificial systematization "may be destroying what conscience there once was in those we teach."[13] The thought experiment method, with its avowed aim of systematically probing the outer edges of our concepts, seems designed to contribute to that process.

Finally, there is a third sort of worry that builds on both of the above. The worry holds that the "bad" challenges students make to thought experiments are not really so "bad" at all. If our intuitions are affected by irrelevant factors, and if the construction of perfectly articulable philosophical theory might be questioned, then, really, *should* we guide our philosophical inquiry via unrealistic scenarios? Isn't it likely that our reactions to impossible situations, divorced from the substance of our real lives, and artificially stretched to meet the demands of theorizing, are the *most* vulnerable to psychological distortion? (Or, at any rate, the least likely to reveal their distortion through conflict with common sense?) Should we *really* put much stock in our judgments about stories in which agents have stipulated perfect knowledge or are implausibly unable to escape dilemmatic choices? In effect, the worry here is that our students' resistance is on to something (even if not always presented in the most sophisticated way). The rationale we provide for declaring these "bad" challenges is not entirely convincing to ourselves.

I am sympathetic to all three points, but, again, this is not the place to *defend* these worries. And if you don't personally experience any of them, then you probably won't feel the pedagogical concern I am about to raise. But many philosophy teachers will admit to experiencing at least some of them, so I hope the following reflection is helpful.

If you do harbor any of these worries about thought experiments, then you may engage in what I will call *pedagogical bad faith*. You continue to teach students the thought experiment method (and continue to rebut their "bad" challenges to it) even while you harbor serious doubts about its value.

Why would you go on teaching the method if you have serious doubts? There are many reasons, the largest of which are institutional. It is very difficult to be a lone dissenter pushing against disciplinary norms. (For those without tenure, it may even be a career hazard.) There are fewer resources to help with lesson design and assessment, and reflection on many of one's own experiences as a student will be less applicable. Many standard readings follow thought experiment methodology without question.

For many people, these considerations may be sufficient to motivate continuing to teach thought experiment methodology, whatever one's personal philosophical qualms. And perhaps this would not be so bad if it were all just a matter of intramural philosophical disagreement. Given that the disciplinary norm endorses this method, is it really a problem that students are not informed that their teacher personally doubts its value?

Unfortunately, I think the problem goes beyond simply keeping students ignorant of our own views. I worry that students only partly digest the official justifications for thought experiments' unreal features—especially when these justifications are proffered insincerely. Students may learn to stop *saying* that unrealistic thought experiments are problematic, but they may just quietly transfer this judgment to the discipline as a whole. If philosophers spend their time obsessing over science fiction stories, they may think, then what use is philosophy? That is a sad outcome, especially as it is likely to drive away from the discipline those students most sympathetic to investigating philosophy through means other than thought experiment methodology.

More importantly, in certain applied philosophy courses, there is reason to worry about students who *successfully* accept thought experiment methodology. Most of my medical ethics students will never take a philosophy class again, but they will go on to be medical professionals. In medical practice, the best instinctive response to a dilemma is often precisely the one that thought experiment methodology trains students against: look for a way to escape the dilemma, acknowledge uncertainty, be realistic. A physician who responded to a medical emergency by artificially narrowing options or stipulating implausible knowledge would be a terrible physician. Thankfully, I doubt that my ethics teaching has ever affected a student so deeply as to bring this about. But then, why bother teaching ethics to medical professionals at all, if it is not meant to affect medical practice?

Hence my worries about pedagogical bad faith. If you are a firm proponent of thought experiment methodology, then of course you should teach it in your classes. But if you are not, then what? Pedagogical bad faith is unattractive, but there are institutional reasons in its favor.

I'll close by considering one possible way out of the problem. Why not "teach the controversy?" Why not design a unit, within the introductory philosophy course, discussing contemporary controversies over philosophical methodology? There are certainly parallels in other disciplines; it would be sensible for an introductory psychology class to discuss the ongoing "replication crisis" in social psychology.

I think there is a problem with this solution, unfortunately. Introductory philosophy students often come in with

prejudices about the nature of philosophy: that it is all "only opinion," that anything goes, that an unsophisticated conceptual relativism is where it all must end up. Given this background, it may often be counterproductive to draw methodological disputes to students' attention. Science has sufficient cultural authority that its hold on students can withstand internal critique. Is this the case with philosophy—or would acknowledging methodological qualms just lead students to default to dismissing the discipline as unprincipled hand-waving?

My point here is that "teaching the controversy" may be counterproductive. If students come into an introductory class already skeptical about the value of philosophy, then we run the risk of validating this skepticism by introducing them to material that challenges the discipline's dominant methodology in a manner that is perhaps too subtle or complex for them to fully appreciate. I am aware that not every teacher will accept my judgment on this point (indeed, more than one anonymous reviewer has indicated disagreement). I would be interested to hear from teachers who have managed to teach Baier or Williams, or the "negative" form of experimental philosophy, to non-major students *without* triggering relapse into unsophisticated forms of skepticism. I think that this is an extremely difficult balance and have not yet found a way to do it with my own introductory students.

If I am right about this worry, then maybe this is the final justification for teaching thought experiments, even to the point of pedagogical bad faith. Systematically varied thought experiments impose a predictable discipline on philosophical discussion. They provide structure to an inquiry that can strike novices as directionless. Perhaps, then, thought experiments are a valuable piece of pedagogical scaffolding. If this is right, it suggests an intriguing question for the profession. Might it be that the discipline's reliance on thought experiments is simply an artifact of how *we* were taught, rather than something essential to the practice of philosophy? This may be another instance where reflecting on the relationship of practice and pedagogy yields lessons for both.[14]

NOTES

1. There are other uses of thought experiments in philosophy. I will focus on the intuition-pump use that, I think, predominates. But sometimes thought experiments are used simply to illustrate a view, rather than provide evidence for it, or just to help a reader understand what is at issue in a particular discussion. I thank an anonymous referee for pointing this out.
2. See the essays in M. R. DePaul and William Ramsey (eds.), *Rethinking Intuition* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998). Of particular note are recent proposals that reinterpret the role of intuition in philosophy. See, for instance, Tamar Gendler, *Intuition, Imagination, and Philosophical Methodology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010); Herman Cappelen, *Philosophy Without Intuitions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012).
3. The case is often credited to H. J. McCloskey, "An Examination of Restricted Utilitarianism," *Philosophical Review* 66 (1957): 466–85.
4. The cases come from Philippa Foot, "The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of Double Effect," *Oxford Review* 5 (1967): 5-15 and Judith Jarvis Thomson, "Killing, Letting Die, and the Trolley Problem," *The Monist* 59 (1976): 204–17.
5. See Joshua D. Greene, "The Secret Joke of Kant's Soul," in *Moral Psychology*, Vol. 3: The Neuroscience of Morality, ed. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2008): 35–80.
6. Judith Jarvis Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1971): 47–66.
7. Michael Tooley, "Abortion and Infanticide," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 2 (1972): 37–65.
8. James Rachels, "Active and Passive Euthanasia," *New England Journal of Medicine* 292 (1975): 78–86.
9. See, e.g., J. M Weinberg et al., "Are Philosophers Expert Intuiters?" *Philosophical Psychology* 23 (2010): 331–55.
10. See S. G. Clark and E. Simpson, eds., *Anti-Theory in Ethics and Moral Conservatism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989).
11. There is perhaps a distinction here between using thought experiments *at all* and using them in the systematically varied way many contemporary philosophers do. Williams certainly was not averse to employing some thought experiments in his philosophical work, though I suspect his anti-theory orientation in ethics made him unsympathetic to iterated trolley dilemmas.
12. Annette Baier, "Theory and Reflective Practices," in her *Postures of the Mind* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 207–27.
13. Ibid., 208.
14. I thank the editors and four anonymous reviewers for helpful comments on this article.

Concrete Examples and Thick Ethical Concepts in Applied Ethics Courses

Yotam Lurie
BEN GURION UNIVERSITY OF THE NEGEV, ISRAEL

SOME PRELIMINARIES

Not just metaphorically, I have crossed the lines and moved to the other side of the campus. Though trained as a philosopher, for the past fifteen years I have been teaching philosophy to business students within the somewhat narrow parameters of the rubric "business ethics." This is a peculiar educational setting for teaching philosophy and is not entirely unlike teaching ice-skating on a sandy beach. In terms of the renowned distinction C. P. Snow makes between the "Two Cultures," a distinction that defines the humanities and the sciences as two discrete cultures whose scholars and practitioners are incapable of conversing with their counterparts in the opposite culture on theoretical issues, I have joined the other "culture," trying to engage its scholars and practitioners in a philosophical conversation on ethics. Thus, when one of the editors of this publication approached me about writing about my experiences in the teaching of philosophy, I was somewhat baffled as to what professional philosophers, teaching in the safety and comfort of their well-preserved and secluded sanctuaries in philosophy departments, could gain from my observations. However, in reflecting on my pedagogical experiences over the last few years on the other side of the campus, I have come to the conclusion that those experiences could nonetheless contain an edifying philosophical lesson about how to teach applied ethics in general.

Teaching philosophy in a business school within a large research institution, I interact with aspiring doctoral candidates, with professional MBA students, and with young business management undergraduates. They are not merely students who have little understanding and knowledge of the ideas and issues discussed in humanities departments. The educational setting of a business school is not conducive for the fostering of abstract reflections on metaphysics and epistemology, or, for that matter, for the fostering of meta-ethical discourse. However, if the discipline of philosophy is to have a voice on public matters,[1] then the teaching of a philosophy course on applied ethics in a business school can be regarded as an effort to make that voice effective. All business students at our university are expected to take at least one course in applied ethics. The majority of those who participate in my courses do not specialize in philosophy, nor will they go on to take advanced courses in it. For most students in business, the ethics course they take with me is the only humanities course they will take. Therefore, the educational setting in which I teach applied ethics is philosophically peculiar and challenging, both for the students and for myself.

INSTITUTIONAL CONSTRAINTS AND PEDAGOGICAL RATIONALE

Teaching a philosophically oriented applied ethics course in the setting of a business school is challenging in several respects. First, we must respond to students' mistaken expectation that, as teachers of applied ethics, we should also be experts in establishing what is the right (or wrong) thing to do in the various ethical dilemmas that we encounter in the course, dilemmas with which students may be confronted in their professional lives, analogous to the way in which other lecturers, in marketing and finance, are supposed to be experts in their particular fields of specialization. Second, students commonly expect that, as teachers of philosophy, we should refrain from imposing our own ethical norms and values on a captive student audience sitting in the classroom. No doubt, ethical preaching might be legitimate for an experienced practitioner of a given business practice or an ideologically oriented citizen who has a particular ethical axe to grind. Yet, as academic philosophers, we have a different calling, and our method of teaching applied ethics should also be different. I try to provide students with philosophical insight into the issues that underlie the ethical problems, but without directly imposing my own personal normative judgments and solutions.

Teaching applied ethics differs from teaching the history of various moral and ethical theories in that it is *applied*. Moreover, the teaching of ethical theories bears the risk of being too abstract and irrelevant for the concrete context of ethical problems that business students must learn to recognize and confront. Students expect applied ethics to be relevant to the ethical quandaries peculiar to their chosen field. Although we should not offer solutions to such ethical problems, I do aim to provide concrete and sometimes even definitive tools for handling and reflecting on these problems critically and insightfully. This effort neither means nor entails that the goal of an applied ethics course is to equip students with a set of conceptual and ethical tools for making valid ethical decisions. An important distinction should be maintained in this context: the tools for understanding the meaning of the situation might not be suitable for ethical decision-making and making judgments on the morally correct thing to do. In other words, the conceptual tools that are useful for critical and reflective insight should not be understood as being tools for ethical decision-making.[2]

In sum, the business ethics courses I designed for our program are intended to be philosophically edifying and insightful but, at the same time, rich in ethical content. They provide students with various ways of reflecting on the ethical meaning of certain human practices, ways that are professionally relevant and concrete, but without pronouncing my personal ethical judgments on any of the problems discussed in the classroom.

RELEVANCE THROUGH SPECIALIZATION AND SPECIFICATION

From a methodological point of view, the type of conceptual insight and linguistic clarification *philosophy* has to offer is foreign to my non-philosophy students. For them, legitimate academic research methods are based on first collecting data and subsequently analyzing it so as to draw proper conclusions and theories by means of valid mathematical or statistical method. Though we do not collect data in an applied ethics course, we do rely heavily on concrete everyday examples and cases both to highlight the business issues discussed and to learn how ethical problems underlie human practices, even in business matters.

Specialization and specification are entrenched features of the professional setting of business schools and, thus, to be meaningful and relevant, business ethics must become specific and concrete. For example, abstract metaphysical questions such as "Do organizations have conscious states?" or methodological questions about how ethical dilemmas need to be resolved are not pedagogically relevant and sufficiently concrete for engaging the interests of most business students. Since my pedagogical goal is to teach applied ethics to students who are philosophical novices in a manner that will be both insightful for them and relevant to their professional endeavors, I pursue this goal by remaining specific and concrete in our classroom discussions, relying heavily on significant examples to formulate ethical ideas and values.

The method I use is both ancient and familiar. Just as Socrates urged the citizens of Athens to take a break from their daily chores, to slow down and to critically reflect on their lives, I teach my business students to slow down, to avoid the habit of providing hasty answers, and to reflect critically on the various meanings of their practices and on the ways those meanings should be understood (and responded to in one way or another, if necessary). Today's business world relies on cultivated social and economic practices whose underlying rules and norms are inherent to them and are aimed at promoting various goals and values that need to be continually appraised and reflected

upon from an ethical point of view. The basic intellectual disposition of the business student tends to promote the concepts of productivity and efficient decision-making, and this tendency is in many ways counterproductive to careful and critical philosophical reflection, particularly on ethical matters. Hence, we must seek before all else to inculcate the importance of hesitation, caution, and critical reflection and to help students develop attitudes and ways of thinking that might at first appear to them to be alien to the very nature of business management. Thus applied ethics should be focused not on the provision of skills for making better or more efficient decisions, but rather on the provision of skills that can enable students to engage in critical reflection on their day-to-day professional tasks. My underlying goal is to help them develop the ability to critically and edifyingly reflect on their day-to-day professional practices.

While there are several business ethics courses in our business school's curriculum, most of them are not broad, generic business ethics courses. Rather, we offer students business ethics courses that focus on subfields relevant to their area of specialization such as, for example, *Marketing Ethics*, or *Ethics in HRM (Human Resource Management)* or *Ethics in Management Consulting*. For undergraduates having less organizational and managerial experience, we offer a basic introductory course to business ethics, but even in this course, issues are discussed not from the viewpoint of *sub specie aeternitatis*, but rather from the professional perspective of a manager in an organization who must constantly try to balance and take into account various human and professional commitments.

These basic introductory courses to business ethics are molded on a similar structure. My experience has been that the grand normative theories of the philosophical tradition have little appeal and impact in this context and deserve merely a passing introduction. Hence, after a brief introduction to ethics and moral theory, most class lectures focus on particular stakeholders or types of social activity. Hence, for example, in a course on *Marketing Ethics*, we discuss ethics in advertising, ethics in selling practices, ethics in pricing, and so forth. Similarly, in *Ethics in HRM*, we discuss the ethical considerations of various concrete issues such as of whistle-blowing, conflicts of interest, hiring and firing, privacy, loyalty, etc.

Within each of these subfields of specialization, my pedagogical approach has been similar. Working business students can provide many engaging examples of ethical conflicts from their experience in business, examples that academics often lack. Since good examples can be philosophically significant, one of the best vehicles for an illuminating and critical ethical discussion is often a concrete example from students' own business practices. However, business students generally lack the kind of conceptual sensitivity that is essential for the provision of rich and accurate descriptions of the often delicate ethical shades and normative tones of a given situation and which may lead to profound insight and understanding. Thus, I divide responsibility in the classroom between the philosophy teacher and the business students: As a philosophy teacher, I provide the relevant philosophical perspective by means of a thick ethical concept that establishes the context for an ethical discussion. Simultaneously, each week a different pair of students will prepare and discuss with the class either a concrete case or a specific dilemma based on their own personal and professional organizational experience. The presentation of issues from a first-person perspective makes the cases both concrete and personal. Not surprisingly, the cases and dilemmas cited by these students are dense in details and very up-to-date.

My heavy reliance on concrete examples for conducting a class in applied ethics should not be confused with either the case method or the classical casuistry method of ethical theory. The *case method*, which is a familiar pedagogical tool used in professional schools (law, medicine, and business) purports to provide a real, concrete life situation for the students to resolve.[3] Cases are used in the classroom as simulation scenarios for students to apply their theoretical tools and practical skills in order to come up with noble solutions. In classical casuistry, the cases are provided as analogies and as paradigmatic points of reference so that one can inductively infer a valid normative judgment.[4] In contrast, my pedagogical use of examples from business practices and real-life ethical dilemmas is for the purpose of critical reflection, so as to foster student engagement in ethical reflection and discussion. We do not look for the right answer to the problems raised by the example, but rather analyze it after providing a rich and critical language-sensitive description of the practice at issue, one that highlights its moral implications and that will facilitate the formation of an edifying moral perspective on the particular practice. It is not surprising to see students becoming excited when they comment on these concrete examples, discuss them, and think about the ethical values underlying them.

THICK RATHER THAN THIN ETHICAL CONCEPTS IN APPLIED ETHICS COURSES

Bernard Williams is often credited for bringing the distinction between thick and thin ethical concepts into the philosophical arena.[5] Williams explains that "thick ethical concepts," such as "coward, lie, brutality, gratitude, and so forth," are action-guiding because they are related to reasons for actions and thus play an important role in practical reasoning. In this sense, they have both a descriptive element and a normative content. Other examples of thick ethical concepts include "generous," "lying," "stealing," "exploitation," and "manipulation." Thin ethical concepts are "general and abstract" and "do not display the same world-guidedness."[6] Common examples of thin concepts are "good," "right" and "ought."[7] To use Williams's terminology, thick ethical concepts are action-guiding, because they display a particular normative attitude, and also have a factual element, because they are used to describe a certain situation and may be applied correctly or incorrectly. Williams's distinction is philosophically controversial but practically useful. There is, hence, no need here for a heavy theoretical apparatus because these concepts are part of our everyday language, intuitive, and relevant to concrete situations. The discussion of the conceptual implications and the meaning of particular thick ethical concepts, through an examination of the descriptive and normative features of a given situation,

is pedagogically advantageous, for it can provide fertile ground for a conceptually based philosophical discourse. Moreover, by looking at concrete situations as instances of lying, stealing, exploitation, manipulation, etc., the students can gain a richer understanding of the normative tones and shades of various situations.

Within the educational setting of a professional school, thick ethical concepts can offer a broad platform upon which to discuss and illuminate the social relations and social practices embedded in real-world cases and ethical dilemmas. By providing a conceptual clarification of the relevant thick ethical concepts that are useful for describing and understanding the intrinsic conceptual components involved in certain socioeconomic situations, such as manager-employer or vendor-customer situations, I bring an enriching philosophical perspective to the ethical values that underlie such social practices. Moreover, when the students and I reflect upon different business practices, in the light of thick linguistic and context-sensitive descriptions involving thick ethical concepts, students can gain concrete ethical insights and an enriched and deeper ethical understanding of the special socioeconomic relationships that are established within these social relationships. For example, the thick ethical concept of "manipulation" (as contrasted with persuasion and sincerity, accuracy and truthfulness) is a relevant thick ethical concept that can be used to describe the special business relationship emerging between a vendor and a customer and what underlies it. Clearly, the exact nature of the descriptive content is a subject of contention; hence, by discussing these kind of concrete examples, the students can begin to clarify the distinctive conceptual features of manipulation: Are there different types of manipulation? How are they managed, and what underlies their performance?

The vendor-customer relationship is part of a rich socioeconomic institution based on an adversarial market relationship between competitors— a relationship that needs to be distinguished from that of enemies at war. Like any other form of competition, such as we find, for example, in sports, it makes sense to ask what the rules of competition are and for whom these rules are advantageous. Such thick social concepts are also thick ethical concepts, and invoking them can provide professional students with an edifying perspective on the ethical implications underlying a given practice. In other words, students are taught to see a particular practice as manipulative, exploitive, discriminatory, or helpful, etc., and then go on to discuss what this insight implies.

To flesh out the above point in more detail, Table 1 below is an example of a marketing ethics course. When we work down the rows in Table 1, we can see that the left column in each row contains a subtopic in marketing ethics that is relevant to business students, while the right column contains a thick ethical concept that I suggest can be utilized in order to provide an edifying understanding of the rich social relations inherent in a particular marketing practice. The analysis of the conceptual characteristics of the thick ethical concept is further enriched by the concrete example, while our understanding of the example (and thus the sub-issue) is deepened when we realize that what emerges is actually a form of bluffing, manipulation, and/or exploitation. By working back and forth between the specific issue at stake and the relevant concept that the issue evaluates and illuminates, we bootstrap our way to a better understanding of the ethical meaning of the situation, and we learn that the relationship between our ethical concepts and the business practices exemplified in concrete cases is not like the relationship between scientific concepts and natural phenomena.

Table 1. Issues in marketing ethics and their relevant ethical concepts.

Issues in marketing ethics	Relevant thick ethical concepts
Market relations	Competition (fair competition) and adversarial relations; interests or needs Commodification, commercialism Consumer sovereignty
Advertising	Truth, trust, and sincerity; stereotype Information and persuasion
Selling practices	Bluffing and manipulation
Pricing	Discrimination and equality
Targeting	Exploitation and respect
Product policy	Safety and consent (informed consent)
Market research	Privacy and personal information
Regulation	Freedom and autonomy

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, two points should be stressed. First, the ability to make sound normative judgments in a particular ethical situation is rooted in an understanding of the situation. Our ethical language is rich, and, thus, as philosophers, we can contribute to courses in applied ethics by critically engaging our students in attempts to provide thicker ethical descriptions of their concrete professional experiences and in attempts to comprehend the ethical implications we arrive at when we understand the situation through these specific ethical concepts. It is not decision-making that determines our ethics; rather, our decision-making is based on how we understand the situation at hand. Second, and within a broader philosophical context, applied ethics understood in this manner has to do with "seeing as." Our mission as philosophers involves the interpretive task of not just mechanically applying a thick description to the particular concrete issue at hand, but rather of providing an understanding of the meaning of our social and professional practices. This meaning can become apparent when we identify the conceptual implications inherent in the thick ethical concepts we use to understand a given situation.

NOTES

1. Doran, "From the Guest Editor."
2. Lurie and Albin, "Moral Dilemmas in Business Ethics."
3. Gomm, Foster, and Hammersley, *Case Study Method*.
4. Jonsen and Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry*.
5. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*.
6. Ibid., 153.
7. Ibid., 128.

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CONTRIBUTORS

Regina A. Rini
NYU Center for Bioethics
gina.rini@nyu.edu

Yotam Lurie
Ben Gurion University of the Negev, Israel
Yotam@som.bgu.ac.il